



Department  
for Education

# **Investigation of Key Stage 2 Level 6 Tests**

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**February 2013**

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

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## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank:

- our colleagues Bernadette Stiehl and Claire Wolstenholme for their roles in leading the study and conducting fieldwork and analysis, Anna Stevens for her input into sampling and conducting telephone interviews, and Cathy Burnett, Martin Little and Sue Slater for their subject-specific advice,
- colleagues from DfE and STA, especially Jo O'Shea the project manager, and
- the teachers and pupils who took part in Case Studies and telephone interviews.



## Glossary

**Accelerated Improvement Programme (AIP)** – Local authority run programme for schools considered to be falling below floor target.

**Annual School Census (ASC)** - census of maintained schools, covering issues such as staffing and pupil numbers and characteristics.

**Assessing Pupil Progress (APP)** - standardised framework for teacher judgments on pupil work, with associated guidelines, materials and resources.

**Average Points Score (APS)** - average level score at individual, school or subject, used as a comparative measure of progress.

**Booster sessions** - school based sessions that were used to either extend high ability pupils in terms of additional learning and/or that acted as opportunities to engage in specific test preparation.

**Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT)** - commercially available reasoning tests, often used at the start of secondary schooling.

**English as an Additional Language (EAL)** - a proxy measure for linguistic and ethnic diversity in schools.

**Feeder schools** - primary schools linked to a specific secondary school.

**Floor targets** - the minimum school targets for attainment. In 2012, for primary schools there were three floor targets related to percentage of pupils reaching level 4 and reaching average of progress in mathematics and English.

**Free School Meals (FSM)** - families with an income below a certain level are entitled to their children receiving free school meals. Used as a proxy measure of poverty.

**Gifted and Talented (G+T)** - common term in UK education for children who have the potential for high achievement, either academically ('gifted') or non-academically ('talented').

**Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA)** - senior role, with associated qualification, for support staff in schools who work with pupils.

**Kangaroo Maths** - A commercially available Mathematics resource.

**Key Stage (KS)** - National Curriculum Phases in compulsory schooling in England - KS1 covers Years 1-2 (ages 5-7), KS2 covers Years 3-6 (ages 7-11), KS3 covers Years 7-9 (ages 11-14) and KS4 covers Years 10-11 (14-16).

**National Curriculum Levels (Level 5, Level 6 etc)** - attainment grading in National Curriculum subjects. Sublevels – for example, 5a (the highest of the sublevels), 5b, 5c - are used at some levels.

**MyMaths** - A commercially available Mathematics resource.

**National Curriculum Test (NCT)** - In Key Stage 2, pupils at age 10/11 take tests in Mathematics, Science and Literacy if they are judged likely to attain at least level 3. Pupils can be graded from level 3 to 5.

**National Pupil Database (NPD)** - database containing information on pupils in maintained schools in England, including attainment and pupil characteristics.

**NRich** - A commercially available Mathematics resource.

**National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)** - Educational Research organisation.

**Single level tests** - in 2009 and 2010, single tests in English and Mathematics at Key Stage 2 were trialled to enable pupils to be assessed at level 3 to 6.

**Standard Attainment Tests (SATs)** - term previously used for National Curriculum Tests, still in common parlance in schools.

**Standards and Testing Agency (STA)** - an executive agency of the Department for Education, responsible for the development and delivery of all statutory assessments to the end of Key Stage 3.

**Value Added (VA)** - generic term for progress measures that assess progress from a starting point over time. Often refers to progress in National Curriculum levels from KS1 to KS2. Previous measure of 'Contextual Value Added' taking into account expected progress in differing contexts is no longer in use.

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Following Lord Bew's review of Key Stage 2 (KS2) testing which found that the current system appeared to place a ceiling on the attainment of the most able pupils, the Government made level 6 (L6) tests available to schools on an optional basis. Sheffield Hallam University's Centre for Education and Inclusion Research (CEIR) was commissioned to undertake a research study investigating the externally marked Key Stage 2 level 6 tests in Mathematics and Reading. The main aims of the research were:

- To gain an understanding of how the L6 tests have affected school behaviour towards the most able pupils (e.g. to find out what support and provision is made available);
- To investigate why schools are, and are not, entering pupils for the L6 tests; and
- To assess any areas of potential good practice in relation to the L6 tests.

## Methods

The study used three main methods. The main data used came from a set of 20 Case Studies of schools taking part in the tests. Schools were selected to give a broad range in relation to the percentage of the Year 6 (Y6) cohort entered for L6 tests and population characteristics including Free School Meals (FSM) entitlement and geographical spread. Each Case Study visit included interviews with school senior leaders, Y6 teachers and a group of pupils who had taken part in the test. This data was cross-referenced with actual test outcomes for pupils in the schools.

The second dataset was a group of 40 telephone interviews with primary schools that decided not to take part in the tests, asking them about the reasons for this decision. Again, the sample was stratified by population characteristics and geographical spread.

Finally a set of 20 telephone interviews with representatives of secondary schools was conducted, utilising the same sampling frame as in the main study to get a range of settings, with the inclusion of some secondary schools from selective areas. These interviews asked about secondary school views of the L6 tests and whether and how they would make use of data from them.

## Findings

### 1. The decision to take part in the L6 tests

Key drivers to take part fell into three broad categories:

#### a) Pupil-related reasons

Schools wanted to provide sufficient challenge for able pupils and/or to remove an 'artificial ceiling' from their assessment. For some, participation in the L6 test provided motivation for both staff and pupils. Some schools hoped that an externally validated exam might make secondary schools more secure in their views about primaries' judgements and safeguard against L6 pupils having to repeat work at secondary school. This concern about secondary schools emerged again and again as a key issue.

#### b) School performance-related reasons

Most schools took part in the L6 test due, at least in part, to a school performance-related issue. There was anxiety as to how a school would be perceived by Ofsted if it did not take part, and many schools welcomed being able to more effectively show additional progress for pupils and/or use L6 test scores to help validate teacher assessments. Attaining L6 was seen by a number of schools as a means of showing that their school had high expectations for their high ability pupils.

#### c) Other reasons

The relatively low stakes nature of the test was appealing to many schools and provided those that were undecided some flexibility to experiment; the L6 test often complemented the existing trajectory a school was taking; for some schools participation in the L6 was seen as an additional means of marketing itself; and for some larger schools having staff with sufficient confidence and expertise to teach level 6 content was a driver.

For those schools not taking part, key drivers were as follows.

By far the most significant reason not to take part was that schools did not feel they currently had pupils operating at a sufficiently high level, although most said they would consider it on a cohort by cohort basis. Many schools reported not having received sufficient guidance about the L6 test itself and/or to what extent they were expected to teach the KS3 curriculum; others noted the lack of L6 specific resources/materials. Other reasons focussed more on disagreements with the nature of the test. Some schools felt there were more effective ways of assessing high ability pupils such as teacher assessment, and a few stated a broader philosophical objection to the extent of testing within primary schools. For some, the L6 test represented a narrow academic focus on learning in terms of just English and

Mathematics. Quite a number of schools felt secondary schools would question the validity of the L6 and would re-test pupils on arrival in Year 7 and cover material previously learnt at primary school.

## **2. Selection of pupils**

### **Selection criteria**

Most schools reported a lack of guidance received both in relation to how to select for the L6 test itself and more broadly in relation to the extent to which schools should be teaching the KS3 curriculum. This was exacerbated by the limited pool of example L6 papers.

Many schools did not seem completely confident in their selection criteria. This played out in various ways in relation to selection: overall it appeared that most schools took more liberal selection policies. Although schools had a very clear picture of where pupils were operating across the full spectrum of level 5, they were far less confident as to whether a pupil was operating at level 6 or not. However, schools were largely effective in ensuring that the very top ability pupils were identified and put forward for the L6 test.

Schools typically employed a combination of objective measures alongside more subjective considerations (such as pupils' wellbeing) when deciding which pupils to enter for the L6 test. Pupils' individual willingness to be involved was identified as paramount in the decision whether to enter a pupil for the test(s). In the majority of instances pupils reported being pleased to have been selected to participate in L6 tests: they felt proud and in some cases were excited. Very few schools consulted parents systematically.

Timings for selection varied. Some schools appeared to have already earmarked at least some pupils well in advance of the end of Year 6.

In general, schools reported being less clear about what the Reading test entailed compared with the Mathematics test and were usually less confident in their pupils passing.

### **Future intentions in relation to selection for the L6 test**

Many schools felt frustrated at the increased threshold marks (compared with those from the pilot tests) and were disappointed by low pass rates in general (particularly for Reading). A number of schools felt the pilot tests/guidance underestimated how difficult the L6 test would be. Following receipt of the results many schools reported intending to narrow their selection criteria for the next year.

### **Perceived qualities and characteristics of L6 pupils**

Some teachers were still getting to grips with what a level 6 encompassed which meant they felt unable to give a detailed account of the 'qualities' and 'characteristics' of pupils working at that level. Those that did feel able to comment identified key variables as pupils being independent, tenacious and motivated, with an innate flair or capability to excel at a particular subject.

Certain qualities and characteristics tended to be more subject specific. Excellent inferential skills and capacity to access authorial intent were frequently mentioned in relation to Reading. This was said to be strongly associated with pupils' levels of maturity. Mathematics depended less on pupil's maturity levels and more on their technical competences and their ability to learn certain topics.

### **3. Provision for pupils and preparation for the test**

Almost all Case Study schools discussed the lack of guidance available to them on how best to support pupils that were engaging in the L6 tests. This included a lack of practice test materials and - more fundamentally - how to support pupils working at L6 within the primary curriculum.

The lack of guidance meant that schools used an array of ad hoc means of support including materials derived from web searches, their own experience as learners or teachers of Mathematics or English and materials used previously for other purposes. Schools varied in their approach to utilising elements of the KS3 curriculum. Many took elements of the curriculum, but there were concerns expressed about the potential for disengagement if pupils were asked to do the same work at secondary school. It was striking that the materials and support used mainly related to Mathematics.

Two main types of support were utilised in the Case Study schools. Firstly, all schools discussed how their work in the classroom aimed to stretch the most able pupils, via differentiation focussing on specific curriculum areas (in the case of Mathematics), the use of investigative and independent approaches and sometimes involving pupils in aspects of teaching/leading learning of other pupils. In the main, these approaches to working more able pupils were not seen to have changed greatly or at all since the introduction of the L6 tests. In all schools for Mathematics and most schools for literacy (in relation to Reading), this teaching took place in the context of some form of ability grouping.

Secondly, almost all schools engaged in some kind of direct test preparation. In most cases this involved booster sessions with the groups taking part in the L6 tests (which usually comprised a combination of teaching and test practice) and the use of practice papers. Several schools intended to change their approaches to focus more on teaching and learning in the next year.

Schools broadly took one of three approaches: a mainly **outcome focussed approach**, which tended to involve a great deal of direct test preparation; a mainly **teaching and learning focus**, which tended to be associated with less emphasis on booster sessions and test preparation; **or a combined learning and outcome approach**.

In most cases, schools and staff were more confident in their support for pupils in relation to the Mathematics test compared with the Reading test for three broad reasons: there appeared to be more internal and external expertise available to support Mathematics; there was less guidance available for the Reading test compared with the Mathematics test; and - linked to pupil selection as noted above - identification of pupils for Reading was more problematic.

#### **4. Outcomes of the test**

Most schools saw positive outcomes for the school in relation to demonstrating progress to staff, Ofsted and parents, although many were resistant to the driving force being school outcomes, especially in relation to inspection, rather than the needs of the pupils themselves. A number were also concerned about the potential for narrowing the curriculum for the most able (an issue for those schools not taking part and for secondary schools).

Some schools were able to use the tests to reinforce a focus on higher ability pupils and provide a boost to staff by symbolising that the school could do well for all pupils including those with the highest ability, and others felt it provided valuable professional development for staff in working with high ability pupils.

Pupils themselves and staff identified two main areas of benefit for the pupils. Firstly, of course, there were educational outcomes - enabling pupils to fulfil their potential, both within the primary school and beyond. There were concerns expressed here that this required secondary schools to take these results seriously (a real issue, as we will go on to discuss).

The other area related to wider personal outcomes. Staff and pupils identified that the test could motivate them, and some described feeling proud to have taken part and enjoyed the process. Staff identified that some pupils could feel overly pressurised by involvement in the test, and this was borne out by the pupils themselves, with some concerns about overloading (with the test being just after the L3-5 NCTs). For most pupils, however, the potential positives outweighed the negatives.

In terms of test outcomes, of the pupils entered in the Case Study schools, around 40 per cent were judged at L6 from the Mathematics test, and around 1 per cent from the Reading test. In relation to the Mathematics test, it was possible using a range of measures to identify a small number of schools that performed particularly well and others that performed relatively poorly.

## **5. Secondary schools' views**

Initial data collection with primary schools revealed a variety of concerns linking secondary schools with the L6 test in some way. The perception that secondary schools did not take primary levelling seriously, a cynicism that the L6 tests themselves would inform curriculum planning within Year 7, and a strong belief that secondary schools merely retest primary pupils on entry were some of the themes to emerge. Secondary school perspectives were gathered to test out these concerns.

Secondary schools in our sample were generally ambivalent about primary schools' use of the L6 test and aspects of the KS3 curriculum. Much of this ambivalence was due to the fact that secondary schools in general felt that measures of KS2 outcomes were not accurate, either in the form of KS2 test or teacher assessments. Consequently, they preferred to test the children pre-entry or at the beginning of Year 7. Often schools did use primary outcomes in Year 7 target setting but only two of our sample used KS2 data alone for this purpose. Of the other 18, ten used CAT tests and others cited NFER or other tests.

In relation to the L6 tests, many of the secondary schools were concerned about primary schools 'teaching to the test' and thus producing L6 pupils with little breadth and depth of understanding of L6 working. This was a real issue in relation to test outcomes. Generally secondaries viewed such results as unreliable, albeit useful for baseline assessment, as they help identify 'high flyers.'

Most secondary schools noted the benefit for the pupils in terms of stretching and enabling a smoother transition to the secondary school teaching and learning environment and appreciated the pressure primary schools are under to produce



higher outcomes; however, some felt that inaccurate test outcomes made the transition more difficult. The main issues secondary schools noted with KS2 assessments were: uneven information sources (especially a problem for schools with a large number of primary feeder schools); a perception that primary pupils are 'spoon-fed' leading to wrongly judging pupils' actual ability; the limited and narrow nature of KS3 work in primary schools; the difficulties caused at secondary level when faced with greater differentiation to deal with; and a perception that primaries are under pressure to inflate their outcomes.

Transition between primary and secondary phases could best be encouraged, according to the secondary schools, by a greater understanding among primary teachers about what KS3 entails and how secondary schools work. Understanding could best be enhanced by primary teachers coming into secondary schools, by secondary teachers spending more time in primary schools, and by the transition process beginning much earlier.

## 6. Conclusion

Firstly, it is abundantly clear from the findings that greater guidance on pupil selection and support, and more practice materials are key issues for schools.

Secondly, there is a link between approach to the test and outcomes with those taking a strong **outcome focussed approach** (see section 3 above) less likely to have successful results compared with those that took a **combined learning and outcome approach**. Schools that felt pressured by Ofsted tended to focus on test preparation, which was not seen to be in the interests of the pupils or schools, so there is a need for schools to be supported to focus on teaching and learning alongside test preparation.

Thirdly, there is scepticism on the part of primaries about whether secondaries will judge the tests as an accurate reflection of levels, and secondaries themselves confirm this. There is a strong need to engage secondaries much more with primaries in, for example, curriculum, assessment and moderation, to ensure the test results are accepted and made use of.

Finally, the very low pass rate for Reading, and the particular issues expressed in relation to support for Reading, selection of pupils (including maturity as a key component of L6-ness for Reading) and the scepticism of secondaries, indicates the need to review whether the L6 Reading test in its current form is the most appropriate test to use to identify a range of higher performing pupils, for example, the top 10%.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Background

The end of Key Stage 2 (KS2), when pupils are about to move from primary to secondary school, is a crucial transition point in their schooling. Currently, this means that in the Spring term of Year 6, when pupils are aged 10 or 11, those who are judged by teachers as being able to access the National Curriculum at level 3 or above take part in National Curriculum Tests (NCTs) in English and Mathematics. In 2011, Lord Bew reported on his review of KS2 testing more broadly, and one significant finding was that the current system appeared to place a ceiling on the attainment of the most able pupils, potentially impeding their progress (Bew, 2011<sup>1</sup>). This is because the standard NCTs give judgments of levels between 3 and 5. For example, the Bew review highlighted that in 2010, 51 per cent of pupils taking the tests achieved level 5 in Reading and 30 per cent in Mathematics suggesting that the tests do not discriminate sufficiently for more able pupils.

Following a pilot in 2011, the Department for Education made level 6 tests available to schools on an optional basis in 2012 to enable them to stretch and demonstrate the abilities of the more able pupils. The Bew review raised some concerns regarding the additional tests, particularly the extent to which primary schools would be able to offer enough of the Key Stage 3 curriculum to allow pupils to attain level 6. Consequently, Sheffield Hallam University's Centre for Education and Inclusion Research (CEIR) was commissioned to do a research study investigating the Key Stage 2 level 6 test. This research study helps address this and other issues as the policy agenda develops, by aiming to answer the following research questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Bew, P. (2011) '*Independent Review of Key Stage 2 testing, assessment and accountability*' DfE 2011

[https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Review-KS2-Testing\\_final-report.pdf](https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Review-KS2-Testing_final-report.pdf)

## 1.2 Aims and Research Questions

### 1.2.1 Aims

- To gain an understanding of how the L6 tests have affected school behaviour towards the most able pupils (e.g. to find out what support and provision is made available);
- To investigate why schools are, and are not, entering pupils for the L6 tests; and
- To assess any areas of potential good practice in relation to the L6 tests.

The key aims are addressed through the formulation of the following research questions:

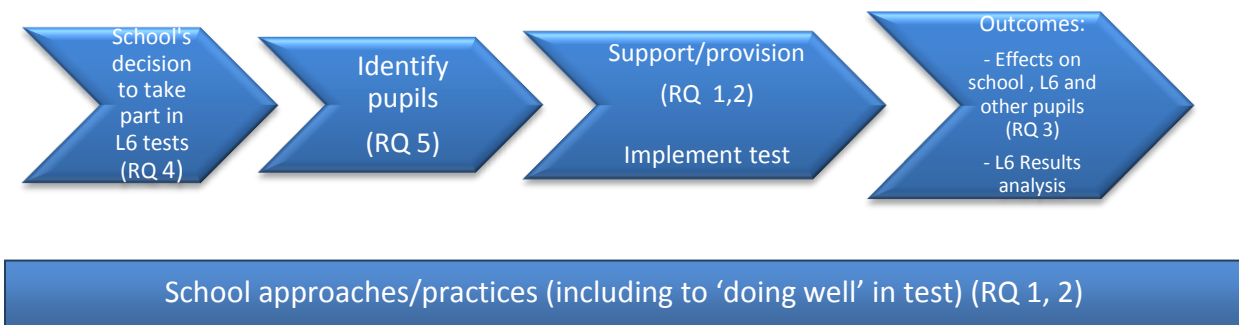
### 1.2.2 Research Questions (RQ)

- RQ1. How have the L6 tests affected school behaviour towards the most able pupils? (e.g. what support and provision is made to L6 test pupils?)
- RQ2. What is the difference in behaviours between schools which do 'well' in L6 tests and those which do not?
- RQ3. What are the positive and negative effects of having the tests on a) the school and b) the pupils?
- RQ4. Why did some schools enter pupils for the tests and why did others not?
- RQ5. How are schools identifying pupils to be entered for the test?

## 1.3 Conceptualisation of the research questions

Figure 1.1 illustrates our conceptualisation of the research questions, closely linked to a school's decision-making and L6 implementation process. Underpinning this process is the school's overall approaches and practices, which - as this report goes on to discuss - are important throughout the L6 process.

Figure 1.1 Conceptualisation of the research into school's L6 decision-making and implementation process



This approach underpins the structure of the rest of the report. Section 2 outlines the methods used in the study; Section 3 considers schools' decisions to take part in the test or not; Section 4 describes how schools identified and selected pupils for the test; Section 5 discusses support and provision; Section 6 explores outcomes; Section 7 reports the views of secondary schools; and, finally, Section 8 provides conclusions and recommendations.

## Chapter 2: Methods

In order to explore the research questions a mixed methods approach was adopted consisting of 20 Case Study visits to L6 test participating primary schools, 40 telephone interviews with non-participating L6 primary schools, and L6 results analysis. Following the initial stage of data collection with primary schools the decision was taken to complete 20 telephone interviews with secondary schools to explore their perspectives in relation to the L6 test. Finally, we conducted a highly structured, email based follow up survey with the 20 Case Study schools following receipt of their 2012 L6 test results. The research was carried out between May and September 2012 in four elements.

### 2.1 Methodology

#### 2.1.1 Element 1: Case Studies of selected L6 test participating primary schools

The final sample of 20 schools was drawn from the Standards and Testing Agency (STA) list of L6 registered schools (i.e. those schools entering pupils for the L6 test). To fully understand the range of issues and circumstances which affect a school's decision to enter pupils for the L6 test – and, importantly, the relationship between their decision and pupil outcomes – the sample was designed to be as reflective as possible of the diversity of schools and their characteristics. The team used a **sampling method** based on achieving a balanced sample across the 2011 Primary School KS2 (L5) performance tables, and the STA data on the schools registered for L6 tests. In selecting the schools, data on other school characteristics were also taken into account to ensure a diverse range of schools that was broadly reflective of the national population. The key factors that shaped the sampling method were:

- percentage of Year 6 cohort entered for L6 test
- percentage of disadvantaged pupils based on FSM data
- location of the school (geographical region; urban/rural)

The sampling method enabled the research team to select replacement schools randomly should individual schools refuse to participate, and thus ensured a balanced sample.

Schools were contacted in phases until the required number and range of schools in each sector was achieved. Initial contact was made by emailing the headteacher a project information sheet outlining the key aims of the research, methodology (including the range of stakeholders we wanted to interview) and timescale. These

emails were then followed by a telephone call to the headteacher requesting a half to one day commitment to hosting a Case Study at a convenient time. Each school was formally offered compensation of £100 as a goodwill gesture in recognition of the additional burden to be used for supply cover where necessary.

Table 2.1 shows the features of schools in the Case Study sample across a number of **key characteristics**. As indicated above, our sampling aimed to get a spread of schools across a range of such characteristics and Table 2.2 indicates that the sample broadly achieved this, with a good spread of schools across each category.

Table 2.1 Characteristics of the Case Study schools

School Code	Latest Ofsted rating	KS2 Results*	Y6 Cohort Size**	FSM category***	EAL category*** *	Region
1	Satisfactory	higher quartile	large	more deprived	upper middle	West Midlands
2	Good	highest quartile	small	less deprived	lowest quartile	South East
3	Good	lowest quartile	medium	least deprived	upper middle	Yorkshire and The Humber
4	Good	lower quartile	small	least deprived	[not available]	South East
5	Satisfactory	higher quartile	medium	most deprived	highest quartile	London
6	Good	highest quartile	small	most deprived	lowest quartile	East Midlands
7	Good	lowest quartile	large	less deprived	lower middle	Yorkshire and The Humber
8	Good	lower quartile	large	less deprived	highest quartile	London
9	Good	lower quartile	medium	more deprived	highest quartile	London
9	Satisfactory	lowest quartile	large	most deprived	highest quartile	South West
11	Good	lowest quartile	small	less deprived	lowest quartile	South West
12	Satisfactory	lower quartile	large	most deprived	highest quartile	London
13	Good	higher quartile	small	more deprived	upper middle	East Midlands
14	Good	highest quartile	large	more deprived	[not available]	North West
15	Outstanding	higher	large	least	upper	West Midlands

	ng	quartile		deprived	middle	
<b>16</b>	Good	lowest quartile	small	most deprived	lower middle	East Midlands
<b>17</b>	Satisfactory	higher quartile	medium	less deprived	lowest quartile	Yorkshire and The Humber
<b>18</b>	Satisfactory	higher quartile	small	least deprived	[not available]	South West
<b>19</b>	Outstanding	highest quartile	medium	least deprived	lowest quartile	Yorkshire and The Humber
<b>20</b>	Satisfactory	lowest quartile	medium	more deprived	highest quartile	East Midlands

\* KS2 - lowest quartile 0-14%; lower quartile 15-22%; upper quartile 23 - 32%; highest quartile 33+%

\*\* Small - less than 29 pupils; medium - 29-47 pupils; large - 48+ pupils

\*\*\* FSM - least deprived 0-5.8%; less deprived 5.9% - 11.1%; more deprived 11.2% - 22.4%; most deprived - 22.5+%

\*\*\*\* EAL - lowest quartile 0-1.7% ; lower quartile 1.8-5.1%; upper quartile 5.2-17.2%; highest quartile - 17.3+%



Table 2.2 Distribution of Case Study Schools across a range of characteristics

Latest Ofsted rating	KS2 Results	Y6 Cohort Size	FSM category	EAL category	Region
<b>Outstanding (2)</b>	Highest q (4)	Large (7)	Most dep (5)	Highest q (6)	East Mids (4)
<b>Good (11)</b>	Higher q (6)	Medium (6)	More dep (5)	Higher q (4)	London (4)
<b>Satisfactory (7)</b>	Lower q (4)	Small (7)	Less dep (5)	Lower q (2)	North West (1)
	Lowest q (6)		Least dep (5)	Lowest q (5)	South East (2)
				not available (3)	South West (3)
					W Mids (2)
					York and H (4)
					East (0)
					North East (0)

Case Study interview and focus group schedules were developed to ensure each question asked during fieldwork contributed towards answering the main research questions outlined in section 1.2.2. Each of these main research questions was mapped against each of the interview and focus group questions in order to indicate the sources of evidence that would be gathered to address the main research questions. (These schedules are available on request). During the **design phase**, input was received from our internal advisory group and the DfE project manager prior to piloting. Piloting ensured that the wording and focus of questions was optimally designed to effectively gather the in-depth information needed, as well as being appropriate for pupils and staff.

Specific arrangements for **data collection** differed from school to school but where possible separate interviews were conducted with at least one senior leader, followed by an interview with at least one Year 6 teacher. Case Studies were then concluded with a focus group with up to 8 pupils that had taken part in the L6 test. Schools were asked to select pupils with a range of characteristics (genders, ethnicities, FSM eligibility, EAL and confidence etc). In schools where a small number of pupils were entered for the L6 test, all were invited to take part in the focus group. Focus group attendees were provided with a covering letter and information sheet for parents, with a return slip for parental opt-out.

The table below summarises the full range of participants involved in the Case Study visits.

**Table 2.3 Case Study participants**

Headteacher	Deputy Head / Assistant Head	Year 6 teacher	Total Boys	Total Girls	Total pupils	Pupils doing just Reading	Pupils doing just Maths	Pupils doing both
14	8	21*	50	55	105	19	35	51

\* 13 of the Year 6 teachers interviewed had some form of additional senior role as well.

In total 43 members of staff were interviewed. In all but one instance either a headteacher or deputy headteacher was interviewed at the Case Study school. Often at least one of the Year 6 teachers interviewed also had a senior leadership responsibility too - for example a key stage lead, subject co-ordinator lead or deputy headteacher. A further 105 L6 test participating pupils also took part in the focus groups. Wherever possible it was requested that the focus groups be scheduled last during Case Study visits - this was to help ensure interviewers were more fully informed about the context of the school, the approaches being taken towards level 6 work in general and the specific preparations undertaken for the test.

### **2.1.2 Element 2: Telephone interviews with non L6 test participating primary schools**

A sampling method for the 40 telephone interviews was designed, based on data from the Annual School Census (ASC) and National Pupil Database (NPD) supplied by DfE, with L6 schools removed. 200 maintained primary schools were selected using a randomised sampling process similar to that used in Element 1, in order to create an achieved sample of 40 non-L6 schools. The interview schedule included a range of open and closed questions, designed to quickly and effectively capture data.

As with Element 1, each of the questions asked in the telephone interviews was mapped against the original research questions (see 1.2.2). Similarly input was received from the internal project advisory group and the DfE project manager prior to piloting. The telephone interviews were piloted with two non-participating schools in order to verify that the terminology and focus of questions were appropriate, as well as to check that the number of questions was achievable within the relatively short 20 minute time frame.

Thirty-two of those interviewed were headteachers; four either deputy or assistant headteachers, two Year 6 teachers with additional senior responsibilities, one was solely a Year 6 teacher and one an Assessment Co-ordinator.

### **2.1.3 Element 3: Secondary schools extension**

During data collection in Elements 1 and 2 it became clear that there were questions to be asked of secondary schools if a complete picture of primary schools' L6 attitudes and behaviours was to be obtained. Consequently the study remit was extended to enable an additional 20 telephone interviews with secondary schools (in September 2012) utilising the same sampling frame as that used in the main study to obtain a range of settings but also to purposively include some secondary schools from selective areas as data from primary schools suggested that this may be a possible factor in the decision whether to take part in L6 test.

The most common role title among our twenty respondents was head of Year 7 (of which there were 6) followed by assistant headteacher (5) and related posts such as deputy headteacher, Assistant Principal and head of Lower School (one of each). Other job roles included SENCO (2); Transition Co-ordinator (1); Pastoral Co-ordinator (1); Learning Manager Y7 (1); and Acting Foundation Manager (1).

Twelve of the 20 had some role in target setting, and of the remainder, three had mainly pastoral roles. Around half had a curriculum specialism and did some teaching, though most spent the majority of their time working with primary pupils and/or had responsibility for target setting and progression in Year 7 and beyond. Responsibilities and roles in relation to pupils coming from Year 6 fell into three main groupings: identifying the 'high flyers'; identifying those with learning needs; and identifying those with social issues that may lead to relationship difficulties in tutor or form groups in Year 7.

Our sample was drawn from 4 quartiles of GCSE attainment - 5 from the highest, 5 from the upper, 4 from the lower, 4 from the lowest and 2 grammar schools in order to pick up selective-specific perspectives. On average the schools had just over 1,000 pupils on roll (ranging from 650 in two rural schools to 2,000 in one school that was the only secondary in the town).

## 2.1.4 Element 4: Results analysis

Once the results of the L6 tests became available in July 2012, the research team compared test outcomes with a typology of characteristics, approaches and practices at the 20 Case Study schools. See Appendix 1, for a full description of this analysis.

## 2.2 Overall analysis

All **teacher and pupil focus groups interviews** (Case Studies) were digitally recorded, partially transcribed, anonymised and written up as a school-level summary report. Thematic analysis of these summary reports allowed for comparison within and between Case Studies and highlighted emerging issues and any similarities/differences captured in the data.

Following on from the first stage of data analysis, an A3 sized flow diagram (based on the conceptualisation of the research questions outlined in figure 1.1) with a variety of open boxes under different headings was produced - see Appendix 3. The diagram had three key sections under which open boxes were produced under the headings outlined below:

- *Influencing/contextual factors*: socio-demographic context, school vision, views on testing and L6, external/internal environment and pupil profile
- *Actions*: decision to take part, selection of pupils, preparation for L6 test, approaches to external drivers and approaches to the L6 test
- *Outcomes*: L6 results, pupil responses and school responses

This template was then populated with key data extracted from the more detailed summary reports. Having this top level data source was particularly helpful for ensuring the analysis and final report fully took into consideration every Case Study. A further advantage of the template was that it enabled a quick means of comparing L6 outcomes against school context. The 20 A3 analysis templates formed the basis for a team analysis meeting (involving an internal advisory group) which identified the key themes emerging from the data which in turn helped inform the report structure.

The **non L6 primary school telephone interview data** was partially transcribed and entered into a excel spreadsheet and analysed qualitatively and quantitatively

(using descriptive statistics). **The secondary school telephone interviews** were partially transcribed with summary documents produced that were similar to those outlined in relation to Element 1 above.

Overall, thematic analysis of the Case Study reports and telephone interview summaries took into account the differences between types of schools, their approaches and pupil outcomes.

## Chapter 3: The decision to take part in the L6 tests

### ***Key Findings***

#### **Key drivers to take part (Case Study schools) could be categorised as:**

##### *Pupil driven:*

- To sufficiently challenge the most able pupils and/or to remove an 'artificial ceiling' from their assessment.
- To provide motivation for both staff and pupils.
- For some schools, the hope that an externally validated test might make secondary schools more secure in primaries' judgements and safeguard against L6 pupils having to repeat work at secondary school.

##### *School performance related:*

- There was anxiety as to how a school would be perceived by monitoring agencies such as Ofsted if they did not take part.
- Many schools welcomed being able to more effectively show additional progress for pupils and/or to use L6 test scores to help validate teacher assessment.
- Attaining L6 was seen by a number of schools as a means of showing that their school had high expectations for their high ability pupils.

##### *Other:*

- The relatively low stakes nature of the test was appealing to many schools and provided those that were undecided some flexibility to experiment.
- The L6 test often complemented the existing trajectory a school was taking.
- Participation in the L6 test offered some schools an additional means of marketing.
- Having staff with sufficient confidence and expertise to teach L6 content - this appeared to be more likely in larger schools.

## **Key drivers not to take part (telephone interview schools)**

### *Pupil ability/wellbeing related:*

- By far the most significant reason not to take part was that schools did not feel they currently had pupils operating at a sufficiently high level.
- Most said they would consider it on a cohort by cohort basis and emphasised how ability levels often varied considerably year by year.
- Some were concerned the L6 test would put too much pressure on pupils and could have a damaging affect on their confidence should they not pass.

### *Guidance and resource related:*

- Many schools reported not having received sufficient guidance about the L6 test itself and/or to what extent they were expected to teach the KS3 curriculum.
- Lack of L6 specific resources/materials.

### *Problem with testing in itself:*

- Some schools felt there were more effective ways of assessing high ability pupils such as teacher assessment (with external moderation).
- Certain schools stated a broader philosophical objection to the extent of testing within primary schools.

### *Impact of doing the test:*

- For some the L6 test represented an overly narrow academic focus on Reading and Mathematics.
- Many schools felt secondary schools would question the validity of the L6 test, re-test pupils on arrival in Year 7 and cover material previously learnt at primary.

## **Introduction**

This chapter seeks to offer an insight into the variety of factors underlying schools' decision making processes that contributed towards them either taking part in the L6 test or not. Firstly we consider the reasons why the 20 Case Study schools decided to take part before reflecting on why the 40 telephone interview schools elected not to.

## 3.1 The Case Study schools that opted to take part in the L6 test

Unsurprisingly, the decision-making responsibility for opting to engage in the L6 test in the vast majority of schools (both in Case Studies and telephone interviews with those not taking part) lay with a headteacher and/or deputy headteacher, usually following consultation with the Year 6 teacher(s) and other senior leaders. (Very often the Year 6 teacher was a member of the Senior Leaders Team anyway). There were some exceptions: in one school, the Year 6 teacher had been handed sole responsibility to decide whether to enter pupils or not, and in two others the Year 6 teachers indicated they had been told the decision rather than consulted about it.

In a small number of instances the primary school made use of an existing external relationship before arriving at a decision to participate or not. For example some schools mentioned that discussions arose regarding the L6 test as part of a local partnership (containing both primary and secondary schools) and this had an influence on their decision to take part.

Finally, two schools mentioned taking into account the views of the school governors before making the judgement to take part rather than, as in most cases, asking them to validate a decision that was already made.

All but one school gave more than one reason for their decision to take part in the L6 test(s) with the majority discussing a number of factors. However, the key reasons identified by the 20 Case Study schools for deciding to take part in the L6 test can be characterised as broadly falling under either **pupil driven** or **school performance** related factors, although in reality the two were often heavily intertwined.

### 3.1.1 Pupil driven factors

The joint most frequently stated reason for deciding to take part in the L6 test was linked to **incorporating sufficient challenge for able pupils and/or to remove an 'artificial ceiling' from their assessment** (16 schools mentioned this as a key factor for participation).

Many schools felt it was important to provide their pupils with an opportunity to demonstrate their true ability beyond level 5, should there be an appropriate mechanism to be able to do so, and the L6 test was said to potentially offer just that. Many schools spoke of their pupils previously having an artificial ceiling imposed



upon them with regards to their academic performance, at least in terms of the KS2 NCT tests (teacher assessment allows for levelling a pupil beyond a level 5a):

*'I recognised the children's ability and I wanted to not have them limited by the fact that I could only level them to level 5...There's never been any pressure on me to get pupils to level 6 because it would be kudos for the school...we want the children to do the best that they can and to show what they can do.'* (School 11, senior leader)

Alongside this, there was a feeling amongst some schools that not to engage with the L6 test would have been doing their highest ability pupils a disservice. Schools reported being committed to doing the best for their pupils across the cohort but indicated that, in practice and faced with limited resources, it was often the lower and middle ability ranges who were targeted for any additional provision given external pressures to meet floor targets for level 4. Engaging with the L6 test was seen as a means of rebalancing.

*'We cater quite a lot for children with SEN who've got problems academically...we also need to cater for pupils who have got the ability to go that bit further.'* (School 16, headteacher)

*'There's a pride that the high achieving are recognised as such...I think it feels right that the highest achieving children are recognised.'* (School 18, headteacher)

As will be discussed in Chapter 5, it is important to make clear at this point that there appeared to be many instances of good practice already operating with regard to differentiation which often encompassed level 6 work alongside particular extension tasks (either with regard to levelling up or broadening learning). However, the standard KS2 tests did not provide the opportunity for pupils to demonstrate this, with some pupils reportedly gaining almost full marks in their practice KS2 NCT papers, sometimes even during Year 5:

*'[The decision to take part in L6] was essentially based on where pupils were performing in KS2 SATs papers and we had a number of children in Maths who were getting consistently 98 per cent and it was clear that wasn't a test that was taxing them particularly...most of them were consistently hitting level 5. I think if you're getting a 100 per cent in a level 5 test and doing it in 20 minutes...you need to be doing something else, they were on a different curriculum.'* (School 12, deputy headteacher)

Through having the tangible end goal of sitting a formally accredited L6 test, many schools felt this would provide more challenge and motivation for both staff and pupils.

Three primary schools were concerned about the future of their high ability pupils once they reached secondary school. By giving the pupils the opportunity to be judged at L6 in the test, it was hoped this would help ensure that secondary schools met the needs of these pupils. At least one headteacher felt that secondary schools would have to take note of the L6 test because the GCSE targets (on which they are ultimately judged) were to be derived from the KS2 data.

*'It puts a level of expectation on KS3 and KS4 to differentiate appropriately and to have the highest expectations...we can in a sense ensure that secondary schools are held to account by making sure that those children realise their potential...it really might mean that they're expected to achieve the highest possible grades because my understanding is that GCSE targets are set off KS2 grades...so the higher a child achieves, the higher the progress they've got to achieve at secondary school to make the same progress....so if they do achieve it we're giving them more opportunity for the future.'* (School 18, headteacher)

It should be noted here that the majority of primary schools in our sample were concerned more broadly about how secondary schools would make use of the L6 tests, and this anxiety was also reflected in both decision-making not to take part by some schools, and by secondary schools themselves (see Chapter 3 and 7).

### 3.1.2 School performance

Sixteen schools stated that they were taking part in the L6 test at least in part for reasons related to **school performance**. For many of these, taking part was in response to a specific recommendation or requirement to improve some aspect of provision or outcome from a monitoring agency such as Ofsted. L6 tests were perceived to offer a means of bolstering their performance in a particular measure of the standards agenda, be it value added (VA), or average points score (APS).

*'If it helps my average points score which is going to be a challenge this year, even by 0.1 per cent, it will be good.'* (School 7, headteacher)

*'It [L6 test] was put to me [in relation to Maths] because of the local authority saying "You have got a lot of children who are very high achievers what are you going to do about it?" basically.'* (School 10, headteacher)

In a number of cases, sitting behind these concerns were the judgments made by Ofsted:

*'In the back of my mind criticism from Ofsted if we didn't do it because they might say why aren't you pushing these children on, giving them opportunities to excel in these areas.'* (School 9, headteacher)

Indeed there was an underlying sense of anxiety among a number of schools about the implications of not engaging with the L6 test. For a minority, concern about how the school would be perceived by Ofsted, Local Authorities and other monitoring agencies should they not engage with the L6 test, outweighed professional concerns that the additional pressure of more testing might be detrimental to the pupils. The following quotation gives some indication of how the decision to take part in the L6 test was sometimes far from straightforward, and the culmination of much soul searching and trying to reconcile a variety of competing factors in order to arrive at what was deemed to be, on balance, the most appropriate judgement for both pupil and school.

*'But there is the pressure - I want my school to come out well at the next Ofsted [Currently under AIP] and I don't want to be challenged on my expectations of my children. I don't want them to ask "Why didn't you put them in for level 6? - Your expectations aren't high enough; you're not doing your job properly here.".' Another part of my thinking is, if it's there and the kids are capable, you have to be pragmatic as well. I'm not one to cut my nose off to spite my face. That's not helpful for me; it's not helpful for anybody. You have to go with the system, whether you like it or not.'* (School 5, headteacher)

In contrast, other schools articulated more positive pull factors as opposed to push factors for engaging with the L6 test. Two such factors were **being able to show more effectively additional progress** that schools were making with their pupils and/or to act as a **means of validating existing school assessment**. These were factors that just over a half (12) of schools mentioned as significant in underpinning their decision to do the L6 test. Many schools conveyed a deep sense of frustration that the current standards structure, which they were ultimately accountable to and judged upon, did not permit them to adequately showcase the progress they had made with their pupils.

*'We started looking closely at the data a couple of years ago. We...noticed we weren't getting our value for money in terms of progress...we'd hit 5a and then we looked at the progress and then we thought our children aren't making progress but we knew they were, but it was actually thinking how are we going to show that progress.'* (School 10, deputy headteacher)

This was particularly an issue for those schools who had significant numbers of high ability pupils achieving beyond national expectations by the time they got to KS2; something that in their eyes unfairly diminished the extent to which they could evidence the progress they had made during KS2 itself.

*'One of the reasons we are doing the level 6 test to be honest is to try to balance out slightly - because the more level 6s we can get balances out the value added scores. So it was an ulterior motive really. Because it gives us more ability to show progress because of the cut off at the top.'* (School 1, headteacher)

Ultimately and irrespective of the extent to which schools believed the L6 test added to their pupils learning per se, it did present the prospect of being able to validate what schools felt they had known for a long time (through teacher assessment) that some of their pupils were operating at a level beyond level 5a.

*'So that we can evidence what we are already doing with them – stretching them to level 6.'* (School 4, Year 5/6 teacher)

So a key driver for many schools' engagement with the L6 test was to demonstrate effectively - to Ofsted and others - that their pupils were operating at L6.

Finally, two schools reported coming **under pressure from their governors/parents to provide opportunities for their pupils to sit a higher paper**. One school opted for the L6 test in response to criticism by a governor that as a school they were not giving the most able pupils enough of a challenge because they hadn't levelled any pupils at level 6 (the governor was a parent of pupils in another LA where it was the practice to assess Year 6 pupils at level 6). Another school in a selective local authority decided to opt for the L6 test at least partly in response to a well organised and influential group of governors and parents who had been lobbying for a higher paper for some time, in order to assure them that adequate measures were in place to stretch the high ability pupils.

*'We also have quite a lot of children who go off to independent schools. It is stretching those more able children, which we do as part of our teaching anyway, but it was proving difficult to convince the governors that we were stretching them. So this way at least I can say we've entered this many kids into the level 6 test as more evidence that we are teaching at this level.'* (School 8, deputy headteacher)

### 3.1.3 Other reasons for participating in the L6 test

For four schools, the perceived relatively low stakes nature of the test, providing **an opportunity to experiment** without concerns about, for example, league tables, was appealing and helped them make the decision to take part:

*'This year it has been 'we'll give it a go' and see what happens.'* (School 13, Year 5/6 teacher)

Staffing capacity was an important contextual factor underpinning the extent to which schools were able to teach L6 content (see section 5.2) but **staff-related issues** were explicitly mentioned by three schools as a factor in electing to take part in the

L6 test. One school emphasised how their Year 5/6 teacher had the skills, confidence and capacity to teach level 6 and that their Higher Level Teaching Assistant was very strong in Mathematics and was teaching the higher ability Mathematics pupils (School 4). In a different example (School 5), the 1:1 tutor (an ex headteacher paid through the pupil premium fund) who was entrusted to teach booster groups for high ability Mathematics, influenced the decision to enter certain pupils to sit the L6 test. In a third school, participation in the L6 test was seen as a boost to staff and confirmation that their efforts were paying dividends for the pupils' even if this was not always recognised externally.

*'Particularly being told we are satisfactory is not good for morale, so showing we have children not just above, but way above national expectations is a boost for all of us. It is a school where we have good and outstanding teaching, but we are satisfactory because of our standards.'* (School 20, deputy headteacher)

A quarter of the schools asserted that they took part in the L6 test because it **complemented the existing trajectory the school was taking**. For instance at one school, a key feature of their school development plan was to challenge their high ability pupils, something the L6 test clearly fed into.

*'We would have done that anyway because for us as a school challenging the higher ability is one of our targets so we wanted to do that anyway...because it's part of our school development plan to challenge our high ability children. So the level 6 test coming in was perfect.'* (School 3, deputy headteacher)

For these schools, the L6 test could provide a strong symbolic message to pupils, staff, governors and parents that a school was raising expectation levels (typically coinciding with comparatively new senior leaders trying to embed a new or revised vision). More than one headteacher discussed how the L6 test offered a useful mechanism to reiterate that there genuinely were high ability pupils:

*'[To inform stakeholders e.g. parents] within our ranks we have pupils working at the absolute highest level and that's important for everybody to hear. It's important for staff to hear too. Really important because that's not always the perception...it's another opportunity to stress that shift to people, we're moving. It's not about getting a pat on the back but it will impact on how you teach next year...publicly it's a fantastic thing to be able to say.'* (School 12, deputy headteacher)

Linked to a number of these of these issues, around a fifth of schools note that this demonstration of progress could be used in **marketing the school** to potential parents and others:

*'Obviously to us as a school last year we were much of a muchness with many local schools with our level 4 plus in Maths and English because of our high achievers we had a much higher APS. So by one government measure we were an average school, by another we were above the local average at least. As a school we can*

*further distinguish ourselves as serving those most able pupils.' (School 18, headteacher)*

## 3.2 Decision-making by schools that did not take part in the L6 test

This section examines the processes behind schools' decisions not to participate in the L6 tests. It is based on the data derived from the 40 non-participating school telephone interviews.

All 40 non-participating L6 schools were aware of the existence of the L6 test. As with participating schools, almost all had involved the headteacher in the decision not to participate, although the Upper KS2 Manager/KS2 teacher made the decision in one school and the Assessment Co-ordinator along with a senior teacher in the other. Typically some combination of the headteacher, a Year 6 teacher and/or an additional member of the Senior Leadership Team (who was more often than not a Year 6 teacher anyway) were ultimately responsible for decision making in relation to the L6 participation. However, 6 schools did directly refer to consulting with the school governors as well.

The reasons for not taking part fell into five main categories which are detailed below.

### 3.2.1 Pupil ability driven

Cited by 25 schools, **not having any pupils working at level 6** was by far the most frequent reason given by schools for not taking part in the L6 test. Some schools felt that the profile of scores meant they were some distance from seriously contemplating engaging with the L6 test. In such instances deciding to not take part in the L6 test was straightforward.

*'None met the criteria, best we have are at lower level 4 and a few at upper level 4. They are also educationally fragile and often recent immigrants so don't need to be upset by facing a test they patently could not succeed in.'* (School N19, headteacher)

However, for the majority, the question of whether schools had pupils capable of undertaking a L6 test or not was less stark. For example, some schools claimed that, although a minority of their pupils might have demonstrated some level 6 traits (and may even have been capable of exceeding expectations and passing a test on a one-off basis), they remained unconvinced this reflected a 'true' level 6 standard:

*'None working solidly at that level, some hitting aspects of level 6 but would want to get people solidly in level 5 before putting them up for level 6 tests.'* (School N26, headteacher/ Year 5/6 teacher)

*'We have done some work at level 6, if they'd have got an level 6 it wouldn't have been a true reflection of what they covered and what they're able to do, completely stand alone. We support our gifted and talented children, but our gifted and talented are possibly not in the same league as children who are getting very substantial level 3s at KS1 and then moving on.'* (School N32, headteacher)

However a number of schools directly reported engaging with some level 6 content either as part of their normal class differentiation or through a particular extension activity, irrespective of whether they took part in the test:

*'We didn't believe that any of our children were working at level 6. We did booster classes (Mathematics) and there was an opportunity for those children who were high L5a's to have that input, and I think that they did have some level 6 input but they're not level 6 children. So we didn't go there.'* (School N49, headteacher)

The following extract outlines how, despite the perceived pressures to engage with the L6 test, one school was confident that their own data did not justify entering pupils.

*'When we looked at teacher assessments/previous progress, we were looking at a number of children who by the end of the year will be secure level 5s but nobody who looked like they would be level 6...We're lucky to have a good statistics team here in X (re Fisher Trust info). We track the pupils all the way back to their foundation schools and we make a judgement together on what the child will achieve by the end of Year 6...It would be very easy for me to say, "Yeah as a headteacher we could play the game and enter some children into the level 6 tests" to say "we're pushing our children, we've got high expectations". But I genuinely believe that what we targeted those children to be by the end of Year 6, that that's where they are. It comes down to the year group.'* (School N9, headteacher)

Other schools made a similar point but emphasised that should future cohorts contain pupils judged to be working at the appropriate level, they would be amenable to entering them.

*'Purely to do with the levels the children were working at. We don't have any ideological reasons or moral or political reasons for children not to do tests. It's purely based on what level they're working at.'* (School N1, deputy headteacher)

This point is reinforced by some schools that stated that although it was not appropriate to enter pupils in the current Year 6, in previous years it would have been and they would have put pupils forward for the test then.

*'They weren't as naturally gifted at Maths, so the children got level 5 this time, we have got quite a good percentage that are predicted level 5 again this year. But that's only through a lot of hard work and revision and the homework the children have put in. When the deadline came for the L6 tests, we decided not to because it wasn't obvious at the time that these children would be able to cope with it. Because of the nature of the children last year they could have a go (at the Maths one) whereas this year we would have had to explain more to them. Issue covering curriculum content. We just covered our Year 6 objectives.'* (School N38, Year 6 teacher/Upper KS2 manager)

Many (particularly smaller) primary schools underlined how cohort abilities at the very highest level are not necessarily predictable and therefore their position on whether to enter pupils would need to be reviewed on an annual basis.

### 3.2.2 Pupil wellbeing concerns

The second most commonly identified reason cited by just under half of schools (18) for not taking part in the L6 test was a concern that the test would create an **additional burden/pressure on pupils** that was too great and that could possibly **adversely affect their confidence**:

*'...it was clearly a matter of looking at numbers and at our individual 'superstars' and asking are they really super enough to take an L6 test? It's one of those catch 22 situations; we don't want to put them into a test where they fail as that would knock their confidence. It's really getting that fine balancing act.'* (School N1, headteacher)

For a number of schools, the concern about harming the pupils' confidence was partly based on experience of the L6 test in its previous incarnation, which they felt had been damaging for some pupils either because they had 'failed' and/or because it was unfair to subject the most able pupils to additional tests when their peers had finished their core KS2 papers.

*'I didn't really want to put them in and then they not get it. When they did it before and I used to put children in for it, not one of them ever got it because we just didn't have time to go over everything they needed to cover. To be honest they've had enough by the end of the test week.'* (School N23, assistant headteacher)

### 3.2.3 Guidance and resource related

Aside from the additional burden on pupils, just under a fifth of schools (7) felt that the **additional burden on existing staff time and resources was too great to justify diverting resource away from meeting floor targets**. This perceived burden on staff time/resources directly linked to concerns about the extent to which primary schools are suitably equipped to teach level 6/KS3 in anything approaching



a systematic manner, with roughly a third of schools explicitly claiming that they **did not think the current curriculum was suited to their pupils taking the L6 test**. In many instances the lack of a comprehensive primary based KS3 (level 6) curriculum dictated their decision not to engage with the L6 test itself through concern of 'setting up their pupils to fail'. For a number of schools there was the sense that in order to give their pupils a fair chance of attaining a level 6 it would necessitate a wholesale revision of the existing curriculum in order to equip them adequately with the required depth of level 6 knowledge and understanding.

*'We felt that level 6 is drawn from KS3 a lot and therefore obviously you've got to consider your teaching programme you are offering. It would mean that we'd have to hive off a group, yet another group. What we are focusing on as well is what resources we've got, focusing in to boost those children who might be a wobbly 3 into a confident 4 or a wobbly 5 into a confident 5...and therefore looking at the whole package and especially with our conversations with our high school and our other fellow schools in the partnership, we felt there was little to be gained for the pupils having level 6 and possibly something to be lost.'* (School N10, headteacher)

Again, linked to this point, over a quarter of schools emphasised how they **felt ill-equipped** to become involved in some way; be it because they had **not been in receipt of the necessary guidance about the test itself** or what the **expected level 6 curriculum should look like** and/or felt they **did not have adequate level 6 specific resources**. Even had the guidance been readily available, many felt the roll out had been too hastily implemented and were cautious about signing up for a test they did not feel truly informed about. In a number of cases there was ambiguity as to what a level 6 was in the context of a predominately primary KS2 curriculum, with many schools stating they did not know what the L6 test was attempting to test and as such were not prepared to sign up to something they did not know the parameters of.

*'Some information from DfE in borough but I have to say there wasn't a great deal of information about it, it was just trialled last year and this year you could put children in for it. I didn't do it last year because I wasn't taking the top Maths group, and I didn't actually have to teach until after Christmas. We didn't really know enough about it to bother with it so we thought we'd just leave it.'* (School N23, assistant headteacher)

*'...we don't know what constitutes a level 6 curriculum, and I think if there had been a little bit more guidance about what the tests entail and what level people should be working at... I'm also very conscious that at Key Stage 3 they cover a completely different curriculum to us so I spent a long time having to look things up myself since I've been helping my son with his homework. And I think for us the focus is the shift from level 3 to level 4, we're going to be really struggling to get level 6s if we don't know what the level 6 curriculum is. It's knowing what the Year 6 curriculum entails.'* (School N36, headteacher)

### 3.2.4 Problem with testing in itself

Over a third of schools articulated some form of concern about the nature of testing in general within primary schools, typically in relation to their high stakes nature and inadequate recognition of school context when making external judgments, with many feeling the L6 test would merely exacerbate all the aforementioned concerns further. Several schools were concerned that the agenda underlying the L6 test related to setting unrealistic expectations:

*'I think it's setting a precedent for teachers to achieve a level 6 when level 5 has already been described as above expectations. Going back to the original literature level 5 was described as writing at an adult level. I don't think our children have the emotional ability to cope with it, I don't think they have the knowledge, I don't think they have the general knowledge, they don't have the socio-economic background to deal with these type of tests'. (School N25, deputy headteacher)*

*'No [I wouldn't consider using it with higher ability pupils]...because I think children are over tested already. I think a number of schools have boycotted tests, although we didn't. Because they thought they were appalling and think it's just a back way in to saying 'let's push children even further and make them level 6' and I don't actually think it's giving them the broadness of learning. Not very long ago, a couple of years ago, level 4 was acceptable. It's not acceptable in my school now, you only achieve if you get level 5. So I can sort of see into the future that if level 6 appears, that's going to be the expected...So it's too much and a back way in.' (School N35, headteacher)*

As the quotation from School 35 above indicates, there were related concerns about narrowing the focus of the learning with some schools stating that providing a broader curriculum was needed to extend their highest ability pupils' learning.

*'I would much rather broaden their experience and give them lots of wider opportunities rather than worrying about a very narrow academic interest.' (School N12, headteacher)*

Eight schools mentioned that the existing testing and monitoring framework meant they had to focus their attention on achieving level 4 and 5 or to ensure they met their 'floor' targets outweighing the need to prioritise the L6 test over the core KS2 tests.

*'Our main focus this year is we've got to achieve level 4 and above, and we've got to clear our floor targets. The pressure is on, last year's results were better but still in one area we didn't get to our floor targets; we're still under the radar. We really have to achieve level 4 plus this year.' (School N13, headteacher)*

### 3.2.5 Impact of doing the test

Just under a quarter of schools raised concerns about the implications of the L6 test in relation to secondary schools. Most frequently these reservations related to **inadequate transition arrangements** and the consequent overwhelming belief that secondary schools simply dismiss the primary schools' judgements regarding levelling. This created a perception that engaging in the L6 test was a futile exercise because irrespective of whether a pupil achieved a level 6 or not, this would ultimately be ignored and they would be **retested as soon as they arrived at secondary school anyway**. There was also a sense that there was little point in extending pupils in Year 6 for them to only **repeat the same content once they arrived at secondary school**.

*'To get them somewhere and then when they go to high school we know the schools round here will CAT test them straight away and group them from the CAT tests. So what is a level 6 going to show them? We also know that within the first year of high school they achieve a level 6 and therefore that sense of achievement from being in high school, from being placed in that setting and it actually means something then.'* (School N35, headteacher)

*'We invite the high school in to see how they are doing but success is limited. Will they really believe they are a L6? Is a L6 at primary the same as L6 in high school? We have to be careful about pupils and parents thinking there is negative progress when they get downgraded to L5. Differentiation happens very carefully in primary, I wonder whether to fine tune in secondary in the same way. Able pupils get bored in secondary'. (School N6, headteacher)*

However, a smaller number of the primary schools sympathised with the position the L6 test might put secondary schools in. There were concerns that a level 6 at primary school might not be equivalent to that at secondary school and that this could in turn give a false position on what should be expected from the pupil at GCSE level; something that could consequently put unwelcome additional pressure on the pupil themselves and leave them bereft of a sufficiently broad education.

*'I think a level 6 at KS2 is not the same as a level 6 at KS3 or KS4 and that therefore by telling the child you're a level 6 you're not actually being completely honest with them...it's definitely not the standard that a full blown GCSE would be. It's because of the breadth of writing.'* (School N10, headteacher)

*'I do feel sorry for secondary schools on that basis [the growing prominence of performance tables]. Children aren't given a broad base. In certain schools where children are deemed more able, the pressure is placed on them to produce these high results, all they do is teach to the tests. That is replicated in secondary schools where everything is based around GCSEs to the detriment of everything else.'* (School N4, headteacher)

Finally, three schools asserted that they felt they had **other more effective ways of assessing the more able pupils**, namely high quality, regular teacher assessment.

*'I don't see it serves any purpose to do national tests for level 6. If you have a child that is working at level 6 then it's useful to have optional materials that you would use in Years 5, 4 and 3 that would help you get the level but I would hope that teacher assessment would be good enough to give a clear level anyway and quality control within the school should be able to do that so I don't actually see the point in testing at all at that point.'* (School N4, headteacher)

Overall, for non-participant schools as well as case schools, the decision making process individual schools undertook when deciding whether to engage in the L6 test or not ranged from the relatively straightforward (e.g. all pupils operating at a level significantly lower than level 6) through to the complex and multifaceted. When analysing the totality of reasons offered from both the Case Study and telephone interview schools it is clear that schools are weighing up quite a breadth of factors, each acting as either a facilitator or barrier towards the eventual decision whether to enter pupils for the L6 test or not. The context in which any given school is situated is also clearly an extremely important dimension too. Aspects of this have already been touched on in terms of pupil profile; staff/resourcing capacity; curricular expertise; external expectations and pressures, as well as the school's overarching vision/philosophy.

However, ultimately it was necessary for schools to make an overall judgement on whether to proceed with the L6 test or not. The simple sentiment raised in the quote below in many ways gets to the very core of what schools were considering when deciding whether or not to do this - namely weighing up the benefits and disadvantages of participation before making the appropriate judgement that they felt on balance represented the best choice for both their school and pupils.

*'There just wasn't enough added benefit to decide to enter them.'* (School N15, headteacher).

## Chapter 4. Selection of pupils

### **Key Findings**

#### ***Approaches to selection:***

- Most schools reported a lack of guidance received in relation to how to select for the L6 test itself and the extent to which schools should be teaching the KS3 curriculum - this was exacerbated by the limited pool of example L6 papers.
- Many schools did not seem completely confident in their selection criteria. This played out in various ways in relation to selection: overall it appeared most schools were erring towards more liberal selection policies.
- Although schools had a very clear picture of where pupils were operating across the full spectrum of level 5, they were far less confident as to whether a pupil was operating at level 6 or not. However, schools were largely effective in ensuring that the very top ability pupils were identified and put forward for the L6 test.
- Most schools decided to employ a relatively broad approach toward which pupils they entered for the L6 test.
- Schools typically employed a combination of objective measures (utilising quantifiable data) alongside more subjective considerations (such as pupil's wellbeing and personality) when deciding which pupils to enter for the L6 test.

#### ***Perceived qualities and characteristics of L6 test pupils:***

- Some teachers were still getting to grips with what a level 6 encompassed, leaving them unable to give a detailed account of 'qualities' and 'characteristics'.
- Overall L6 test pupils were commonly identified as being independent, tenacious and motivated, often with an innate flair or capability to excel at a particular subject.
- L6 Reading pupils were said to have excellent inferential skills and capacity to access authorial intent. This was said to be a skill strongly associated with personal levels of maturity.
- Mathematics depended less on pupils' maturity levels and more on their technical competences and their ability to learn certain topics.

***Consultation with pupils and parents:***

- Pupils' willingness to be involved was identified as paramount in the decision whether to enter them for the test. In the majority of instances pupils reported being pleased to have been selected to participate in L6 tests.
- Very few schools consulted parents systematically.

***Timing:***

- Timings for selection varied. Some schools appeared to have already earmarked at least some pupils well in advance of the end of Year 6.

***Differences in selection approaches between Reading and Mathematics:***

- Schools tended to be less clear about what the Reading test entailed compared with the Mathematics test and were usually less confident in their pupils passing.

***Future intentions in relation to selection for the L6 test:***

- Many schools felt frustrated at the increased threshold marks (compared with the pilot tests) and were disappointed at the low pass rates in general (particularly for Reading).
- Certain schools felt pilot tests/guidance underestimated the difficulty of the L6 test.
- Following receipt of the results many schools reported intending to narrow their selection criteria for next year.

## **Introduction**

This chapter begins by examining the factors that influenced school decision making in relation to which pupils were put forward to sit the L6 test. It goes on to unpick Case Study schools' selection data, before concluding with a brief analysis of case schools' intended future selection approaches following receipt of their L6 results.

### **4.1 How were decisions made about selection?**

The interview data, and the analysis of results data presented in Chapter 6, indicated that Case Study schools often took very different approaches to selecting which

pupils to enter for the L6 test. Some schools only entered those they felt had a very good chance of passing, others entered pupils who they felt may just 'have a chance' and in a limited number of instances even entered pupils who they felt would probably not pass, with many opting for some kind of combination.

Although often a complex overall picture exists, the key factors underpinning selection approaches can be broadly categorised as being either objective measurement based (involving some form of quantifiable data) or subjective (focusing more on value based judgements such as pupil personality and behaviour). Under these two overarching headings, this section now attempts to illuminate the various factors that contribute towards the extent to which schools adopt either a narrow or broad approach to selection.

#### 4.1.1 Objective measurements

Unsurprisingly all schools mentioned using **a form of objective measurement to assist with determining** a pupil's capacity to do the L6 test. By *objective measurement* we mean formative teacher assessment, use of ongoing tracking systems, moderated work between partner schools and performance in mock NCTs and mock L6 tests themselves. Typically, schools maintained they were very secure in their objective measurements of pupils' levelling.

*'As well as the ongoing teacher assessment they had also done a former level 3 to 5 SAT and scored very highly at level 5 so were clearly on the cusp of level 6.'* (School 7, headteacher)

*'It was very very early on. Once we realised after the gap analysis we have quite secure level 5's, it was then pretty easy to say 'right there's our selection of children'...Really we were looking at secure levels rather than just scraping in...So I had to make sure my assessments were very accurate...I had to find ways that they could be moved on.'* (School 12, Year 6 teacher)

However, it was telling that only four schools explicitly stated that any pupils (for either Mathematics or Reading) were actually working at level 6, either at the point at which they were selected to undertake one of the L6 tests or later:

*'Our teacher assessments from KS1 onwards identify pupils likely to be level 6 by Year 5/6. We already had a clear idea which pupils were at or working towards level 6 based on our monitoring and tracking... We're careful to only enter solid level 6 – we do not want to set them up to fail. We are confident in our levelling.'* (School 4, Year 5/6 teacher)

Instead, schools tended to take a level 5 measure at some stage during the year (typically during Year 6) and use it to forecast a pupil's learning level by the end of Year 6.

This suggests that although schools had a very clear assessment of where pupils were operating across the full spectrum of level 5, they were far less confident as to whether a pupil was operating at level 6 or not. So, in reality, the majority of schools were making judgements on whether pupils should be entered for the level 6 test on the basis of their performance at level 5 as opposed to being secure that they were at level 6.

In the absence of standardised or accessible guidance regarding L6 test selection, it was apparent just how differently schools were conceiving their selection criteria, giving a very fragmented picture. Many schools struggled to convey coherently a specific selection strategy, electing to avoid the use of precise boundaries and using broader and ambiguous terms such as operating at a 'solid level 5'. The implication of the differing strategies for selection is that a pupil's likelihood of being selected to take part in the L6 test was highly dependent on which school they happened to attend. For example, a pupil operating at a level 5b in one school would almost definitely be entered, whereas the same child at a different school would almost certainly not be selected.

The qualitative data provides a number of reasons for these differences. The first explanation relates to the **lack of of guidance received in relation to selection for the L6 test**. As we noted above, Case Study schools appeared to be very proficient at identifying where pupils were at in terms of level 5, through a variety of means. However in terms of identifying level 6, schools were just simply not as confident and there appeared to be some diffidence in deciding whether pupils were operating at a true level 6 or not. Many schools **were concerned about the limited pool of past L6 test papers** with a minority reporting never having seen a mock paper. This only added to the lack of awareness regarding level 6 and how to benchmark pupils to take the test.

This lack of confidence seemed to play out in different ways. In the absence of any specific guidance, many schools adopted quite broad approaches to selection. This approach was often linked to the non-compulsory status of the test and the wider benefits of taking part, for example:

*'We were unsure of the standard and expectations so we were hedging our bets. Whether any of them pass L6 or not is a bit of a mystery to us anyway. No one knows what the pass mark will be in reality. Just to be asked to sit it was a compliment, regardless of how they actually did.'* (School 5, headteacher)



In contrast, other schools described how they adopted far more conservative approaches. Certain schools were mindful to not enter any pupils they felt might not be judged as achieving level 6, setting the selection bar relatively higher than others to try and avoid 'borderline pupils' failing the test. Schools with narrower selection policies conveyed a sense that they had deliberately 'played it safe' and that, even if they did suspect there were others who had a 'chance' of passing, the risk of undermining their confidence should they have failed was deemed to be unacceptably high.

*'We were pretty secure in the ones we entered. I could have probably put 5 more kids in for each test but I think it would have been stress on them because they're more uncertain pupils and I think it wouldn't have been fair because I might have been setting them up for failure.'* (School 8, headteacher)

*'Well we'd be very disappointed if they don't pass – we are expecting them to do ok, and they seemed to do so on the day, they were very confident on the day...It's not tricky here – there's nobody at the borderline...we would rather put in children who have a good chance. Borderline shouldn't go in for it.'* (School 20, Year 5/6 team leader).

#### 4.1.2 Subjective considerations

Although schools put a great deal of emphasis on formal teacher assessment and pupil performance in mock tests, the decision-making criteria practised in relation to the L6 test encompassed more than a purely objective measures focus. Instead many schools directly mentioned **weighing up other considerations alongside academic performance indicators to come up with a more fully informed set of decision making criteria**. In certain instances possessing the raw ingredients of academic ability and a track record of high academic performance in isolation were not necessarily seen to be sufficient grounds for selection. Instead a number of schools also attached considerable importance to the particular pupils' maturity, personality and, in some cases, behaviour.

*'They are also "sensible pupils" - I didn't think it would cause them stress or anxiety to enter them for the L6 test, so that was a factor as well...I wouldn't suggest anybody (for the test) who I thought would struggle with it - they're all very sensible.'* (School 2, headteacher)

*'I think at the end of the day it's got to be something the child is really up for this. It is about their attitude. Now you invariably find that the children who are working at level 6 have also got best behaviour, attitude and they just are model pupils.'* (School 10, headteacher)

The following school exemplifies a far more holistic selection approach to the Level 6 test.

*'I think you have to look at the personalities of the children and the whole child when you say can these children go through this test. The test is different, completely and they need to be able to cope with that, some of our children are less able to cope with the emotional stress, some of them were sitting the test crying and some refusing. You have got to weigh up the whole child; if it's not necessary then you are not going to push the issue.'* (School 6, headteacher)

In a different case the teacher had confidence in the selected pupils being able to do the level 6 test in terms of the content, but far less confidence in them doing so under the time constraints of a higher level test, the format of which would be very different to what they were used to.

*'... time is the issue often, it's not whether they can do it or not, it's whether they can do it in time.'* (School 17, headteacher)

All of these examples illustrate a fundamental aspect of subjectively driven selection criteria, namely how schools went about conceptualising the qualities and characteristics present in pupils deemed to be operating at level 6. The next section attempts to unpick how different schools went about interpreting 'level 6-ness' amongst their pupils.

#### **4.1.3 The qualities and characteristics of pupils working at level 6**

Viewpoints varied in relation to the qualities and characteristics level 6 pupils tended to possess. Given the lack of guidelines around what constitutes level 6 and the previously documented difficulties some schools had with accurately selecting level 6 pupils, it was not surprising that some schools struggled to pin down what traits were typically associated with level 6 pupils. A number of schools mentioned '*reading between the lines*' when looking through past papers and/or using APP materials in order to give themselves a greater understanding of 'level 6-ness'. However, certain schools and staff had just not had sufficient exposure to level 6 materials nor comprehensive or sustained experience of teaching the KS3 curriculum to feel able to elaborate much as to the nuances of what a level 6 pupil was in terms of their qualities/characteristics.

*'Simply put it's them meeting level 6 targets. If they can achieve those level 6 APP targets they're a level 6 pupil....it does seem quite a big leap.'* (School 9, Year 6 teacher)

Instead, in a number of instances it appeared that some teachers were still getting to grips with what a level 6 encompassed, because they remained at the very embryonic stages of teaching at this higher level more comprehensively. A minority of teachers were quite candid about their lack of security in what a confident level 6 pupil looked like and urged additional guidance to get a proper handle on what 'level 6-ness' was like.

*'I think if anything the Reading, maybe even the writing, needs more input to show teachers what level 6 writing and Reading looks like.'* (School 11, Year 6 teacher)

*'Content [around L6] was a little lacking. I would have liked there to have been more information easily available...there were sample tests but very little else I could find around...because it was such a new area for me...I was a bit fumbling in the dark.'* (School 12, senior teacher)

The lack of guidance meant that the extent to which teachers felt they understood what constituted 'level 6-ness' related to knowledge gained by other means. Examples included a school that was previously a middle school which meant that one of the teachers had previously routinely taught level 6 content; teachers with older children who they had supported through level 6 work; and those teachers with a higher educational background in either Mathematics or English, for example teachers who did A-levels or a higher degree in a related area.

Nevertheless a significant number of schools were able to give their impressions of what the key qualities and characteristics associated with level 6 in Mathematics and Reading were. Around half of the schools made some reference to the **pupil's positive attitude in relation to their learning**. Many were said to be highly self motivated individuals and as such were strong independent learners with a genuine passion for learning within a given subject. Consequently they were usually keen to be challenged and extended throughout their learning.

*'Well they are inquisitive, independent learners; they can work on projects independently.'* (School 1, headteacher)

This positive attitude was also linked to **resilience and tenacity** to understand complex concepts.

*'They are questioning, and want to get in deeper, tenacious in a way, stick with a problem and learn more about it, usually very competent talkers and good communicators.'* (School 7, Year 6 teacher)

Fundamentally L6 test pupils were said to enjoy learning and in the main relish the prospect of showcasing their skills in a test situation, meaning that formal testing rarely unduly fazed them.

*'They are the type of children who succeed in tests and enjoy them... Generally they are kids who are very self-disciplined, independent learners who have a real interest in the world around them, enjoy success and have many skills like resilience and resourcefulness meaning they will be successful.'* (School 7, headteacher)

Roughly a quarter of schools specifically suggested that their L6 test pupils had some form **of innate flair or capability to excel at a particular subject**. This played out in a variety of ways. Some schools focused on how quickly L6 test pupils were able to grasp new concepts – often it was said to be almost instinctive. Schools sometimes struggled to articulate this concisely but the following neatly encapsulates what others were trying to describe: *'They know a lot about a number by looking at it because that's what their brains do'* (School 12, deputy headteacher). Similarly the following extract describes how certain L6 Mathematics pupils are able to just intuitively arrive at a correct answer without necessarily being able to account for how they have done so.

*'Some of them seem to be able to do things and they can't always tell you how they've got there. They just know how to do it and they do it really quickly and they can do a lot of it in their head. Whereas the people working at level 5 have still got to write everything down.'* (School 3, deputy headteacher)

Schools often highlighted this natural ability as a key distinguishing feature between level 6 and level 5 pupils. A minority of teachers even felt that there was a limit as to how much schools could do to facilitate progress up to a level 6 standard without a certain baseline of natural ability, to make doing so feasible.

*'Maths isn't a chore for those two boys, they want to do it, they crave it almost...it is something that I think comes naturally to them... I don't think I could teach someone to get a level 6 level if they were naturally a level 5 – I don't think you can boost them to that. They have got to have that innate understanding and insight to take that next step.'* (School 20, Year 6 teacher)

*'It is a flair as well, linked to literacy say – we have a lot of children, level 5 children who have the skills to do level 5 writing or do level 5 comprehension but haven't*

*necessarily got that in-built flair that some of these children have.’ (School 1, headteacher)*

Certain qualities and characteristics tended to be more subject-specific in nature. The overwhelming quality/characteristic schools identified pupils exhibiting in relation to L6 Reading was their **excellent inferential skills** and **capacity to access authorial intent**, being able to ‘*read between the lines*’, interpret the nuances underlying a reader’s style and accessing deeper understandings, all of which were said to be very rare occurrences amongst typical Year 6 pupils.

*‘With Reading for example they are very good at inference and they are very good at working out why the author has written that in a certain way. Sort of their authorial intent...pupils who are working at a lower level find inference extremely hard being able to read between the lines and work out why something has been written in a certain way...but even our very highest readers still struggle with the authors intent and that’s why we didn’t put them in for the level 6 test.’ (School 3, deputy headteacher)*

Pupils’ ability to infer and deduce within L6 Reading was stated to be strongly associated with their own levels of maturity – in a way that was not as prominent within L6 Mathematics.

*‘L6 requires the maturity expected of a 14 year old - as well as the higher order thinking and writing skills, well read, comfortable with a wide range of challenging texts, higher order punctuation and writing. The breadth of life has to be infused into their writing, which only comes with maturity.’ (School 4, headteacher)*

The maturity issue was reported to be a central feature as to why many schools felt far less inclined to put pupils forward for the L6 Reading test - ‘*level 6 English at age 11 is rarer than Maths level 6*’ (School 4, Year 5/6 teacher). The point made here is that the parameters of the level 6 Reading test are just not compatible with the vast majority of pupils aged 11 (even the very brightest ones) – they simply do not possess the experiences and emotional maturity to be able to access what is required of them within the level 6 test.

In contrast, Mathematics was said to be far more transparent in terms of the criteria, depending less on pupils’ maturity levels and more on their technical competences. Instead it was based more on concrete aspects, which lent themselves far more tangibly to being taught in a classroom – ‘*Maths is easier because you have topics*’ (School 8, Year 6 teacher). For example a heightened understanding of algebra and formula/problem solving was frequently mentioned as being a key characteristic associated with level 6 test pupils. However, the characteristic level 6 Mathematicians were most often reported to possess was their capacity to apply mathematical reasoning in a variety of different situations, often ‘*in a very subtle way*’ (School 18, Year 6 teacher).

*'They're more able to apply reasoning. They're a lot quicker at solving those higher level challenging problems...some of them seem to be able to do things and they can't always tell you how they've got there. They just know how to do it and they do it really quickly and they can do a lot of it in their head. Whereas the people working at level 5 have still got to write everything down.'* (School 3, deputy headteacher)

*'In Maths you have 2 and 3 stage problems, you have to apply your understanding and extend it to solve more complex problems. Using and applying in unfamiliar circumstances is important as a skill.'* (School 15, Year 6 teacher)

Reflecting on the comments made by Case Study schools overall, it is clear that being a level 6 pupil in Year 6 is seen as being exceptional. Just a quick overview of the breadth of qualities and characteristics schools associate level 6 pupils with, suggests they are a minority group in most cohorts - the very brightest and very top performing pupils. This reflects the direction of travel of most schools towards taking a more selective approach to inclusion in the test (see 4. 4).

#### **4.1.4 Differences in selection approaches between Reading and Mathematics**

In general, schools reported they were less clear about what the Reading test entailed compared with the Mathematics test:

*'... in Maths it is more clear cut about what content to follow to achieve level 6 - we had to make that decision so they could be taught specific content. In Reading we have not taught specific content because we don't know what that is. It is very new to us.'* (School 7, headteacher)

*'I think I felt more confident about the ones going for Maths. Maths we were more confident that they would be getting the level 6. Literacy was a bit unknown we hadn't seen a marking scheme yet. So it was just a little bit of unknown territory.'* (School 8, Year 6 teacher)

The sense of confusion in relation to which pupils to select for the Reading test was compounded by the fact that a small number of schools were unclear as to whether they were obliged to enter Reading test pupils to sit the Writing paper as well. Consequently it appeared that certain schools needlessly narrowed the pool of pupils they felt eligible to take the L6 Reading test on the erroneous belief that in doing so they would then be obliged to also sit the Writing test, which they perhaps felt the pupils would not be capable of doing well in.

*'We had quite a lot of children we could have done just for the Reading, but because it was level 6 English they had to go for both tests, so we had to narrow it down to*

*who was both a good reader and a good writer, that's why we only got 6.'* (School 14, deputy headteacher)

*'Reading-wise we did think there were one or two who would have achieved a level 6 but we interpreted it that it had got to be combined with the writing and we struggle to get level 5 writers.'* (School 16, headteacher)

#### **4.1.5 Consultation with pupils and parents**

Many schools spoke of the consultative dimension to selection and emphasised the importance of dialogue undertaken between pupil and teacher. A number of schools conveyed that, irrespective of what criteria they employed to identify pupils primed for L6 test selection, the pupil's individual willingness to be involved was paramount in any eventual decision.

*'It goes a lot on what the teachers think, their knowledge of the children and then whether the child is willing to give it a go - we don't put them under pressure.'* (School 1, deputy headteacher)

In contrast, very few schools consulted parents systematically, although there were very isolated instances of parents' views overriding other concerns. School 3 for example discussed how they entered one pupil at the insistence of a parent, despite strong misgivings about the pupil's capacity to pass.

*'We added a girl in right up to the day before. We decided she could do it. Her mum asked if she could do it...as far as I was concerned she wasn't ready at all to do the booster group. Her confidence wasn't that high but her mum asked if she could do it. It was really her mum who wanted her to do it not her so we put her in for it.'* (School 3, headteacher)

In contrast, a different school reported rejecting a parent's request to enter their child into the level 6 test, holding firm with their original selection criteria and explaining that they did not feel the pupil in question was at the required level to sit the test.

*'We did have one request from a parent that their child was entered for the L6 [Reading] but as far as we were concerned he was only working at 4a so we didn't.'* (School 8, deputy headteacher)

## 4.2 Timing of decision-making

Timings varied. Some schools appeared to have already earmarked at least some pupils well in advance of the end of Year 6. Typically, these pupils had already been labelled as 'high flyers' by staff who felt they would be capable of doing the L6 test by the time they reached the end of Year 6. Often such pupils had already been identified as requiring an enhanced and more challenging curriculum for Year 6.

*'I was quite certain that [the pupil identified at end of Year 5] would be doing the level 6 paper.'* (School 6, Year 6 teacher)

*'We looked at what they got in Year 5. And talking to the Year 5 teacher and talking about their capabilities and we do assessment at the beginning of Year 6 so unfortunately it's a majority of formal testing that we've been using. They did an assessment early on and I identified and clarified which children would be going through.'* (School 14, deputy headteacher)

More broadly, the model to earmark certain pupils at the beginning of Year 6 (or before in some cases) and then review and refine selection judgements nearer the formal deadline in April, also appeared quite a common strategy.

*'We looked at their end of Year 5 assessments and progressed that forward. Initially we were looking at about 10 or 12 in each subject, but it was constantly reviewing and we were allowed to put them in up until the day. It was the 31st March before you had to name them so it was quite flexible. That was great for us. We had an idea of who it might involve. We identified children who were already achieving level 5 when tested in autumn term and were consistent in English and Maths, then we considered putting them through. As the year goes on you see there are children who are more able to do that so you can add a few more.'* (School 15, Year 6 teacher)

Other schools noted that their selection policies allowed revision nearer to the formal DfE deadline. For example, certain schools stated they withdrew individual pupils because they had not made the anticipated amount of progress:

*'Yes we did. They wouldn't have been aware of it but we had a couple of children who we'd identified as potentials but when it got down to making those big decisions they weren't quite there, they were 5Bs and we thought that's a leap too far for them...we were very much aware of how big a jump level 6 is for them.'* (School 10, assistant headteacher)

In contrast some pupils were added because it was felt that they had the potential to go far further than they were currently demonstrating or because they had made strong progress:

*'One child was added...she made a huge leap. Things obviously fell into place for her.'* (School 8, Year 6 teacher)



### 4.3 Which pupils were selected for the test?

As has been previously outlined schools differed with regards to the extent to which they employed a narrow or broad approach to selection. This section examines the selection data in more depth for both L6 Mathematics and Reading.

#### **Mathematics**

On average schools put forward 41 per cent of their pupils who had attained a level 5 in the standard NCT to take the L6 Mathematics test.

Table 4.3 contains data from column 6 of table A1 (see Appendix 1). It shows the relative proportions of the pupils who attained a level 5 in the standard Mathematics NCT who were subsequently entered in the L6 Mathematics test across the Case Study schools.

Table 4.1 Proportions of pupils who achieved a level 5 in their NCT test who were entered for the L6 Mathematics test

Percentage of pupils who performed at level 5 in the NCT and were also entered in to the L6 test	Case Study school	Total
<b>very narrow approach: 20% or less</b>	7, 9, 17, 20	(4)
<b>narrow approach: 21% to 40%</b>	1, 3, 5, 6, 11, 16,	(6)
<b>broader approach: 41% to 50%</b>	2, 14, 15, 18	(4)
<b>broad approach: 51% to 80%</b>	8, 12, 18,19	(4)
<b>very broad approach: 81% or greater</b>	10, 13	(2)

\*School 4 did not enter any pupils

The table shows that whilst two schools took a very broad approach to selection, entering over 81 per cent of their pupils who performed at level 5 in their NCT, and four entered fewer than 20 per cent, taking a very narrow approach, most entered between 21 and 80 per cent. This indicates that a relatively liberal approach was being taken by most schools. This is not necessarily very surprising given the newness of the test along with the difficulties many schools outlined regarding lack of guidance, limited resources and insecurity with what a true level 6 pupil is.

Across the Case Study sample there were 21 top level 5 pupils (i.e. those for whom statistical modelling indicated a strong likelihood of their passing, based on post hoc analysis) from the main test who were entered in to the L6 test from across 12 of the schools. Of those 12 schools, 9 selected all of their top level 5 pupils to take part in the L6 test suggesting that these schools were largely very effective in ensuring that the very top ability pupils were identified and put forward for the L6 test. School 3 was unusual in that it had 4 top level 5 pupils and yet only entered half for the L6 test, and School 17 did not select the one top level 5 main test pupil they had, although it is possible this pupil may have been the one the school referred to below:

*'There was one that we weren't sure about putting through (but was away on test day anyway). What I have seen in class he has elements of level 6 in his knowledge but in the test situation and the time isn't the best way he works so I was concerned that he may not be able to complete it to the best of his ability within the time.'* (School 17, headteacher)

## **Reading**

On average schools put forward 25 per cent of their pupils who had attained a level 5 in the standard NCT to take the L6 Reading test. Table 4.4 contains data from column 6 of table A2 (see Appendix 1). It shows the relative proportions of the pupils who attained a level 5 in the standard Reading NCT who were subsequently entered in to the L6 Reading test across the Case Study schools.

Table 4.2 Proportions of pupils who achieved a level 5 in their NCT test who were entered for the L6 Reading test

Percentage of pupils who performed at level 5 in the NCT and were also entered in to the L6 test	Case Study school	Total
<b>very narrow approach: 20% or less</b>	3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 14, 16, 17, 20	(9)
<b>narrow approach: 21% to 40%</b>	1, 6, 8, 11, 12, 18, 19	(7)
<b>broader approach: 41% to 50%</b>	2, 15, 19	(3)
<b>broad approach: 51% to 80%</b>		(0)
<b>very broad approach: 81% or greater</b>	10, 13	(2)

\* Schools 3, 9, 16, 17, 20 did not enter any pupils

Only two schools selected over 80 per cent of their pupils who performed at level 5 in their NCT with the vast majority electing to select fewer than 40 per cent (5 schools decided to enter no pupils at all). This apparently represents a far more narrow approach to the selection of L6 Reading pupils as opposed to the Mathematics (see Table 4.3), although in fact the post hoc analysis indicates that none of the schools had any pupils who were very likely to attain level 6 in the test so, as with Mathematics, this still represented a liberal approach to selection. This is in line with the qualitative data that suggests that schools were even less confident about judging what level 6 in Reading constituted, what curricular content to include and, more broadly, far less confident in their pupils' capacity to achieve it.

#### 4.4 Future decision making and selection intentions

Following the receipt of the results from the tests, each of the 20 schools was asked to reflect on this year's experience of the L6 test and to report, via email, on their future intentions for selection in 2013.

#### 4.4.1 Proposed changes to selection overall

There was only one Case Study school that did not intend to enter any pupils for either the Reading or Mathematics test in 2013. School 11 reported losing faith in the accuracy of the L6 test to identify level 6 pupils. The school had employed a narrow approach to selection for both Reading and Mathematics. In the case of Mathematics, two of the pupils were said to have already completed the Year 6 curriculum with no trouble in Year 5 - something that prompted the school to consult with their partner secondary school to ensure they were taught the Year 7 curriculum content in Year 6. As such the school was convinced that they had 'evidence' that those and other pupils were operating at a level 6 standard, and so were dismayed when none of their pupils achieved a level 6 in the L6 test.

*'I was disappointed that our children did not get their level 6 as I have evidence of them working at the level.'* (School 11, email response)

Of the 19 schools expecting to take part in either the Reading or Mathematics test in 2013, seven intended to make some changes to their selection processes, with all indicating that they would be more selective this time.

*'We will make everything harder and move the threshold higher...We will adopt a more cautious approach to selection in view of the increase of threshold.'* (School 14, email response)

*'As we do not wish to enter children into stressful tests unless we are sure they will pass the test (as opposed to working at level 6 in their class work), this will change our entrance criteria. As last year, we will let the children and the parents make the final decision.'* (School 17, email response)

The government's decision to significantly increase the mark threshold was both unexpected and controversial in the eyes of a quarter of the Case Study schools. Schools reported feeling undermined by this. School 14 revealed the depth of feeling in relation to the decision to increase the threshold so markedly and gives an insight into how crushing the affect of unexpected failure was on the pupils themselves.

*'I wasn't at all happy with the increased marking threshold. I was really irritated by that...Lots of disappointed pupils who knew they were L6 pupils because they'd passed previous tests and then they were told they weren't in the test.'* (School 14, email response)

The same school also emphasised how the threshold alteration put them in an awkward position with the pupils' parents and obliged them to try and justify why their children unexpectedly did not pass. School 20 reported that the threshold change

amounted to such a large shift in the goalposts that had they known in time, it may well have altered which pupils they felt capable of achieving a level 6 in the test.

*'We were disappointed that the pass into level 6 threshold had been raised a huge amount compared to the 2011 trial level 6 test. One of our boys gained level 6, the other missed out by a couple of marks - however, the previous year he would have been well into level 6. Had we known the change of threshold in advance it may have changed our decision on who to enter.'* (School 20, email response)

Related to this, eight of the schools identified that the materials and guidance for selection last year more broadly had under-represented the difficulty of the actual tests.

*'We prepared our children by assessing level 6 material available. However when the level 6 paper was given out it was obvious that this was not in line with what we had prepared for.'* (School 15, email response)

This combined with the higher mark threshold and relatively low pass mark nationally (particularly for Reading) meant many schools were even less confident about which pupils would be able to pass the L6 test, ensuring that narrower selection approaches were an almost inevitable consequence.

#### **4.4.2 Proposed changes for the Mathematics test**

Seventeen of the 20 schools intended to enter pupils for the Mathematics L6 test in 2013, with one stating that it depended on teacher assessment later in the year, and two stating that they did not intend to take part next year.

School 2 adopted a broader approach to selection and admitted entering a '*small group of pupils who had been achieving 5c/5b levels in Reading and Maths*'. However, the school fared disappointingly in the L6 test with only one pupil attaining a level 6 standard. Consequently, the school was intending to adopt narrower selection criteria with the boundary for selection reducing to level 5a - which meant no pupil would be entered for the next year's Mathematics test. They stated that this year's relatively poor performance in the L6 test could be used as a means to 'justify' their more conservative approach towards selection to the parents and governors who were likely to be '*encouraging*' them to '*put pupils in for the level 6 tests*'.

#### **4.4.3 Proposed changes for the Reading test**

Fifteen of the schools intended to enter pupils for the L6 Reading test in 2013, with two stating that it would be dependent on their teacher assessments, and three

stating that they would definitely not take part. Leaders of at least five schools were particularly concerned by the significantly increased threshold employed on this year's L6 tests compared to last year's:

*'It would be nice if the criteria for the level threshold remained constant, within one or two marks. We had children who sat the L6 the previous year and passed comfortably. Our 2012 pupils were nowhere near despite being the same level of ability, which gives us a false sense of security.'* (School 13, email response)

Interestingly of the five Case Study schools that elected to not take part in the Reading test this year, only one definitely decided against taking part next year. This suggests that participation rates in the L6 test are likely to fluctuate year on year, dependent to a large extent upon the dynamics of each particular cohort. School 4, for example, emphasised that although they had enjoyed being part of the L6 test this year, there was an even greater sense of anticipation for next year because they happened to have a greater proportion of higher ability pupils.

*'Glad we did them, even though we only had a limited number of capable students. Looking forward to next year, we have a much brighter selection to work with.'* (School 4, email response)

## Chapter 5: Provision for pupils and preparation for the test

### ***Key Findings***

- Almost all Case Study schools discussed the lack of guidance available to them on how best to support pupils that were engaging in the L6 tests. This included a lack of practice test materials and - more fundamentally - how to support pupils working at level 6 within the primary curriculum.
- The lack of guidance meant that schools used an array of ad hoc means of support including materials derived from web searches, their own experience as learners or teachers of Mathematics or English and materials used previously for other purposes.
- Schools varied in their approach to utilising elements of the KS3 curriculum. Many took elements of the curriculum, but there were concerns expressed about the potential for disengagement if pupils were asked to do the same work at secondary school. It was striking that the materials and support used mainly related to Mathematics.
- Two main types of support were utilised in the Case Study schools.
  - Firstly, all schools discussed how their work in the classroom aimed to stretch the most able pupils. This was done via differentiation focussing on specific curriculum areas (in the case of Mathematics), the use of investigative and independent approaches and sometimes involving pupils in aspects of teaching/leading learning of other pupils. In the main, this was not seen to have changed greatly or at all since the introduction of the L6 tests. In all schools for Mathematics and most schools for literacy, this teaching took place in the context of some form of ability grouping.
  - Secondly, almost all schools engaged in some kind of direct test preparation. In most cases this involved booster sessions with the groups taking part in the L6 tests (which usually had a combination of teaching and test practice) and the use of practice papers.
- In most cases, schools and staff were more confident in their support for pupils in relation to the Mathematics test compared with the Reading test for three broad reasons:
  - there appeared to be more internal and external expertise available to support higher level Mathematics;
  - there was less guidance available for the Reading test compared with the Mathematics test; and

- as noted above, identification of pupils for Reading was more problematic.
- Schools broadly took one of three approaches:
  - a mainly outcome focussed approach, which tended to involve a great deal of direct test preparation;
  - a mainly teaching and learning focus, which tended to be associated with less emphasis on booster sessions and test preparation; or
  - a combined learning and outcome approach.
- Several schools intended to change their approaches to focus more on teaching and learning in the next year.

## Introduction

This chapter examines the support provided by schools to pupils selected to take part in the L6 tests. The first part looks at the guidance and support schools were able to make use of as they planned to work with these pupils. The second part looks at the practices used, outlining pupils' experiences and discussing an outline for characterising schools' broad approaches to supporting L6 test pupils.

### 5.1 Guidance and materials for support

Almost all schools commented on the lack of support provided. This related both to a lack of example questions and papers as well as support for teaching level 6 learners. This support could include guidance, materials and professional development activities. For example:

*'If they are going to become more the norm Year 6 teachers are going to need more support. There might be some Year 6 teachers who even as confident Mathematicians can get children to level 5 but level 6 is a different story. There needs to be resources up on websites, there needs to be tips on how you teach certain things without just simply giving them a SATs question. Teachers sometimes need those kind of ideas just to make sure that those level 6 children are getting a well rounded education...we don't have the resources to help them.'* (School 9, Year 6 teacher)

Other schools made clear a major issue that underlay many of the problems that teachers faced here: the lack of clarity of how level 6 should be supported within the primary curriculum (this is mentioned in Chapter 3 in relation to decision to take part as well). For example:

*'We have a test at level 6 but we have nothing in the curriculum...there is no framework at the moment to tell us what that looks like. If there weren't any pilot*



*materials I would have had no idea what our children would have had to learn to pass level 6.... It took me three to four years to learn how to teach and a good deal of that was learning familiarity with the primary curriculum. It's not something even an experienced teacher could just pick up a textbook and go "Oh that's all right"...It's not like that, it's way beyond that.'* (School 12, deputy headteacher)

This relates to the approaches schools took to utilising elements of the KS3 curriculum in their teaching. This varied enormously, and is an area of contention for secondary schools, as is noted in Chapter 7. Just under half of the Case Study schools already utilised elements of the KS3 curriculum, and others had begun to use some aspects in teaching for pupils to be entered for the L6 tests. Areas covered for Mathematics included quadratic equations, multiplication of fractions, use of compasses and geometry. However, there was much less clarity over level 6 approaches in relation to Reading, which a number of schools again related to a lack of external support. This lack of support was linked to an array of ad hoc, unsystematic approaches to support within schools. For example, a number of schools used online search engines or browsing bookshops to try to find materials:

*'I went and bought myself a KS3 Mathematics revision book – it's been a godsend. That was my main source of content. I got the level 6 APP from the internet but not got any training – I've done it all myself... I've asked for more level 6 books for the children for next year, because it's been a lot of me using the revision book and making it up and I don't think that is the best way to teach them.'* (School 19, Year 6 teacher)

Others who had a background in Mathematics or English used their own resources:

*'I didn't necessarily add the KS3 curriculum but I do have some KS3 Maths books so what I can do is delve into them if there's something that is going to give me an extra resource and for some reason the children love that. They love seeing this KS3 book come out. It gets them excited because it makes them feel good about themselves but I don't work to it...The KS3 I'm not really very aware of - I'm just aware of level 6.'* (School 9, Year 6 teacher)

Schools used their experience of other materials such as Kangaroo Mathematics, N RICH, materials from the Single Level Tests and MyMaths. In a small number of cases, advice and guidance was sought directly from secondary school colleagues. For example in School 11 the Year 6 teacher had discussions with secondary school staff in relation to KS3 Mathematics, as also occurred in School 14:

*'Back in September I met the head of Maths at [secondary school] and showed her the resources that I had and I said "It doesn't say level 6 on it, is this the right materials for level 6". She looked through our resources and said "Yes, that's level 6", and she gave me some resources as well so I could use them in my lessons... We only met the once, and we did have some children in Year 5 who were working at level 6 as well, so she did offer something for those but it was just the one meeting, I just wanted to know I was on the right lines.'* (School 14, deputy headteacher)

Some schools expressed concern that overuse of KS3 materials could be problematic. For example:

*'For me it wouldn't be advisable to use KS3 materials throughout. Though they are high ability you've still got to make sure they're strong in their foundations...it's looking at not just the one answer, looking at all the possible answers to the question. I think KS2 allows children to be sort of systematic in their approach...I would worry if the teacher was using KS3 fully.'* (School 12, Year 6 teacher)

A small number of others actually rejected using KS3 work, in particular School 10 which had undergone a recent overhaul of the KS2 curriculum with a particular focus on making it work better for the highest achieving pupils:

*'We struggled with that. We talked at length about it and we decided not to [teach KS3 curriculum]. There are elements we'll dip into because that's the way it is. These were the discussions we had. Shall we look at KS3 curriculum or shall we try and give these children a broad, as rich a curriculum as we can in that level 5 and we decided to go down that route....going sideways rather than up...We didn't want to push push and just move them up.'* (School 10, deputy headteacher)

This school had taken this decision partly to avoid the problem of disengagement at KS3 when pupils came across the same areas of work. However, in addition to the materials there was recognition in a number of schools that professional development support for the teaching of these new materials was unavailable. In School 11, the Year 6 teacher for Mathematics felt the onus to *'find out exactly what the Year 7 curriculum was and go on from there.'*

It should be noted that throughout this section most of the sources of support related to Mathematics, rather than Reading - that will be returned to later.

## **5.2 Types of support and provision**

There were two main types of support utilised: provision for the most able more broadly, and specific test preparation.

## 5.2.1 Provision for the most able

All Case Study schools discussed how they taught to *stretch the most able*. Over half of the Case Study schools suggested that they taught to ensure all pupils met their potential, and that this was part and parcel of their approach to teaching. Most of these stated that they already had a strategic focus on supporting pupils to achieve their potential, which fitted well with engagement in L6 tests. For example:

*'We extend level 6 children as a matter of course anyway..... the main difference was going through L6 past papers so they were familiar with lay out, content of the paper but the pupils chosen would already have had experience of more challenging work anyway.'* (School 4, headteacher)

Individual teachers also explained that their overall approach already involved stretching the most able, for example:

*'It hasn't changed my teaching at all. I think what does change is looking at the children and looking at the kind of Maths or literacy that we are doing so if I have got level 6 children in there, it is not always going to relate to the primary curriculum some of it. It is new stuff. I have to teach myself in some respects, remind myself how to do it. It will vary from year to year depending on who I have got in there.'* (School 6, Year 6 teacher)

However, others noted how engagement in the L6 test had altered their approaches:

*'Well obviously yes because I'm having to differentiate another way, to start getting past papers for those level 6s. I mean I was already differentiating in the Maths lesson anyway to try and do that but it has led to extra differentiation.'* (School 9, Year 6 teacher)

As can be seen from Section 5.1 above, the majority of schools utilised additional materials. It is striking how in the majority of cases the discussions here focussed on Mathematics, with very few additional materials or examples relating to Reading. This classroom work involved in all schools, grouping by ability in Mathematics. The majority of schools also used ability grouping in literacy. This grouping typically involved two or sometimes three ability groups, with the level 6 pupils catered for in the upper ability group. All schools discussed supporting L6 test pupils by differentiated teaching and activities. In many cases this involved providing opportunity for engaging in independent problem-solving and investigatory work in Mathematics:

*'The children are moving forward but they're also getting a broad understanding of tackling Maths in lots of different ways...at the moment they're doing lots of different work on spirals and all sorts of interesting mathematical stuff which is giving them an enriched curriculum.'* (School 10, headteacher)

Several schools discussed using pupils in teaching roles:

*'And often we'd get the level 6 almost playing a teacher role really; demonstrating using the Mathematics symbols how they went about it, putting it into words using Mathematics language. So sometimes as kind of mentors for the other children.'*  
(School 10, Year 6 teacher)

## 5.2.2 Test preparation

In addition to this broader support, the vast majority of Case Study schools utilised some form of *test preparation*. This involved utilising practice papers for almost all schools and, for around three quarters, providing specific additional 'booster sessions.' These sessions lasted between thirty and sixty minutes, and took place after school or at lunchtime or occasionally during class time. The number of such sessions varied from one or two just prior to the test, to weekly sessions for half or even a full term.

All schools gave thought to who should conduct these additional booster sessions. In many cases, they were conducted by the teacher who taught the pupils in their main numeracy or literacy sessions. In others, external 'experts' were used such as senior leaders in the schools, HLTAs and in one case support from a local secondary school.

The focus of these sessions varied along a continuum in the use made of booster sessions from specific test preparation/exam practice to broader teaching at level 6, with a combination of both in many cases. For example:

*'For our level 6s we did boosters. There are certain elements of level 6 that I may have not covered, so in class I will do some level 6 stuff as an extension for the challenge, so when we looked at angles, I automatically wanted to look at corresponding angles and alternative angles to extend them towards level 6 anyway but certain things they have not necessarily done so we did for four weeks once a week a booster for half an hour to make sure they felt confident. I think I would have done it anyway, they like that challenge.'* (School 17, Year 6 teacher)

School 18 was notable in that the headteacher withdrew the most able pupils in Mathematics to provide additional teaching that was not focussed on the test, but rather on developing their mathematical skills for the future:

*I was then able to say "Right, these are your 'high flyers' and it's going to be really difficult for you [Year 6 teacher] to differentiate because whatever you give them they can do it in 10 minutes. I'll take this group and I'll introduce simultaneous equations, statistical surveys, data analysis, bell curves all that much harder Maths which would*

*come into KS3. Really prepping them so that they can land and fly at top group." I mean ultimately they should be doing their GCSE a year early. Ideally spending 3 years on their A-level to get the highest possible grade. I can't see that through but that's what I'm trying to do.'* (School 18, headteacher)

Again, there were some differences here between Mathematics and Reading, with some teachers noting that 'preparation' and teaching for the Reading test were not as easy as for Mathematics, due to the ability to focus on specific topics and curriculum areas in the latter case:

*'They were even being taught quadratic equations at one point... but you know, with English it was more tricky.'* (School 8, Year 6 teacher)

A number of schools indicated that they did little additional work on Reading other than practice papers in these sessions.

### 5.2.3 Pupil perspectives

Focus group attendees were asked to think about work carried out by the school to prepare for the tests and who, in both school and in the home, helped them. For many, the lack of time between being informed that they were being entered in the tests and the tests themselves meant that they had little awareness of some of the range of support activities outlined by schools above. However in the majority of schools there was an awareness of at least some of the support and preparatory work done. In terms of in-class support, some pupils realised that this might have been part of the usual differentiation work:

*'It was in the same lesson because we sometimes finish before people so we like get a sheet to do and then we get to finish it as homework.'* (School 16, pupil).

*'I think they probably have gone through a few things with us but with us not being aware of it.'* (School 7, pupil).

In most cases the differences in work done was more overt. From our 20 Case Study schools pupils in eight mentioned some kind of differentiated learning or preparation and a similar number mentioned dedicated homework and revision:

*'When all the other children were doing their practice level 3-5 tests I was doing the practice level 6 ones instead. I did all the preparation for the normal ones but I also did some extra level 6 as well.' It was all in lesson time.'* (School 6, pupil)

Comments from the School 15 focus group illustrate the differences in practice between level 5 and level 6 work:

*'We did this lesson where people were just doing normal Maths but there were a few people that were going to do level 6s and they gave them a level 6 paper to do questions from.'* (School 15, pupil 1)

*'We did a lot of work but it was mainly for level 5, the main work we did for level 6 was probably on 'My Maths.'* (School 15, pupil 2)

*We were doing level 6 mental Maths tests when we usually do level 5.'* (School 15, pupil 3)

Several reported after-school or lunchtime sessions as discussed above, and many focus group respondents mentioned homework and the support they received from family members and others. Often pupils were given guidance as to websites they could access at home that contained KS3 materials and learning techniques.

*'My teacher said any work that we do at home or any essays that I did she said to take it in and she'd mark it for us and she had extra sheets of papers near the shelf so that if you want harder work in your spare time you can do it.'* (School 8, pupil)

In addition, eight of the focus groups produced comments about support offered at home by family members:

*'My mum and dad tried to help me but they couldn't. It was too hard for them so my brother had to help me and my granddad.'* (School 15, pupil)

### 5.3 Confidence in support for L6 pupils

Differences in confidence in preparation was a common theme emerging. A number of teachers were lacking in confidence in teaching L6 test pupils in both Reading and Mathematics, although it is also important to note that many teachers were markedly less confident in their teaching and support for pupils in relation to the L6 Reading test compared with the Mathematics test. This was due to a number of inter-relating factors.

First, it is striking that around a third of schools identified strengths in relation to Mathematics: for example staff who had a Mathematics degree or A level, staff who had worked in industry or who had previously taught Mathematics in secondary schools. Thus there were a number of comments made relating to 'expert' or 'strong' Mathematics teaching. For example, in School 20 the Year 5/6 teacher who taught the upper ability group for Mathematics and was described by the deputy headteacher as the 'Maths whizz' explained:

*'I've only been in teaching 10 years, I was in engineering prior to that, so Mathematics is very much in my blood.'* (School 20, Year 5/6 teacher)

In contrast, very few schools identified particular expertise in relation to Reading. School 12 stood out, although even here a lack of confidence in teaching Reading at level 6 amongst Year 6 teachers was noted:

*'We have a Reading champion. She's a published author and playwright and she runs the library basically. She's an HLTA but she does enrichment work... I can give her a paper and a mark scheme and say "Please get on with it"...I'm not sure I would have the same faith with our Year 6 teachers in terms of subject knowledge.'* (School 12, deputy headteacher)

Secondly, whilst the vast majority of schools commented on the lack of guidance and support for teaching and preparation at level 6 in general, there was a particular problem in accessing such support in relation to the Reading test. For example, there was very little guidance available compared with Mathematics or the optional Writing test on the DfE website.

Thirdly, and related to this lack of guidance, many teachers found it very hard to identify the characteristics of pupils at level 6 in Reading compared with those at level 6 in Mathematics (see Section 4.8). When they were confident in doing so, they often identified that the characteristics of pupils at level 6 in Reading related to the ability to empathise and respond with emotional maturity to texts, which they argued were likely to be found in children older than 10 or 11.

Often, these factors combined. For example in School 7 both Year 6 teachers were confident mathematicians, having A level and degree level Mathematics respectively, but less confident in relation to Reading. In addition, the headteacher reported difficulties in identifying what level 6 meant in relation to Reading:

*'What we had to be clear about was exactly what a child needs in Reading to achieve in level 6. In Maths it is more clear cut about what content to follow to achieve level 6. We had to make that decision so they could be taught specific content. In Reading we have not taught specific content because we don't know what that is. It is very new to us... In Reading we do not feel highly skilled in assessing level 6 so we don't feel highly skilled in teaching Reading at level 6 so we don't know what it involves.'*  
(School 7, headteacher)

## 5.4 Categorising approaches to support for L6 pupils

Drawing on the analysis of differences in types of support for level 6 presented in Section 5.2 and 5.3 above, three broad views or approaches to teaching and learning in schools were identified which related to their approaches to these kinds of support.

First, a small group of perhaps four schools took a strongly **learning-focussed approach**. These schools were clear that teaching and the classroom were of over-riding importance, and assessment was best done by teachers using a range of measures, rather than focussing just on a test. For example:

*'I struggle with the tests anyway, don't like to level based only on tests. But it does make sense if you are looking at testing that they need to attain level 5 if getting level 6. But the test anyway doesn't show the realistic level. Teacher assessment is much better. For children on the borderline of the tests, you really need to use teacher assessments based on much broader range of data.'* (School 20, deputy headteacher)

These schools tended to provide minimal specific test preparation, for example one or two specific booster sessions, or none at all.



At the other extreme, another small group of around four schools took a strongly **outcome-focussed approach**. These schools tended to be under pressure to improve outcomes for the most able or more broadly. Many of them had been assessed as 'Satisfactory' in their most recent Ofsted inspection, or were concerned that they may be assessed as less than 'Good' in their next inspection:

*'We tend to do very well with higher ability children, good level of L5s, but we don't tend to convert SEN children as straightforwardly. So we are judged 'Satisfactory', not on attainment, but on KS1/KS2 progress because of this... One of the reasons we are doing the L6 test to be honest is to try to balance out slightly, because with more L6s we can get it can balance out the value added scores. So it was an ulterior motive really. Because it gives us more ability to show progress because of the cut off at the top.'* (School 1, headteacher)

Their responses tended to involve a large amount of test-specific preparation, with less focus on wider classroom teaching. For example:

*'They do a lot of practice papers. We feel that its exam technique that lets them down rather than lack of knowledge and we give them a lot of practice understanding the types of questions they might do and what techniques they might use for annotating etc so they have done a lot of tests/past papers.'* (School 14, deputy headteacher)

The largest group - about 12 - were on a continuum between these two extremes, taking a **learning and outcome-focussed approach**, with some tending to focus primarily on classroom learning but with some preparation for the tests, and others with a lot of test preparation but still a clear wider learning agenda. The headteacher at School 7 captures this approach very well here as well as the pressures perceived to make this more difficult:

*'We have tried to take a - not "laid back" but not "hot housing" approach to testing. It's our ethos that we are teaching far more than teaching for a Reading and Maths test, but I have to balance that with the stakes being very high and my job dependent on how those children do in those tests. But we have to remain strong on that, we do not do a lot of mock testing, the curriculum remains rich and varied right up to the week of SATs - we don't stop doing PE and do extra literacy instead. As we get nearer to May they have a look at papers and they familiarise themselves. We use the test base system to try some practice questions that relate to topics they are working on.'* (School 7, headteacher)

As will be identified in Chapter 6 below, in relation to measurable outcomes on the test, the most successful schools took a combined learning and outcome-focussed approach, whereas most of the least successful schools took a strongly outcome-focussed approach.

## 5.5 Future plans in relation to preparation and support

Following the receipt of the results from the tests, each of the 20 schools were asked to report, via email, about their future intentions in relation to both taking part in the test (reported in section 4.7.3 above) and changes they might make to preparations.

All but six indicated they would make some changes in preparation. For five schools, this involved focussing more on teaching and learning rather than test preparation. It is worth noting that this group included two of the poorest performing schools that were identified as being 'outcome-focussed' overall, indicating they were aware of the need to move away from overemphasis on test preparation:

*'We will integrate the teaching of level 6 Maths and Literacy more into lessons rather than separate booster classes.'* (School 3 email response)

*'We may look at preparing differently for English through our whole class teaching - encouraging children towards the more extended responses required, to making comparisons across texts, for example.'* (School 12 email response)

Others were looking overall at providing additional resource; with three noting they would use more booster sessions and two that they would start preparation earlier:

*'Will start earlier with Maths doing small group work.'* (School 19 email response)

*'As I am under pressure to achieve maximum points progress per pupil, I will inevitably have to allocate some booster support time for pupils selected to take the test, to best prepare them.'* (School 2 email response)

## Chapter 6: Outcomes of the test

### **Key Findings**

#### **Outcomes for the school and staff**

- Most schools saw positive outcomes for the school in relation to demonstrating progress to staff, Ofsted and parents.
- However many were resistant to the driving force being school outcomes, especially in relation to inspection, rather than the needs of the pupils themselves. A number were concerned about the potential for narrowing the curriculum for the most able.
- Some schools were able to use the tests to reinforce their focus on higher ability pupils and provide a boost to staff by symbolising that the school could do well for all pupils including those with highest ability.
- Others felt it provided valuable professional development for staff in working with high ability pupils.

#### **Outcomes for pupils**

- Pupils and staff identified two main areas of benefit for the pupils.
- Firstly, of course, there were educational outcomes. This referred to enabling pupils to fulfil their potential, both within the primary school and beyond. There were concerns expressed here that this required secondary schools to take these results seriously (a real issue, as will be discussed later).
- The other area related to wider personal outcomes. Pupils identified that the test could motivate them (corroborated by staff), and some described feeling proud to have taken part and enjoyed the process. However, staff identified that some pupils could feel overly pressurised by involvement in the test, and this was borne out by the pupils themselves, with some concerns about overloading (with the test being just after the L3-5 NCTs). For most pupils, however, the potential positives outweighed the negatives.

#### **Test results**

- Around 40 per cent of pupils entered were judged at level 6 from the Mathematics test, and around one per cent from the Reading test.
- In relation to the Mathematics test, it was possible to identify, using a range of measures, a small number of schools that performed particularly well and

others that performed relatively poorly.

- Those that performed particularly well had a school-level focus on both learning and outcomes, and used a mix of teaching and test preparation. Those that performed particularly poorly tended to have a school-level focus on outcomes, and focused their efforts on test preparation.

## Introduction

The section examines a range of outcomes, including outcomes for the school, the staff and the pupils. It also examines test results.

### 6.1 Outcomes for teachers and the school

Only two schools - School 2 and School 13 - outlined negative outcomes for the school. The headteacher at School 2 had noted that they had taken part as an experiment this year, but had not been convinced of the benefits and (if she were not leaving) would not be taking part again due to a number of factors including lack of credence given to the test results by secondary schools; perceived negative outcomes for pupils, and the tests acting as a driver for test preparation rather than pupil learning (which will be considered later).

The most commonly mentioned set of positive responses (from 9 schools) centred on involvement **demonstrating pupil progress**. Many of these noted that this reflected well on the school, most commonly - in the case of 7 schools - with Ofsted:

*'There's the political side to it and there's thinking about the children. We have 24 kids, if you get a level 6 that increases your APS by 6, so 8 children getting a level 6 would increase our APS for this year... so we were aware of that and the LA [Local Authority] had briefed us on that, that the APS would rise this year if we sat the L6 test. It is a "bar raising moment". We do lots of good things, children are doing really well, making really good progress, but every time we seem to get there the bar gets raised. We're now 18 months away from an Ofsted inspection, so this data will be quite significant for that.'* (School 5, headteacher)

A small number of schools also mentioned demonstrating progress to governors and parents while others discussed its positive effects on the staff:

*'It feels sometimes like a real uphill struggle to keep motivated and keep going keep putting in - you can tell people they are delivering outstanding lessons, and the children are making progress, but they are not hitting the national standards so it is nice to show we can teach at that level.'* (School 20, deputy headteacher)

However, as the quotation from School 5 above indicates there was often resistance to the pressure to demonstrate progress to others rather than it being for the benefit, primarily, of pupils. For example:

*'It goes on your grades on line, unfortunately at the end of the day children are data to the government but besides that, I feel proud and I have got a lot out of them but nothing else.'* (School 17, Year 6 teacher)

The next most common set of responses (from 7 schools) related to **impacts on teachers**. Three schools noted that the test helped validate teacher judgments. For example:

*'I don't really think there's any benefits testing the kids at all because I do believe the teachers already know that of them....I think the only purpose they serve is checking teacher's judgements are correct.'* (School 8, deputy headteacher)

And three noted that it provided Continuing Professional Development (CPD) or training for teachers, well articulated in School 12:

*'Even without the results it's still been extremely helpful...it's given a framework for developing teachers' subject knowledge, raising aspirations of pupils and parents, a structure for changes to curricula that I don't think we would have had otherwise...It won't be additional next year because it's fundamentally changing how we teach our higher attainers...The test can't take all the credit for that, it's the way we've used those materials.'* (School 12, deputy headteacher)

One teacher noted test outcomes provided recognition at a personal level for his work acting as a *'feather in my cap'*. (School 20, Year 5/6 teacher).

## 6.2 Outcomes for pupils

### 6.2.1 Pupil views

#### Experiences of the L6 tests

Most pupils in the focus groups were pleased to have been **selected** to participate in Level 6 tests: they felt proud and in some cases were excited. They perceived that they had been selected because of their performance on objective measurements, usually in practice NCTs. The majority of comments about the fact that they had been chosen were positive. For example one boy noted that 'it's because [the teacher] thinks we have loads of potential and that everybody was good but he thought that we could like do a little bit extra' (School 9 pupil). Some pupils noted the context formed by the NCTs: 'If you got a worse mark in the level 6, it wouldn't get reported, like if you got a bad mark in level 5'; which seemed to take the pressure off pupils for the L6 test.

However, the timing of the decision and when the pupils were informed was an issue for several pupils. A few individuals mentioned having known about it since the parents' open evening in the early spring (in Schools 2, 6 and 8) and several mentioned having to get parental consent. However focus group attendees from one school noted that they were told on the day for the English test '*literally five minutes before the test*' (School 7 pupil) and that '*it would be fair if everyone was told at the same time*' (School 7 pupil). One pupil reported that they had first heard of the L6 test following the standard NCTs (School 9 pupil), although most focus group respondents found out earlier. In general, though, these concerns were outweighed by the positives in being chosen, captured well by this comment:

*'I felt a bit awkward doing more tests because I thought our SATs would be finished but we had more to do. But I was actually quite happy that I got chosen to do it because it kind of showed my ability and I had the potential.'* (School 8 pupil)

Focus group attendees were then asked how they felt about **engaging in the L6 tests**. Around a third of those who spoke mentioned the hard work involved in test preparation, although just as often pupils mentioned that the challenging nature of the work made it more interesting and rewarding:

*'It was a bit nerve wracking it was much harder. Once you got used to it, it wasn't that hard. We couldn't learn everything; we didn't have to know all of it. We just had a go.'* (School 5, pupil)

Fears about the L6 test restricting the curriculum were reflected on by one girl who noted '*You can feel a bit agitated sometimes because all you do all day is Maths and English and not your normal subjects and you feel so exhausted at the end*' (School

8, pupil). However, others found the test relatively easy because they had already been used to level 6 work:

*'They were easy and because we were doing level 6 mental Maths and we were also doing level 5 sometimes she said if you are getting full marks at level 6 it should be easy at level 5. It's just very easy.'* (School 15, pupil)

Perhaps unsurprisingly the L6 test cohort found the level 3-5 NCTs 'easy' by comparison, a word used in all the focus groups we conducted. The Mathematics level 3-5 NCTs were found to be easier because of the level of work they had been used to, either in normal classroom work or in L6 test preparation sessions. Opinion was divided on the degree of additional difficulty L6 Mathematics and Reading tests presented. Three pupils found the Reading L6 test harder, explaining

*The Reading [was] a bit harder because you had to explain your points more, there was no easier questions.'* (School 15, pupil)

Others found the Mathematics test the more difficult of the two, with the Reading test relatively easy:

*'Most of the questions I was quite surprised they were level 6 standard. I was surprised how the questions were, I thought I would not even be able to read the words on the page, I thought it would all be in posh words but it wasn't like that.'* (School 14, pupil)

For some pupils the voluntary nature of the L6 test made it more comfortable:

*'For L6 the work was harder but not as pressurising because if you didn't get it, it didn't matter.'* (School 19, pupil)

Many focus group attendees were apparently surprised by the length of time of the tests, especially the Mathematics test which had to be completed in half an hour. This was noted in particular in schools 7 and 8, though it did not necessarily affect performance. One focus group discussion (in School 15) centred on whether pupils had enough time to do the L6 test, although there was disagreement about how long they remembered the tests as having been. The overall conclusion was that most pupils in the group thought there hadn't been enough time.

Focus group attendees were also asked about their impressions of doing the L6 tests shortly after their level 3-5 NCTs. Several found this 'annoying', and others noted their disappointment, tiredness after the NCTs and in one case, apprehension:

*'Well I think it was ok ... we only just did them this week so I thought the SATs weren't over but I thought the bulk of them were over so when we were piled on with another one I was like "Oh is this over!" and it is still not. I wasn't that happy, I was kind of scared. One thing I did think was if they thought I might get a level 6 and I might not have worked up to that so they may be mad that I didn't get it.'* (School 7, pupil)

Overall, however, most pupils were generally positive about the tests because they had the opportunity to attain a higher level, with the mix of feelings expressed well here:

*'I kind of felt happy for them [those not taking L6] because I knew they had a chance to relax but I didn't feel annoyed or anything because we had extra tests because I felt happy and proud that we had been able to have the privilege to do this test.'*  
(School 8, pupil)

### Perceptions of the benefits of the L6 tests and how they could be improved in future years

Unsurprisingly almost all respondents identified benefits to them from taking part in the L6 tests, along with relief that the extended Year 6 testing period was over. Benefits identified can be divided into two main categories: **personal outcomes** such as enhanced confidence, and **educational outcomes** relating to their future education and even working lives. Some pupils highlighted their personal sense of achievement: *'No one else did them. I felt special'* (School 4, pupil); *'I realised I could achieve anything .... the teacher chose us because we were clever - the chosen ones ...'* (School 5, pupil); *'It kind of gave you confidence. I thought 'I can do this.'* (School 19, pupil).

Among those that highlighted the benefits for their school career there was some emphasis on the requirements of the secondary schools:

*'Because of the level 6 and the SATs put together it kind of helps me in [secondary school] when I go there because it's a grammar school then they're probably going to do harder things. So it kind of sets you up for the work we're probably going to get.'*  
(School 8, pupil)

Focus group attendees at one school saw the future benefits in terms of their own interests and development:

*'Maybe if they can see I got a level 6 I could do my GCSEs early and maybe my A-levels and then I could go to like Cambridge.'* (School 12, pupil)

One discordant note focussed on the **pressure** of the L6 tests: *'If you don't think you're ready then don't do them because it's not an experience you need to have.'* (School 3, pupil). Others noted that their self-confidence might take a knock if they haven't actually passed the L6 tests (unknown at the time these focus groups took place). Generally, though, the majority of focus group attendees were positive about the benefits in terms of their ability to adapt to the secondary school learning environment and KS3/GCSE regime.



When asked about **how the testing process could be improved** in future years many comments referred to the amount of notice pupils received and the associated issue of the amount of preparation and revision the school provides (mentioned by focus group attendees at four schools).

Others mentioned the short time gap between the NCTs and the L6 test: *'We were just recovering from level 5 and we got a level 6 one shoved under our nose'* (School 7, pupil); and one questioned the need to take level 3-5 NCTs if they were going to do L6 anyway (School 5, pupil).

Nevertheless, virtually all who were asked said they would recommend next year's Year 6 to take the L6 test if given the opportunity, and offered various pieces of advice:

*'I would say don't panic, stay relaxed, I was taking deep breaths and I actually found it quite easy, so don't be nervous, it's not as hard as you expect.'* (School 6, pupil)

*'Do it if you want to know what it's going to be like in secondary school....do it. It will make your parents proud of you and the school proud to have you here.'* (School 9, pupil).

Others emphasised that there was little to lose from taking the L6 test, reflecting the fact that the test is voluntary and seen by this group as less important than the level 3-5 NCTs.

### **Word choice activity: positive and negative views of the L6 test**

During the focus group attendees were asked to choose up to three words that best described how they felt about doing the test. The words selected were then coded as positive, neutral or negative. Among positive comments 'proud' and 'excited' were the most common, followed by 'happy' and 'pleased'. Among (the fewer) negative comments 'nervous' was the most commonly cited term followed by 'scared/worried' 'pressured' and 'anxious'.

Over the 20 focus groups and combining the responses of 104 pupils, positive comments outnumbered negative comments by a ratio of 3:2 (148 positive to 90 negative responses). Analysis by individual school focus groups shows the balance between positive and negative comments. Fourteen schools produced a positive balance across all comments, four had a negative balance and two had no imbalance at all. There was no strong relationship between these outcomes, and outcomes in the test itself.

## 6.2.2 School views of pupil outcomes

Schools themselves indicated a range of outcomes for pupils. In terms of positive outcomes, these were in two broad areas that replicated pupils' own views. The first set of positive outcomes related to attainment, progress and learning. Over a quarter noted that they felt it had been beneficial as it stretched the pupils involved (linking also to progress for the school see Section 6.1 above):

*'I think the benefit for children is they can have a go at something that stretches them. As long as it's an atmosphere that is conducive to their learning then I am happy for it to happen. They absorbed it happily.'* (School 15, headteacher)

One school felt it helped preparation for secondary school, and others noted that this helped raise the aspirations and attainment of others:

*'The main impact has been on the other children working in that higher set. Those working at 4b upwards. There really has been an impact on them because I've taught things I wouldn't before...they've all been exposed to some level 6 work throughout the year...It really motivated the other children when they were doing their work and they were finished: "Can I have a go at that now?"... and I'd say "Yeah but have a go at it", and sometimes they could do it and sometimes they couldn't but just giving them that opportunity.'* (School 3, deputy headteacher)

The second area related to personal wellbeing. More than a quarter of schools noted that they felt it motivated pupils or improved their self-esteem. For example:

*'I think it made them more motivated and the majority of them were boys, which you know boys can be a bit lazy sometimes and just do the minimum, but because it was competitive, really competitive against each other it really did motivate them.'* (School 3, deputy headteacher)

Three schools stated that pupils were excited to take part. The negative outcomes were all clustered around negative feelings. Four schools indicated that some pupils felt pressurised by involvement in the tests. For example, in School 2, one pupil had been withdrawn because she had been finding the test too difficult.

However, four other schools stated that no pupils had felt stressed or pressured. Interestingly, two of the schools identifying pressure on pupils had the poorest test outcomes, and two of those identifying no pressure had the strongest outcomes suggesting that there may be a link between particular approaches to the test and both test outcomes and pupil feelings about the test. This may be worthy of further investigation. Three other schools noted that some pupils were nervous.

## 6.3 Test results

It was possible to conduct a set of analyses on the results of the tests. The full school by school analysis is presented in Appendix 1, but in summary, for the 20 Case Study schools, three analyses were undertaken. [Appendix 2 details the national outcomes data for comparison].

Firstly, the **simple pass rate**, i.e. the proportion of those entered that were judged as being at level 6, is simple to produce. The overall pass rate for the case study sample in Mathematics was 41 per cent, and for Reading one per cent (representing one pupil of the 100 entered across the 20 schools). This is broadly reflective of the national picture: overall, 34 per cent of pupils entered for Mathematics and 2 per cent of those entered for Reading were judged as being at level 6.

However, this measure does not take into account the extent to which schools selected those with a very good chance of achieving level 6, or gave opportunities for others – in other words, whether they took a 'narrow' or 'broad' decision on who to enter. As was discussed in Chapter 4, some schools only entered those they felt had a very good chance of passing, and others entered pupils who they felt may just 'have a chance' - and some entered children who they felt would not pass. In addition, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, a lack of guidance and experience in both selection and preparation for the test, meant that selection decisions were taken with little confidence on the part of teachers in their judgments regarding who to enter, especially in relation to the Reading paper.

To take account of this, an analysis of the **level 5 to 6 conversion rate** was conducted, i.e. measuring the percentage of those at level 5 who then go on to achieve level 6. On this measure, whilst most of the schools that were 'successful' on the 'simple pass rate' measure are also successful on this rate, there is some variation. For example, School 7 is below average on the level 5 conversion rate measure, and School 12 is far more successful on this measure but not at the top on the 'raw pass' rate measure. Even this wider measure is quite crude as it does not allow for differing profiles in level 5 results. For example, it may be that School 12 has many pupils at the upper end of the level 5 spectrum, whereas School 7 has many pupils at the lower end of the spectrum.

A third more nuanced measure is the **top level 5 to 6 conversion rate** which examines the proportion of those at the very top of level 5, who DfE analysis indicates are likely to achieve level 6, who actually achieve level 6. On this measure there was polarity: most schools either found that all of their 'top level 5s' achieved level 6, or that none of them achieved it. This is difficult to interpret, and the qualitative data does not shed a lot of light on this.

However, it is worth noting here that for a number of schools - School 6, 8, 12 and 16 - there appears to be a strong correlation between 'success' on this measure and the other two success measures. This is also the case for School 3 and 14, which did poorly on all three measures [as did schools 5, 17 and 20, but these had very small numbers at the top of level 5]. Therefore it can reasonably be argued that schools 6, 8, 12 and 16 did well in relation to outcomes at the school level, and schools 3 and 14 did more poorly on the same set of measures.

There were some indications of a relationship between school approaches to learning and the L6 test using these broad measures of 'doing well' on the Mathematics test, as illustrated by Table 6.1 below.

**Table 6.1 Relationship between school approaches to learning and the L6 test with L6 test outcomes**

	main focus of school on learning	main focus of school on learning and outcomes	main focus of school on outcomes
<b>Poorer Results in L6 test</b>	S20		S3, S5, S14
<b>Average Results in L6 test</b>	S2, S11	S4, S7, S9, S10, S13, S15, S17, S18, S19	S1
<b>Better Results in L6 test</b>	S6	S8, S12, S16	

We must be clear that the table above is based on very broad categorisations of much more complex approaches, from a small number of schools, and involving a small number of pupils. This data should be treated therefore as an indication of potential trends that is worthy of further exploration. However, it does help to graphically illustrate the analysis we presented throughout this report. The most successful schools had a strong focus on pupil learning alongside measurable outcomes, which led them to take an approach to the L6 tests that involved a

balance between teaching and preparation. Such schools had a strong strategic focus on improving outcomes related to a clear vision.

The less successful schools, in contrast, tended to have an overall focus on measurable outcomes, and - in relation to the L6 test - put their efforts into preparation or - in one case - a focus mainly on learning not outcomes, with little test preparation. These schools tended to have taken part in the test for pragmatic, tactical reasons rather than having a clear vision for the school.

This analysis has a number of implications, which are explored further in the concluding discussion.

## Chapter 7: Secondary schools' views

### **Key Findings**

- Secondary schools were generally ambivalent about primary schools' use of the L6 test and aspects of the KS3 curriculum.
- Much of this ambivalence was due to the fact that secondary schools in general felt KS2 outcomes were not accurate, either in the form of KS2 tests or teacher assessments, and preferred to test the children pre-entry or at the beginning of Year 7.
- Often schools did use primary outcomes in Year 7 target setting but only two schools in this sample used KS2 data alone for this purpose. The other 18 used other commercially available tests such as Cognitive Ability Tests (CAT) tests.
- In relation to the L6 tests, many of the secondary schools were concerned about primary schools 'teaching to the test' and thus producing level 6 pupils with little actual breadth and depth of understanding of level 6 working.
- Most noted the benefit for the pupils in terms of stretching and enabling a smoother transition to secondary school environments and appreciated the pressure primary schools are under to produce higher outcomes.
- However some felt that inaccurate test outcomes made the transition more difficult.
- The main issues secondary schools noted with KS2 assessments were:
  - uneven information sources (especially a problem for schools with a large number of primary feeder schools);
  - a perception that primary pupils are 'spoon-fed' leading to wrongly judging pupils' actual ability;
  - the limited and narrow nature of KS3 work in primary schools;
  - the difficulties caused at secondary level with greater differentiation to deal with; and
  - a perception that primaries are under pressure to inflate their outcomes.
- Transition between primary and secondary phases could best be encouraged, according to secondary schools, by a greater understanding among primary teachers about what KS3 entails and how secondary schools work.
- Understanding could best be enhanced by primary teachers coming into secondary schools, by secondary teachers spending more time in primary schools, and by the transition process beginning much earlier.

## Introduction

Primary schools frequently raised a variety of issues linking secondary schools with the L6 test in some way. This prompted an extension to the study comprising 20 telephone interviews with secondary schools to gather their views on the L6 test directly.

### 7.1 Primary school Case Study perspectives on secondary school views

As was stated in Chapter 3, a small number of primary schools hoped that the externally moderated L6 test might make secondary schools value primary schools' judgments more and help safeguard against pupils having to repeat work at secondary school. However, just under half of the primary schools still harboured **concerns that L6 test results would be sceptically received by secondary schools and not utilised properly in their Year 7 curriculum planning**. For example, one school noted:

*'Our secondary school heads and colleagues have already said they are dubious about level 5s anyway. They don't feel secure with the primary school SATs assessments. They just want to know that pupils can apply their knowledge and they don't think the system at the moment is helping children do that. It is helping them to sit papers. They said they'd like to start their own assessments in Year 7.'* (School 2, headteacher)

A number of primary schools noted that this mistrust resulted in secondary schools routinely retesting pupils at entry to Year 7, and this perceived lack of regard for primary school assessment was seen as a problem by many. For example, over a third of schools specifically mentioned concerns about the degree of challenge in the Year 7 curriculum for more able pupils. There was a view that Year 7 was a 'consolidation year' which made many question just how worthwhile the drive towards getting high ability pupils to level 6 at primary school actually was:

*'I think the other thing you have to keep in mind is that these children have to go to secondary school and the last I want is for them to leave flying high and then end up with a curriculum in secondary school that doesn't run with it.'* (School 10, headteacher)

One school was so concerned about this lack of trust in primary judgments that the deputy headteacher contacted secondary schools directly:

*'It's been good preparation for secondary school. I hope to god they don't have to re-sit Year 6 all over again in Year 7 essentially. That's another reason why I think it's important. I will be handing over if the DfE don't, I will be handing over their teacher assessment.. I fully intend to email the results to neighbouring schools when their*

*results come back because I'm not clear if it will be reported to them. So I think it's our duty to do it myself.'* (School 12, deputy headteacher)

Whilst some schools mentioned good links with secondary schools in relation to transition at a pastoral level, there appeared to be little significant partnership work operating specifically in relation to the L6 test itself or curricular transition more broadly. There were, however, exceptions. For example, in School 11 there was dialogue with the local secondary school both in relation to the L6 Mathematics test itself and the Mathematics curriculum more broadly, as well as the curriculum for the highest ability Mathematicians.

Another school mentioned that, although there remained an enduring element of distrust in the levels given to pupils at primary school, it had become relatively much '*less of an issue over the years with the work we do with local secondaries*' (School 2, Year 5/6 team leader), for example ending a '*piece of independent writing*' to the secondary and the implementation of '*transition units in algebra*'. These approaches appeared to be paying dividends in assisting with demystifying the respective schools' understanding and approaches as to what level 6 actually represented.

A final significant theme raised by two of the Case Study schools related to implications for future assessment. There was a view here that secondary schools were concerned that if a pupil was (wrongly) assessed as being at level 6 in primary school, this meant they would need to be converted to a high GCSE level which might not be achievable.

*'I have talked to the headteacher of the secondary school, looking at whether they could support us for next year, but they are not so keen on L6. Because they have then got to convert them through. Although they said they would support us, I didn't get the impression they were keen.'* (School 1, headteacher)

However, it was precisely because of this heightened expectations that one primary school welcomed the use of the L6 test, claiming it would encourage a heightened sense of '*mutual accountability*':

*'...while I'm wanting to hold the secondary school accountable and I'm also expecting them to hold us accountable to deliver the KS2 national curriculum and the foundations of KS3 learning. So it's a two way accountability.'* (School 18, headteacher)



## 7.2 Secondary school views on relationships with primary schools

All of the non-selective secondary schools had specified 'feeder' primary schools as well as a wider group of primaries from which pupils came. Grammar schools typically drew from a far higher number of primary schools and did not have specified 'feeder' schools in the same sense. The relationships between non-selective secondary and primary schools reflects this demarcation, with schools usually able to spend a lot more time and resource in primaries that provide larger numbers:

*'Normally when I go out visiting it's about 20 primary schools, a lot of them might send just one or two. About 6 feeder primary schools send us the most; one will send 70 -80 and is in the trust.'* (School 19, transition co-ordinator)

Only one of the sample schools (School 9) said that the relationship with all schools was the same: *'If they are sending at least 2 pupils they do the same outreach, have the same liaisons with the headteachers, head of Year 7, etc.'* The nature of the relationship was subject to change and was sometimes felt to have worsened due to funding pressures:

*'...links have degenerated in recent years. As a performing arts school we used to have very close links with the 3-4 main feeder primaries who send 20-30 to us but with curtailment of funding that link has gone.'* (School 5, assistant head)

There were also perceived limitations on the relationship due to time pressures on primary schools during NCT preparation.

The purposes of these links were varied. For about half of the respondents one main activity was identifying those with higher ability, for example for the identification of Gifted and Talented cohorts and for specific subject support (e.g. forensic science, writing and Mathematics or languages). For most schools, the focus went beyond looking at higher ability pupils, with schools emphasising the social and pastoral aspects of transition and wider curriculum continuity.

## 7.3 Secondary schools' attitudes towards L6 tests and KS3 work at primary level

### 7.3.1 Awareness and understanding of the use of L6 tests at KS2

Secondary respondents were asked whether they knew about the L6 test at primary, what they knew about it and if they have had any liaison with feeder primary schools

about their use. All but three of the respondents knew about the tests. Among those that did know of them, there was a degree of ambiguity and indifference, partly because not all their feeder primaries would have used them and very few of them reported knowing of pupils that had taken the test. Some schools (e.g. School 9) said they 'noted on their system' when a pupil had taken a L6 test but preferred to use their own test data. Many comments echoed those made by primary schools in relation to scepticism and inconsistency but also raised questions about their impact on pupils and on schools' expectations:

*'From what I have heard the targets that are set for primary schools are all associated with achieving level 5. As long as there is no target for level 6 then primary schools will not have an incentive to push the top end.'* (School 4, vice principal)

Some respondents were more positive about the L6 tests' ability to stretch brighter pupils:

*'Are aware - but very few took it last year, just 3 from the same primary school. They were at the high level and are in the top set so no problem with them taking L6 test if it challenges them and they subsequently perform at the appropriate level.'* (School 12, pastoral co-ordinator)

Only a minority of secondary schools appeared to have discussed the L6 test with feeder primaries - 15 respondents said they had not and three said they did not know. While some who did comment further said they 'didn't have a view', two respondents did venture some support for discussing the L6 test, one in the form of a primary-secondary conference and another with Mathematics materials. However one of these went on to note some of the associated difficulties:

*'..... we also got the feeling that the primary teacher felt it was a bit above what they were used to delivering in Maths as level 6 is a lot above level 5. A whole new set of concepts are involved. The offer was there and that school did put some pupils in but the offer was not taken up.'* (School 20, assistant headteacher)

Another secondary respondent voiced some suspicion about the motivation of primary schools for taking on the tests:

*'[There is] pressure to teach to the test in schools that do have it, to challenge their higher level 5s. We think it is all about the ideology of G&T but there is a danger that primary schools use it for performance management.'* (School 8, assistant headteacher)

Secondary respondents were asked about their attitudes towards primary schools' use of KS3 curriculum in general and their thoughts on the advantages and disadvantages of primaries applying the L6 test in particular. In general they were not against the idea of using aspects of the KS3 curriculum or the use of L6 test to stretch Y6 pupils, although they were sceptical about the depth and breadth of

understanding that can be achieved at KS2 given the different ways in which teaching and learning are organised in each phase and the extent to which 'teaching to the test' and competing pressures on primary schools may distort outcomes. Perhaps reflecting this scepticism and other concerns about the reliability of data from primary schools, almost all of the secondary respondents reported use of their own tests and assessments when it came to target setting in Year 7.

### 7.3.2 Perceptions of primary school coverage of KS3

Respondents were evenly divided on the issues of the use of KS3 at KS2 and on whether it is appropriate to use KS3 to stretch the brightest primary pupils. Nine of the 20 were happy for aspects of KS3 to be taught in primaries. Their reasons included showing progression, challenging and stretching the brightest children and primary school autonomy. However, although four of these also had caveats relating to breadth and depth of study at level 6. Some of these respondents were happy to have another tool for their assessment of pupil attainment at the baseline stage of target setting:

*'... It's a useful indicator if the primary feel they have a particularly gifted student. We had no students coming in even though I know for a fact some schools entered them. The ones who were entered didn't even get a 5a, some got a 5b or a 5c so it's making sure the primary schools can identify which students actually are working in level 6 and not just entering ones who just might get it - it's an eye opener for them as to how hard the test is.'* (School 20, assistant headteacher)

However, others were concerned that lack of understanding of L6 would lead to teaching to the test and therefore an inaccurate assessment of progress:

*'It's appropriate to teach KS3 at level 6, that's not the problem, but it shouldn't be all about teaching to the test that is the risk. Some pupils we have had that had level 6 think they are going backwards when they come to us.'* (School 8, assistant headteacher)

In addition, seven respondents didn't think the work was equivalent and that was why they carried out their own tests.

Most respondents (13 of the 20) thought stretching was a good idea in general while another two schools noted that while it was good to stretch the brightest there were concerns about the breadth of knowledge. Others were concerned about pupils slipping back after the summer break:

*'I know the Maths department find that very few children are working at the level that the primary school have finished them at, so if they come to us at a 5 I can guarantee for the first 5 or 6 months they are not working at a level 5 - they forget it, they have not practised over the summer. So if a level 6 child came to us I would doubt they*

would be working in that level, so you do worry about the parent who says “Hang on he got a level 6 why are you giving him level 4 work?” ’ (School 20, assistant headteacher)

### 7.3.3 Views on the L6 test at KS2

Issues raised by respondents when considering the positive and negative effects of putting KS2 pupils into the L6 test varied considerably, from those concerned with the child, those concerned about the impact on secondary schools having to deal with still more differentiation, and those concerned that the narrowness of the L6 test requirements at KS2 would lead to 'teaching to the test'. However, just over half of respondents accepted it would be good for the individual child, but only four saw no downside, concentrating on the benefits. For example:

*'If it is rigorous and externally assessed then those students who have a natural aptitude to achieve level 6 should be given the opportunity to do that.... but if a teacher has a target [to achieve level 6 then] we would be in an even worse position for inheriting even more inflated SATs scores than we already do.'* (School 4, vice principal)

In addition to concerns about wrongly assessing pupils as being at level 6 as noted above, several respondents flagged up potential extra difficulties in relation to the narrowness of pupils' understanding.

When asked whether they preferred primary schools not to enter pupils for the L6 test only four said unequivocally that they should not and only six said that they were happy for primaries to use the tests. The largest group (9) had no view while one raised concerns about inconsistency if some schools took part and others did not. Ambivalence was general, along with the desire to couch responses with caveats:

*'We're a bit indifferent at the moment. That's the impression I get from talking to people, because we don't know a lot about them, haven't seen a lot of what the tests actually involve, we're ambivalent at the moment.'* (School 2, head of lower school)

*'[It is] good to enter them but [they should be] given with a lot of warnings to pupils and parents, this doesn't mean they are going to be level 6 when they arrive - parents are always on the phone anyway when they see they are not as good as the primary said even when given level 5 at KS2.'* (School 9, head of Year 7)

Some respondents went as far as to question the motives of primary colleagues, believing that test results could be inflated as primaries 'play the numbers game' and that it might perhaps be better if they did not enter pupils for L6.

Respondents were also asked to discuss what L6 tests at KS2 should consist of to make them more valid and valuable at KS3. A third declined to take a view (sometimes due to a lack of specific knowledge of the English and Mathematics curriculum) and among those that did respond six cited the need for more depth and or detail, while others dwelt on the differences between primary and secondary teaching and learning styles. Others noted their concerns about content breadth and highlighted the need for open-ended questions to fully test understanding of the KS3 curriculum.

## 7.4 How secondary schools use KS2 data in KS3

### 7.4.1 Secondary schools' use of KS2 NCTS and Year 6 teacher assessment

The views noted above in relation to concerns about L6 tests were related to broader concerns about KS2 tests in general. Secondary respondents were fairly unanimous in being somewhat sceptical about the use of KS2 test results and teacher assessments, in relation to KS3 target setting. Some were concerned, as with L6 tests, that primary schools had incentives to inflate their assessments; others felt there were irregularities in data and inconsistencies in the interpretation of level 5 and level 6 (where the test has been taken). As a result more than half (12) set their own tests, although almost three quarters (14) used Year 6 tests and assessment as part of the baseline data for target setting.

*[We are] '...sceptical of the consistency and the quality of the assessment that takes place, the reliability of the data we receive. Across primaries and within primaries we are sceptical of the whole thing. Some SATs are externally moderated but my understanding is that different primary schools sub [contract] out their work to be assessed to different degrees. The primary schools have a vested interest in inflating their scores...' (School 4, assistant headteacher)*

*'With tremendous caution, we have to say, many of our feeder schools are incredibly small, there might be 70 pupils in the whole school (infants included) so coming up there may only be 5 pupils. Who is the brightest of those may be massively down the ranking when you add in the 170 that we have coming from the other primaries. Therefore we have an element of caution with teacher assessment.'* (School 20, assistant headteacher)

Schools that were more positive tended not to set pupils immediately and thus used primary data for mixed ability form grouping as well as target setting, while other respondents valued KS2 assessments for identifying the brightest of the cohort at

each school. As noted above, many secondary schools used KS2 NCTs and teacher assessments for target setting but only a minority (5) appeared to use them without additional testing of their own.

*'At the start of Year 7 we take their average KS2 points score and use it to generate targets for English, Maths and Science and for other subjects as well and every term as a minimum we will assess progress against that.'* (School 5, assistant headteacher)

However, reflecting the concerns noted above, many secondary schools either ignored KS2 results or put more weight on their own tests in relation to Year 7 target setting:

*'[We have to] test to even out the variability of how primaries work. There's too much ambiguity about, some have opted out of SATs, some take them earlier in the year etc. It all has such an impact on our results further up the school.'* (School 7, assistant principal)

Overall 18 of the 20 schools used some kind of testing of pupils at the start of Year 7, such as CAT tests/other NFER tests or their own tests at individual subject level. Interestingly two of the higher achieving schools (School 5 and 6) were the only ones not to use their own tests.

Despite the fact that almost all of the secondary schools used tests to augment KS2 NCT results and teacher assessments in their KS3 target setting, ability grouping appeared to be usually based on KS2 results. For example:

*'Setting is based on their SATs and they are set in Y7 in Science, French and IT, and English and Mathematics in Y8.'* (School 11, head of Year 7)

Most respondents reported that setting begins immediately, with a few waiting until after the October half term and one until after Christmas in Year 7.

## **7.5 Ways in which primaries and secondaries can work towards better transition**

This question elicited a variety of responses, the most prevalent of which were that primary school teachers should **visit secondary schools** to see how KS3 was taught there (8 responses), or conversely that **secondary teachers should spend more time in primary schools** (5 respondents) with at least three respondents referring to both those points:

*'I have meetings with children and teachers as well, joint meetings if Maths teachers meet the Year 6 teachers and help them with Maths work. We can do that, we have the luxury of being in a trust with only 5 primaries. We can tailor our support to those primaries. If you are not within that then it makes it hard. That is always the tricky bit. In a trust we can do a bit of you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. If a school isn't in that position then it's hard to do that cross work. Joint pieces of work that a child can start in a primary school and finish in a secondary school.'* (School 19, transition co-ordinator)

For some respondents the transition between Year 6 and Year 7 was seen to be too late to begin the necessary work, and **working together should start much earlier**.

*'Stretch and challenge has to start earlier than this transition period, identification of G&T etc needs to go on at Year 4. In our rural setting some of the primaries have 60 pupils ages 5-11 so we can't wait until Year 6 to start identifying them.'* (School 7, assistant principal)

For a significant minority of respondents **better information and communication** generally is the key to successful transition, and this partly reflects the sense of mistrust about KS2 assessments and data:

*'One of the things that makes identification of more gifted pupils difficult is that we are getting piecemeal data... We have to get in touch with the primaries individually and ask them "Please can you give us your levels?", and it takes a lot of time.'* (School 20, assistant headteacher)

Several respondents noted **resource issues**. For one respondent the problem was structural as there are no financial incentives for schools to act co-operatively given their different targets and sometimes competing agendas. Others noted that Gifted and Talented funding was no longer available.

For most schools the **number of potential feeder schools** was an issue in setting the context for transition work.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

### 8.1 Concluding discussion

This discussion will attempt to draw together some of the key findings from the report by presenting a process of decision-making that schools go through, each stage of which requires support. Of course in reality schools will not necessarily take these decisions in sequence. Nevertheless we feel it provides a helpful way of considering the factors that are involved in engagement with L6 tests at a school level, and, therefore, the support they may need at each stage of the process.

First, a small number of schools took the decision not to engage in the test for reasons related to a fundamental disagreement with the principles of the tests. As noted above in Chapter 3 this applied to a very small number of schools, but it is certainly the case that very many schools were to some degree sceptical about engagement with the test. In essence schools that did engage fell into three groups: those that engaged with the test for clear, strategic reasons, linked to their wider vision for the school; those that engaged for pragmatic reasons, seeing it as a way to improve outcomes for pupils and the school but without necessarily fitting it clearly with wider school agendas; and those that engaged as 'experimenters', unclear about the benefits, but prepared to try it out.

For most schools, the decision to take part involved weighing up the incentives and disincentives to take part. The factors considered included the support or pressures from parents to take part; pressures from Ofsted and governors to improve outcomes for the highest ability pupils (or conversely to focus on the level 4 or level 5 threshold); the skills and expertise available to the school; the wider priorities of the school; and the number of pupils involved. This last point leads to the next set of decisions made - deciding whether there were pupils at the right level.

As indicated in Chapter 4 above, schools used a wide variety of methods to select pupils, ranging from objective data to more subjective considerations, with a variety of support used. Some schools entered as few as two pupils, but there was an increasingly high cost associated with providing for very few, when limited resources could have been deployed supporting other pupils.

Our analysis indicates the difficulties schools found in deciding whether pupils were at the right level to be able to take part in the L6 tests. There is a very clear need here for guidance and support in this decision-making: in a nutshell, whilst schools are highly competent at judging whether a pupil is at level 5, the picture is far more



mixed regarding level 6. This problem was a particular issue for Reading where maturity was seen as one of the characteristics associated with 'level 6-ness.'

Once the decision was made regarding which pupils to enter, the school then had to address how to support them. One key issue here relates to the resources at the school's disposal. Some schools had expertise in relation to teaching higher level Mathematics, but others did not; others had access to external resources such as senior leaders or provision from outside the school. Due to the lack of guidance, and confidence, schools used ad hoc methods including web searches. There is a clear need to provide support to teachers working with L6 test pupils, and ensure quality of materials and approaches taken.

Another crucial point is the lack of guidance on delivery. Schools took a mix of approaches to in-class support, usually involving ability grouping and out of class preparation (e.g. booster classes). However, the lack of guidance meant some schools understood level 6 to mean full coverage of KS3 while others felt it needed no extra KS3 curriculum content and the test was merely about identifying those talented children working at level 6 in a KS2 curriculum context. As noted above, we could identify schools as being in one of three broad groups: those focussed primarily on preparing for the test; those focussed primarily on teaching and learning; and those taking a mixed approach.

This leads to the final stage: outcomes. The analysis presented in Section 6.3 indicates that the most successful schools on a number of measures appeared to have a clear strategic vision focussing on both learning and measurable outcomes with which participation on the L6 tests fitted. They took an approach to the L6 tests that involved a balance between teaching and preparation. The less successful schools, in contrast, tended to have a focus on measurable outcomes, and put their efforts into test preparation. They tended to have more pragmatic, tactical reasons for taking part in the tests, rather than linking participation to a clear vision for the school.

In all of these cases, there was a strong direction set by inspection and monitoring from Ofsted. This, of course, indicates the importance of ensuring that a clear message that a narrow focus on improving outcomes (or, on the other hand, setting them entirely to one side) is not appropriate: there needs to be clear strategic focus and vision on teaching and learning.

We found no evidence that engaging with tests helped provide this vision or strategic direction, but we did find that success was associated with schools that had a vision for teaching and learning to which engagement in the L6 tests related.

We identified that a strong emphasis on Ofsted judgments and recommendations was in place in schools. The aim of this emphasis is, of course, to improve teaching and learning. We found, however, that schools that felt under particular pressure often turned to a focus on outcomes rather than teaching and learning. This was noted as a potential negative result of the L6 tests by primary schools that decided not to take part (and some that did take part) and secondary schools. This was because a narrow focus on test preparation was seen to be:

- **bad for teachers**, since they become essentially test preparers rather than professionals engaged in the full range of pedagogical approaches;
- **bad for schools**, since it cannot be in the strategic interests of schools to focus on preparing for tests rather than outcomes, and;
- **bad for pupils**, since not only does this report provide evidence that this approach does not work, even when it does work it simply means pupils are well drilled at passing a test, not necessarily working at a particular level.

This indicates the need for policy to aim to drive home the vital importance of pedagogy and learning to counteract the tendency for some schools to respond to pressures by focussing on test preparation which can crowd out more taking a strategic focus on teaching and learning.

These final points, relating to the link between test outcomes and school approaches, are in relation to Mathematics, where around 40 per cent of those entered in the Case Study schools (and 34 per cent of pupils overall nationally) passed the test. They cannot be applied to Reading, where around one per cent of entrants in Case Study schools (2 per cent nationally) passed. This equated to less than 1000 pupils across the country as a whole (See Appendix 2). We noted that schools felt they had less expertise in relation to Reading, there was less guidance, and there were concerns raised that to get to level 6 in Reading required a level of maturity that was beyond many children in Year 6. The results seem to bear these concerns out. Only 0.3 per cent of the pupils that achieved at least a level 5 went on to achieve a level 6 in Reading compared to 9 per cent for Mathematics - meaning that those pupils who achieved a level 5 in Mathematics were nearly 25 times more likely to achieve a L6 compared to Reading, and on average there would only be one pupil in every 15 primary schools that achieve L6. Given all of this, alongside the scepticism of secondary schools, it is hard to see how the benefits can outweigh the costs of preparation at a school or system level in relation to the Reading test as it currently stands. Therefore, particularly given that a very small percentage of pupils achieved level 6 in Reading, there is a strong case for reviewing whether the L6 Reading test is the most appropriate test to use to identify, for example, the top 10% of higher performing pupils. This would be consistent with the aim of the introduction

of the L6 tests as outlined in the Bew review, which argued that the L3-L5 test placed a ceiling on the attainment of the most able pupils (see recommendation 5).

This brings us to a further issue: how secondary schools view the test. Primaries were very worried about how secondaries view L6 test results, and the indications are that secondaries on the whole are themselves sceptical. This is a particular concern for Reading. The data here reveals again the need for greater coordination and cooperation between primary and secondary schools, in this case for the benefit of the most able pupils. The degree of mistrust amongst secondary schools in relation to data from primary schools, and the concern expressed about this from primary schools, illustrates this. The best practice in very few schools we could find focussed on developing closer relationships between schools, although the practicalities of this are unclear for secondaries with many feeders.

## 8.2 Recommendations

A set of recommendations emerge from the discussion in 8.1, as follows.

1. There is a need for clear guidance and support to schools in making decisions about which pupils to enter for the test. Discussions with teachers and analysis of the standard NCT and L6 test results indicate that schools vary enormously in their judgements about which pupils to enter. This indicates a role for DfE with the STA in supporting schools here.
2. There is also a need for support and guidance for teachers in relation to teaching and learning strategies, and materials for preparation, for the L6 tests. This would include both a need for practice papers and other related support, but also - more significantly - guidance on coverage of KS3 curriculum, or guidance on level 6 at KS2. Currently, schools have very different perspectives on these issues, which mean that they adopt widely varying approaches and practices.
3. There is a need for policymakers, school leaders and Ofsted to make clear that meeting the needs of the most able pupils should occur through a clear focus on teaching and learning. Some schools responded to the direction from inspectors and policymakers to support the most able by a narrowing of the curriculum and overemphasising test preparation, which is not in the best interests of pupils, teachers or schools. Of course, this message applies far beyond L6 tests in primary schools.
4. There is a continuing need for secondary and primary schools, supported by policymakers, to work together for the benefit of the most able pupils. The lack of trust on the part of secondary schools in primary testing and teacher assessments

must be addressed. However, the analysis presented in this report - and many other studies conducted over a number of years - indicates this is not a straightforward issue. Some of the most promising areas for development appear to be in relation to primary and secondary teachers working together on assessment and moderation of assessment, and curriculum work. However, the evidence for this occurring in practice is very limited, so there is a need for significant work here.

5. There is a need to review whether the L6 test in Reading is the most appropriate test to use to discriminate between the highest ability pupils and others given:

a) that only around 0.3 per cent of the pupils that achieved at least a level 5 went on to achieve a level 6 in Reading compared to 9 per cent for Mathematics

b) there was a particular lack of guidance and school expertise in this area

c) pupil maturity was seen to be an issue

d) the cost of supporting and administering a test for such a small proportion of the school population appears to outweigh the benefits.

## **Appendix 1: Analysis of test outcome data**

### **A1.1 Analysis of Mathematics test results**

Table A1 contains a considerable amount of information, and requires some commentary (see Table A2 below for an equivalent for Reading). This is addressed in two parts: firstly looking at columns 1-7 (on selection) and then at columns 8-12 (on outcomes).

Table A1 Analysis of Mathematics test results

Col 1	Col 2	Col 3	Col 4	Col 5	Col 6	Col 7	Col 8	Col 9	Col 10	Col 11	Col 12
ID	L5 main test	top L5 main test	total L6 test entry	total top L5 L6 test entry	% L5 entry in L6 test	% top L5 entry in L6 test	total at L6 in L6 test	total top L5 at L6 in L6 test	% of entry in test at L6	% of L5 at L6	% of top L5 at L6
1	16	1	6	1	38%	100%	3	1	50%	19%	100%
2	11	0	5	0	45%	[no top L5]	1	[no top L5]	20%	9%	[no top L5]
3	23	4	6	2	26%	50%	1	0	17%	4%	0%
4											
5	10	1	4	1	40%	100%	0	0	0%	0%	0%
6	3	1	1	1	33%	100%	1	1	100%	33%	100%
7	26	0	2	0	8%	[no top L5]	2	[no top L5]	100%	8%	[no top L5]
8	37	4	20	4	54%	100%	14	4	70%	38%	100%
9	22	1	2	1	9%	100%	1	1	50%	5%	100%
10	10	0	10	0	100%	[no top L5]	1	[no top L5]	10%	10%	[no top L5]
11	5	0	2	0	40%	[no top L5]	0	[no top L5]	0%	0%	[no top L5]
12	16	2	9	2	56%	100%	8	2	89%	50%	100%
13	5	0	6	0	120%	[no top L5]	1	[no top L5]	17%	20%	[no top L5]
14	19	1	8	1	42%	100%	2	0	25%	11%	0%
15	31	0	15	0	48%	[no top L5]	5	[no top L5]	33%	16%	[no top L5]
16	9	1	3	1	33%	100%	3	1	100%	33%	100%
17	10	1	2	0	20%	0%	1	0	50%	10%	0%
18	12	0	7	0	58%	[no top L5]	0	[no top L5]	0%	0%	[no top L5]
19	25	3	14	3	56%	100%	5	2	36%	20%	67%
20	11	1	2	1	18%	100%	1	0	50%	9%	0%
	<b>301</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>86%</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>57%</b>

## ***Selection of pupils***

Columns 1 to 7 illustrate the wide variation in proportions of those assessed as being at level 5 and 'top level 5' who were entered in the test. 'Top level 5' refers to those who, from DfE statistical modelling from the whole cohort, are most likely to achieve level 6 in the L6 tests. For Mathematics this group comprises those pupils who achieved 98, 99 or 100 per cent in the standard level 3-5 National Curriculum test (NCT). Note that this is a post hoc analysis: schools did not know prior to entering them in the L6 test pupils' results on the standard NCT, so this data cannot reasonably be used to judge schools' decision-making. Nevertheless, it gives us a proxy measure of the number of potential high performing pupils in Mathematics in Year 6.

Column 6 shows the percentage of those pupils who achieved a level 5 from the standard NCT and were entered to sit the L6 test; this arguably gives the most useful proxy measure for interpreting how **broad** or **narrow** schools' approaches to selection have been. A glance at this column reveals a varied picture of the proportions of level 5 pupils that schools are selecting for the L6 test. For the Case Study schools that took part in the L6 Mathematics test, the percentage of those pupils who achieved a level 5 in the standard NCT and who were also entered into the L6 test varies from just 8 per cent (representing 2 out of 26 pupils) in the case of School 7 to 120 per cent (representing all 5 level 5 pupils plus one at level 4) in School 13. This measure does not take into account where the pupils are on the continuum of level 5 - so it is plausible that School 7 may have had significantly more pupils who were operating at the top of the level with School 13 having far more at the bottom of level 5. However, even allowing for this and the small pupil numbers in certain schools, the differential between these schools represents quite a stark contrast.

On average schools put forward 41 per cent of their pupils who had attained a level 5 in the standard NCT to take the L6 test. Whilst two schools took a very broad approach to selection, entering over 81 per cent of their pupils who performed at level 5 in their NCT, and four entered fewer than 20 per cent, taking a very narrow approach, most entered between 21 and 80 per cent. This indicates a relatively liberal approach taken by most schools, indicating the difficulties schools faced in judging whether pupils were at L6, given the lack of guidance and materials available and the newness of the test.

Across the Case Study sample there were 21 top level 5 pupils (i.e. those for whom statistical modelling indicated a strong likelihood of their passing, based on post hoc analysis) from the main test entered in to the L6 test from across 12 of the schools. Of those 12 schools, 9 selected all of their top level 5 pupils to take part in the L6 test suggesting that the Case Study schools were largely very effective in ensuring that

the very top ability pupils were identified and put forward for the L6 test. School 3 was unusual in that it had 4 top level 5 pupils and yet only entered half for the L6 test, and School 17 did not select the one top level 5 main test they had.

### ***Test results***

Columns 8 and 9 give the simple number of passes overall (column 8), and for those that might be expected to achieve level 6 on the test (column 9). On their own, these are not very useful. Column 10 improves on this raw data, since it gives a simple 'pass rate' i.e. the percentage of those entered for the test that are assessed as being at level 6. However, this measure does not take into account the extent to which schools selected those with a very good chance of achieving level 6, or gave opportunities for others (whether they took a 'narrow' or 'broad' decision on who to enter).

Column 11 provides one way of doing this, by measuring the percentage of those at level 5 who then go on to achieve level 6. On this measure, whilst most of the schools that were 'successful' on the 'raw pass rate' measure are also successful on this rate, there is some variation: note that School 7 is below average on the level 5 conversion rate measure, and School 12 is far more successful on the level 5 conversion measure but not at the top on the 'raw pass' rate measure. Even this wider measure is quite crude as it does not allow for differing profiles in level 5 results. For example, it may be that School 12 has many pupils at the upper end of the level 5 spectrum, whereas School 7 has many pupils at the lower end of the spectrum. Thus a more nuanced analysis would be better.

The final measure in Column 12 shows the proportion of those at the very top of level 5, who DfE analysis indicates are likely to achieve level 6, and who actually achieve level level 6. The first thing to strike the reader looking at column 12 is the polarity: most schools either find that all of their 'top L5s' achieve level 6, or that none of them achieve level 6, on the test. This is difficult to interpret, and the qualitative data does not shed a lot of light on this.

However, it is worth noting here that for a number of schools - School 6, 8, 12 and 16 - there appears to be a strong correlation between 'success' on this measure and the other two success measures. This is also the case for School 3 and 14, which do poorly on all three measures [as do schools 5, 17 and 20, but these have very small numbers at the top of level 5]. Therefore we can reasonably say that schools 6, 8, 12 and 16 have done well in relation to outcomes at the school level, and schools 3 and 14 have done more poorly on the same set of measures.



## A1.2 Analysis of Reading test results

There is no exact equivalent to Table A1 for the Reading results, since out of the 100 pupils entered, only one was judged to be at level 6 in the test.

Table A2 Analysis of outcomes - Reading test

Col 1	Col 2	Col 3	Col 4	Col 5	Col 6	Col 7	Col 8	Col 9	Col 10	Col 11	Col 12
ID	L5 main test	top L5 main test	total L6 test entry	total top L5 L6 test entry	% L5 entry in L6 test	% top L5 entry in L6 test	total at L6 in L6 test	total top L5 at L6 in L6 test	% of entry in test at L6	% of L5 at L6	% of top L5 at L6
1	36	0	9	0	25%	n/a	0	0%	0%	n/a	36
2	11	0	5	0	45%	n/a	0	0%	0%	n/a	11
3	18	0	0	0	0%	n/a	0	[no entries]	0%	n/a	18
4	8	0	1	0	13%	n/a	0	0%		n/a	8
5	16	0	1	0	6%	n/a	0	0%	0%	n/a	16
6	4	0	1	0	25%	n/a	0	0%	0%	n/a	4
7	37	0	5	0	14%	n/a	0	0%	0%	n/a	37
8	35	0	14	0	40%	n/a	0	0%	0%	n/a	35
9	25	0	0	0	0%	n/a	0	[no entries]	0%	n/a	25
10	12	0	10	0	83%	n/a	0	0%	0%	n/a	12
11	7	0	2	0	29%	n/a	0	0%	0%	n/a	7
12	24	0	7	0	29%	n/a	0	0%	0%	n/a	24
13	6	0	6	0	100%	n/a	0	0%	0%	n/a	6
14	32	0	6	0	19%	n/a	0	0%	0%	n/a	32
15	38	0	19	0	50%	n/a	0	0%	0%	n/a	38
16	15	0	0	0	0%	n/a	0	[no entries]	0%	n/a	15
17	21	0	0	0	0%	n/a	0	[no entries]	0%	n/a	21
18	18	0	6	0	33%	n/a	0	0%	0%	n/a	18
19	29	0	8	0	28%	n/a	0	0%	0%	n/a	29
20	13	0	0	0	0%	n/a	1	[no entries]	8%	n/a	13
<b>405</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>405</b>	

### ***Selection of pupils***

Column 4 reveals that across the whole population of Case Study schools, schools entered just under a fifth more pupils (24 pupils) for the L6 Mathematics test than for Reading. In the case of Mathematics there was just one school that did not enter any pupils for the test whereas for Reading there were five. A comparison of Column 6 for both Reading and Mathematics, reveals that overall Case Study schools put forward 39 per cent fewer pupils to take the L6 test who had attained a level 5 in their standard NCT for Reading than Mathematics. Of the 15 Case Study schools who took part in the L6 Reading test, the percentage of those pupils who achieved a level 5 in the standard NCT and who were also entered into the L6 test varies from only 6 per cent in the case of School 5 up to 100 per cent in School 13.

Only two schools selected over 80 per cent of their pupils who performed at level 5 in their NCT with the vast majority electing to select fewer than 40 per cent (5 schools decided to enter no pupils at all). This apparently represents a far more narrow approach to the selection of L6 Reading pupils as opposed to the Mathematics (see Table 4.2), although in fact the post hoc analysis indicates that none of the schools had any pupils who were very likely to attain level 6 in the test so as with Mathematics, this still represented a liberal approach to selection.

### ***Test results***

The pass rate of one per cent is in line with national data, and DfE analysis indicates that pupils expected to pass constitute only about one in eight of those who achieved 100 per cent on the level 3-5 NCT. Since none of the 100 entered was in this group, on one measure the schools involved did well. Of course this pass rate does call into question the value of the test as it currently stands since this represents a huge amount of pupil and staff time with very little result.

## Appendix 2: Analysis of test outcome data across all English schools 20122

Source: Primary School Performance Tables data

	Number of pupils who achieved at least level 5	Number of pupils who achieved top * marks at level 5	Number of pupils who were entered for level 6 tests**	Number of top marks achieving pupils who were entered for level 6 tests	Percentage of pupils achieving level 5 who were entered for level 6 tests	Percentage of pupils achieving top marks at level 5 who were entered for level 6 tests	Number of pupils who achieved level 6***	Number of top marks achieving pupils who achieved level 6 in level 6 tests	Percentage of pupils who entered level 6 tests and achieved level 6	Percentage of pupils achieving level 5 who achieved level 6 in level 6 tests	Percentage of top marks achieving pupils and entrants of level 6 tests who achieved level 6
Mathematics	214,259	16,393	55,212	11,193	26%	68%	18,953	7937	34%	9%	71%
Reading	261,202	645	46,810	394	18%	61%	942	63	2%	0%	16%

\* For maths this comprises of those pupils who scored 98, 99 or 100 per cent in the standard level 3 - 5 National Curriculum test, and for Reading this comprises of those pupils who achieved 100% (50 marks out of 50) in the standard level 3 - 5 National Curriculum test.

\*\* Note that these figures include pupils who were entered, but were absent for part or all of the tests.

\*\*\* Note that this requires the predicate of achieving level 5 in the level 3-5 test.

<sup>2</sup> The England all schools figures include those independent schools that chose to take part in Key Stage 2 assessments.

## Appendix 3: Example Case Study School Template

<p><b>Socio-demo context</b></p>	<p><b>Decision to take part</b></p> <p>What were their reasons? (e.g. demonstrating progress above L5 /raising expectations - for pupils / school / teachers /governors /parents / LA/Ofsted etc; validating</p>	<p><b>L6 results</b></p> <p>% pass/L5-6 conversions in Reading and Maths</p> <p>'Doing well' - what does this mean for the school?</p>
<p><b>Vision</b></p> <p>-Description of the school's vision for T&amp;L/English &amp; Maths curriculum etc</p> <p>Is school learning or outcome focused?</p> <p>- Learning focused = whole child focus on <i>all</i> learners throughout the year; L6 test as a means of improving T&amp;L for higher ability pupils</p>	<p><b>Selection of pupils</b></p> <p>Selection criteria - narrow or wide definition of 'most able' (L4a/5b/c; 'secure 5a's'; clearly L6s)</p> <p>Differences between selection for English and Maths</p>	<p><b>Pupil responses</b></p> <p>Pupil views</p> <p>Pupil response</p>
<p><b>Views on testing / L6</b></p> <p>- in general</p> <p>- on extra L6 testing</p>	<p><b>Preparation for L6 test</b></p> <p>Extent of specific teaching of KS3 curriculum / L6 (none/minimal/moderate/considerable) - normal practice for G&amp;T or driven by L6 test?</p> <p>Extent of L6 test preparation (none/minimal/moderate/considerable)</p>	<p><b>School response</b></p> <p>-Staff reflections overall re pupils' response to test</p> <p>Impact on future practice - (responses in June)</p>
<p><b>External environment</b></p> <p>External drivers (or pressures)</p>	<p><b>Typology of approaches as a response to external drivers</b></p> <p>How does the school respond to drivers/ pressures?</p> <p>To what extent does the school:</p> <p>- teach to learn only (but pupils underprepared for/upset by the test)?</p>	
<p><b>Internal environment - staff expertise, support and resources</b></p> <p>Staff/Y6 specialism in English/Maths</p> <p>Confidence / skills to teach L6/KS3</p> <p>Teacher assessment - awareness of L6ness /qualities of L6 pupils</p>		



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for Education

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[March 2013]

**Ref: DFE-RR279**

**ISBN: 978-1-78105-217-4**

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