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for Educational Research**



**An Evaluation of the Year 7 Progress
Tests and Years 7 and 8 Optional Tests in
English and maths**

A report for the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

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FULL REPORT

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Section 1 Executive Summary

During August of 2001, the QCA published a tender specification for a project to evaluate how the year 7 progress tests and the years 7 and 8 optional tests had been received by schools. The NFER was awarded this contract on 12 September 2001 and the present report delivers the findings of the Evaluation.

1.1 The tests

The year 7 progress tests in maths and English, and the years 7 and 8 optional tests in maths and English, were introduced nationally during 2001. They were provided by the QCA for voluntary uptake, to support the assessment of achievement of pupils toward the beginning and middle of the key stage 3 phase.

The progress tests in maths and English were introduced as instruments for schools to assess progress from end of year 6 to end of year 7, specifically for students who had not reached the level 4 target by the end of their primary schooling. The progress tests were made available for assessment during May 2001, being provided and externally marked at no cost to schools.

The optional tests in maths and English were developed as secondary school versions of the popular primary school optional tests (for years 3, 4 and 5). While the progress tests were based on previous key stage 2 programmes of study, the year 7 and 8 optional tests were linked to the new approaches of the key stage 3 literacy and numeracy strategies. Unlike the progress tests, the optional tests incurred a cost and were not externally marked.

1.2 The methodology

The Evaluation utilised two modes of investigation:

1. large scale postal surveys, to secondary school maths and English department heads, to explore issues at a broad level and to provide quantitative results;
2. small scale focus groups, with secondary school maths and English department heads, to explore issues in depth and to provide qualitative results.

Separate questionnaires were developed for maths and English, although essentially the same questions were posed in each. They were sent to two independent samples of 550 schools. In each of these samples: 50 were key stage 3 strategy pilot schools; 100 had

registered for the year 7 progress test, but had not ordered either of the optional tests; 100 had ordered either the year 7 or the year 8 optional test, but had not registered for the year 7 progress test; and 300 had registered for the year 7 progress test and had ordered either the year 7 optional test or the year 8 optional test (or both). From the 550 questionnaires sent to heads of English departments, responses were received from 18 key stage 3 strategy pilot schools and 128 non-pilot schools. For maths, 23 pilot schools and 167 non-pilot schools responded.

Four focus groups were convened: one in each of London, Slough, Birmingham and York. The restricted time scale of the research made it hard to recruit participants, although at least seven people attended each group. Participants represented either maths or English and, during the first discussion session of each focus group, talked together in response to questions concerning the 'more practical' issues of administration, etc.. During a second discussion session, the participants of each focus group divided into two subject-specific units to consider the 'more professional' issues of test quality, etc..

The two research components were conducted in parallel and addressed the same issues (albeit in different ways and with different focuses). The results from the questionnaires and the focus groups were synthesised to construct general findings and conclusions.

1.3 Results

As the surveys and focus groups were aimed at schools that had tended to use both progress and optional tests during 2001, the studies were able to explore in depth teachers' perceptions of how the tests had actually functioned. The results presented below concern only the main samples of non-pilot schools (where results differed for pilot schools this is highlighted in sections 3 and 4 of the Full Report).

1.3.1 Test use

The progress tests for maths and English were often seen as a 'bandwagon' that schools would benefit from being on as early as possible, rather than simply as a means of obtaining important assessment information about their students.

The optional tests for maths and English were viewed somewhat more constructively, and the most frequently reported reason for using them was to obtain reliable assessments of performance. There was a tendency for the optional tests to be used as end-of-year tests, and administered to the entire cohort (especially in year 8).

Instead of basing their decision to use the optional tests on a scrutiny of sample materials, only around half of the questionnaire respondents (for maths and English in both years) reported having done so. It seemed from the focus groups that many schools had been unaware of the sample materials.

1.3.2 Administrative procedures

Across subjects and tests, there was a general satisfaction with the various administration procedures, which included: information gathering; ordering and invoicing; registration (progress tests); delivery of materials; and collection of scripts (progress tests). Where concerns were expressed, they tended to focus on the production of information and delivery of materials. (However, it seemed from the focus group interviews that respondents had not always been in a position to oversee the administrative procedures directly, and so may not have been very well placed to comment upon them.)

1.3.3 Selection of students

For both maths and English, a potentially widespread misunderstanding of the progress test entry requirements was identified during the focus group interviews: this was the prevalent view that the entry of *all* students who had not achieved level 4 in the key stage 2 tests was required – including students currently working at levels 1 and 2 (for whom the tests were not intended).

This supported additional evidence that many teachers had failed to read the Teacher's Guides in sufficient depth.

1.3.4 Test scheduling

For each of the tests, in both subjects, timetabling problems were reported by at least one-quarter of questionnaire respondents. Problems were most acute for both English optional tests, which appeared to be related to the fact that administration of the English papers often required longer than a double period would allow.

It appeared that many maths and English departments that had used both the progress test and the optional test with year 7 students had required those taking the progress test also to take the optional test.

1.3.5 Test preparation

Most survey respondents had not given their students specific preparation for either the maths or English progress test. Where preparation had been given, it had tended to be based upon schools' own revision programmes.

1.3.6 Teachers' perceptions of the tests

Teachers tended to rate each of the tests, in both subjects, as either difficult or satisfactory (but not as easy). The English optional tests were rated as difficult by over two-thirds of questionnaire respondents. The reading burden – both complexity and length – was cited by focus group participants as a particular problem (especially for the reading paper). Complexity of language was also mentioned in relation to the maths progress test papers.

There was a strong feeling that the tests had not been effectively targeted. Maths teachers from the focus groups expressed concern at the inclusion of level 5 questions within the progress test since it was aimed at students who had not achieved level 4 in the previous year. Teachers from both subjects felt that the optional tests were targeted too narrowly at the middle ability range, thereby not stretching the most able students and being inaccessible to the least able. The use of tiered papers was recommended.

There was a general feeling that the content of the progress and optional tests for English did not equate especially well with the schemes of work that students were being taught. Less concern was expressed by maths respondents, and three-fifths considered there to have been a considerable amount of overlap for both optional tests.

1.3.7 Students' perceptions of the tests

It was generally felt that using the key stage 2 test as a progress test was not good practice and threatened to de-motivate those year 7 students who realised that they were taking the same test as their younger peers. Many teachers felt that students had experienced at least 'a little' stigma in being required to take the progress test for maths and/or English.

Focus group participants mentioned that potentially the most stigmatised group would be those students who were not performing at a high enough level to be entered for any of the tests.

1.3.8 Marking

Although schools were encouraged to undertake in-house moderation exercises prior to marking the optional tests, very few reported that this had happened for maths or English in either year. In general, maths teachers believed this to be unnecessary, while English teachers reported not having had enough time.

Maths teachers were generally satisfied with the optional test mark schemes, although English teachers were considerably less so. According to the focus group participants, the complexity of using the reading mark schemes had caused most concern, although a number explained that the marking of writing had not been a problem simply because they had abandoned the mark scheme and awarded national curriculum levels instead. Marking was reported to have been very time consuming for English teachers.

1.3.9 Views and uses of test results

Few questionnaire respondents reported that the test results had been particularly useful: the proportion that ticked the 'very useful' box ranged from less than one-tenth (for all English tests and the maths progress test) to just over one-quarter (for the maths year 8 optional test). Maths respondents found results from the progress tests less useful than those from the optional tests, while the reverse was true for English. This matched a pattern that was observed for teachers' impressions of the relationship between teacher assessment and test results (i.e., maths teachers found less agreement for the progress tests than for the optional tests, and vice versa for English teachers). Poor levels of agreement were expressed most frequently in relation to both English optional tests (by just under one-fifth of respondents) and in relation to the maths progress test (by nearly one-quarter of respondents).

Teachers tended to use the results most frequently to assess the strengths and weaknesses of students (reported by between one-third and one-half of respondents, across tests). Another commonly mentioned use was to assist in setting or streaming. In fact, in relation to both of the maths optional tests, the majority of respondents reported this use.

1.3.10 Future use of tests

For both maths and English, the majority of questionnaire respondents reported intending to use the progress and optional tests in 2002 (although the anticipated 2002 prevalence seemed slightly lower than actual 2001 usage). The focus group participants responded

similarly, often citing a belief that the tests were likely to become compulsory in future years anyhow.

1.4 Recommendations

The results of the Evaluation provided feedback from samples of schools that typically had used both progress and optional tests during 2001. This feedback gave insight into teachers' perceptions of how effectively the tests had functioned, and this insight supported the following recommendations for future development of the tests.

1. Certain confusions and misapprehensions were detected amongst teachers concerning the status and purpose of the progress and optional tests. Future publicity should ensure that these are communicated effectively to a wide audience. Better publicity of sample materials for the optional tests should also be considered.
2. There was evidence that the Teacher's Guides were not being used effectively and that core guidance was being overlooked. Steps should be taken to ensure that core guidance is communicated effectively. The structure, content and purpose of the Teacher's Guides should be re-examined.
3. Teachers expressed strong opinions on the inappropriateness of using key stage 2 tests as progress tests. Unique progress tests should be developed in future years.
4. The progress tests were frequently felt to have been too hard for the target population and concerns were expressed that the reporting scale was too broad to identify progress. Future tests should be better designed to target the intended populations and consideration should be given to developing a finer reporting scale, although it is recognised that there are technical difficulties associated with this.
5. The optional tests in English were considered to be too long and, for the reading paper in particular, to carry too great a reading burden. Future tests should be shorter and should pay close attention to the reading burden placed upon students.
6. Teachers believed that the optional tests in maths and English were not targeted at a sufficiently broad population. To enable schools to test an entire cohort using a single metric, it is recommended that the feasibility of producing tiered papers should be explored. (As the issue of tiering, per se, was not addressed within the surveys, further research may be needed to explore the acceptability of this prospect with a wider sample of schools, particularly for English).

7. As many maths and English students appeared to have been entered for both the year 7 optional test and the year 7 progress test, consideration should be given to amalgamating these two assessments into the same system or suite of tests.
8. The optional test marking schemes for English were not necessarily being followed by all teachers, and were considered a burden by those that had used them. Marking models should be reviewed with an intention to simplify the mark schemes and to make them quicker to apply. Consideration should be given to the promotion and support of within-school standardisation exercises for English.

Section 2 Introduction

During August of 2001, the QCA published a tender specification for a project to evaluate how the year 7 progress tests and the years 7 and 8 optional tests had been received by schools. The NFER was awarded this contract on 12 September 2001 and the present report delivers the findings of the Evaluation.

2.1 The tests

The year 7 progress tests in maths and English, and the years 7 and 8 optional tests in maths and English, were introduced nationally during 2001 (having been piloted during 2000). They were provided by the QCA for voluntary uptake, to support the assessment of achievement of pupils toward the beginning and middle of the key stage 3 phase. They ran in parallel with the key stage 3 literacy and numeracy strategy pilots, and pilot schools were very strongly encouraged to use all of the tests.

2.1.1 The year 7 progress tests in maths and English

The progress tests in maths and English were introduced as part of the government's programme to transform key stage 3. They were intended specifically for 12-year-olds who had not achieved level 4 in their end of key stage 2 test (in the corresponding subject, in the previous year). As such, they were intended to assess progress from end of year 6 to end of year 7, with a specific focus on students likely to be working close to the boundary between levels 3 and 4 – students who had not reached the target for 11-year-olds by the end of their primary schooling and who needed to progress in literacy and numeracy in order to access the wider secondary curriculum.¹ As explained in DfEE circular 0278/2000:

“The tests provide a clear focus for schools to ensure that as many of these pupils as possible have made the necessary progress to catch up with their peers by the end of the first year of secondary education.”

¹ In fact, although the tests were almost always discussed as being targeted at students who did not achieve the expected level (level 4) in their key stage 2 tests, they were actually intended only for students currently working at or around the boundary between level 3 and level 4. They were explicitly not designed for, nor intended to be administered to, pupils working below level 3.

The tests were made available for assessment during May 2001. They were provided and externally marked at no cost to schools. Schools were required to regard them as formal tests, to be treated with the same level of security and confidentiality as the key stage 3 tests and to be administered during a specified period. This was particularly important for 2001, as the progress tests were exactly the same as the 2001 end of key stage 2 tests in maths and English, for levels 3 to 5 (with the exception of their covers). As such, they were designed to assess key stage 2, rather than key stage 3, programmes of study.

Although the tests were not statutory, schools were encouraged to register all eligible pupils. A *Headteacher's Declaration Form* return report, from 18 June 2001, recorded the participation of 2,311 schools for English, 2,358 schools for maths and 3,240 schools overall.

2.1.2 The year 7 and year 8 optional tests in maths and English

The optional tests in maths and English were also introduced as part of the government's programme to transform key stage 3. In addition, though, they had a clear ancestry in the optional tests for years 3, 4 and 5. The primary optional tests have been received very well and have been used in the vast majority of schools. It was hoped that the optional tests for years 7 and 8 might prove similarly popular. During 2001, approximately 50% of secondary schools ordered secondary optional tests. (Exactly how many actually used the tests during 2001 is less clear, though, as there appeared to have been a significant number of schools that ordered tests but did not use them.)

In contrast to the progress tests, both the year 7 and the year 8 optional tests were specifically designed for use with pupils in those year groups. They were also designed to reflect the key stage 3 frameworks for teaching English and maths.² The tests for both year groups were targeted at levels 4 to 6 only, although the year 8 tests were targeted more towards levels 5 and 6 while the year 7 tests were targeted more towards levels 4 and 5.

The optional tests were developed for administration at any time and were not to be treated with the same degree of confidentiality as the progress tests. Indeed, it was intended that each optional test should remain current for a number of years. However,

² The literacy and numeracy frameworks were piloted during 2000/2001 in some 200 schools across 17 LEAs. However, they were made available for other schools, if they wanted to use them.

the optional tests were not delivered into schools until the week beginning 30 April so, for 2001 at least, they were effectively end-of-year tests. The tests were not free: they cost £1.30 per student for each set of tests for maths and £1.05 per student for English. The teacher packs cost an additional £6.00 for maths and £5.50 for English. Review samples of the test materials were available from the QCA website from late November 2000. The tests had to be ordered before 31 January 2001.

The optional tests were not externally marked, and detailed mark schemes were provided for teachers within the Teacher's Guides. However, on the basis of feedback from a nationally representative sample of schools, QCA were able to provide formal level thresholds which were available to schools from early July.

2.2 The specification

The specification defined the scope and general agenda for the production of a report to provide the QCA and DfES with detailed qualitative and quantitative information on teachers' views associated with the tests. It required that the report should contain the following elements:

1. "Insight into schools' and teachers' views on the guidance materials provided, ordering and registration procedures, delivery, administration procedures for the tests and marking issues.
2. Insight into teachers' views on the content of the tests, the timing of the tests, the usefulness of the tests in assessing progress against KS2 and KS3 programmes of study, the comparability of levels achieved by pupils taking both progress and optional tests and the comparability with teacher assessment."

2.3 The proposal

The proposal submitted by the NFER outlined a research project that incorporated two modes of investigation:

1. large scale postal surveys, to secondary school maths and English department heads, to explore issues at a broad level and to provide quantitative results;
2. small scale focus groups, with secondary school maths and English department heads, to explore issues in depth and to provide qualitative results.

Ideally, the focus group research would have been conducted either before or after the questionnaire research, to maximise the power of this design. Unfortunately, the very short time scale for the research project meant that this was not possible. Instead, it was proposed that the two component investigations should be conducted in parallel and the results subsequently drawn together.

2.4 The Evaluation report

The following report presents the methodology and results from the postal surveys, followed by the methodology and results from the focus groups. The main findings from these studies are synthesised within a final section.

Section 3 The Postal Surveys

3.1 Introduction

The aim of the postal survey study was to explore the views of teachers within a large number of schools, in order to contribute a national perspective to the Evaluation. Two questionnaires were developed for this purpose, for maths and English teachers respectively. Both questionnaires posed questions relating to each of the three tests.

3.2 Methodology

3.2.1 Sample selection

The target population for this study was schools with students in year 7 and/or year 8 (as any such school was eligible to use the tests, if they so desired). However, as only a limited number of eligible schools actually used each of the tests, a decision had to be made whether to sample from the entire target population or from a more limited one.

If it had been decided to sample from the entire population, then the Evaluation team would have been better placed to estimate the prevalence of use of the optional tests during 2001 (the prevalence of use of the progress tests was already known), and would have been better able to survey reasons for not using the tests. On the other hand, one of the main intentions of the Evaluation was to determine the nature and effectiveness of the testing processes during 2001, and therefore it was important to ensure that a sufficiently large number of respondents had actually taken part. As it was envisaged that the short time scale would result in a lower than ideal response rate, it was decided not to select the sample from the entire population of eligible schools.

Two independent samples were selected: one for maths and one for English. The sample selection for each was limited to those schools that had either used the progress test, or that had ordered at least one of the optional tests. It was decided that key stage 3 strategy pilot schools should constitute a further group. The final breakdown, for maths and English respectively, was as follows:

- 50 key stage 3 strategy pilot schools;
- 100 schools that had registered for the progress test, but had not ordered either the year 7 or the year 8 optional test;

- 100 schools that had ordered the optional test for year 7 and/or year 8, but had not registered for the progress test;
- 300 schools that had registered for the progress test and had ordered the optional test for year 7 and/or year 8.

Clearly, then, the focus was upon those schools that had used the tests, to get feedback on how they had been used and how they had been perceived to have functioned during 2001. Therefore, even if there had been a perfect response rate, the results of the Evaluation could not be taken to represent the views of all eligible schools in England. In contrast, it is conceivable that the population from which the samples were drawn might have been somewhat more positively disposed toward testing than the wider population of all eligible schools (as these were the schools that had explicitly decided to use the tests in their first year of operation).

3.2.2 Questionnaire development

The questions used on each questionnaire were developed by the NFER following generalised statements of issues made by representatives from the QCA and DfES, in expansion of the themes outlined in the initial specification document. To facilitate comparison between maths and English, the same questions were posed on each of the two versions, with only minor subject-specific differences in the wording of prompts or response options. Many of the questions had three separate response columns, representing the year 7 progress test, the year 7 optional test and the year 8 optional test, respectively – and respondents were encouraged to tick boxes in relevant columns (i.e., to tick boxes in columns corresponding to tests that they had used).

The vast majority of questions were ‘closed’, requiring only tick-box answers. This was important in reducing the burden upon teachers, and facilitated the speedy input of data. Two ‘free-response’ questions were provided at the end of each version of the questionnaire. A copy of the questionnaire for maths is reproduced in Appendix 3.1.

Owing to the acute lack of time available in which to develop and distribute the questionnaires, it was not possible to pilot them.

3.2.3 Questionnaire distribution

It was anticipated that department heads for maths and English would be best placed to respond to the survey, so the questionnaires were sent directly to them. In completing the

questionnaires, they were also encouraged to consult with other members of staff who had had an input into the testing process.

The questionnaires were despatched on 2 October 2001, and a reminder letter was despatched on 10 October (to those schools that had not already returned their questionnaires). Half term began for most schools on 22 October and the deadline for receipt of returns was Friday 26 October.

3.2.4 Response rates and reply-sample representativeness

From those schools not involved in the key stage 3 strategy pilot (referred to in this report as 'non-pilot' schools), completed questionnaires were analysed for 128 English respondents and 167 maths respondents. These figures represented 26% and 33% of the samples that were initially sent questionnaires. Questionnaires were analysed for 18 (36%) and 23 (46%) of key stage 3 strategy pilot schools, for English and maths respectively. The response rates were not high, but were understandable given the limited amount of time available for responding. Even though the Evaluation targeted only those schools that were likely to have used the tests during 2001, with such low response rates, it should be realised that the final group of respondents may not have represented even this more limited population.

Although various breakdowns of respondents' characteristics are presented at the outset of Appendix 3.2, there was no formal intention to compare the representativeness of the reply-samples in relation to the full samples to whom questionnaires were sent or in relation to the population from which they were drawn. This was predominantly because the characteristics of the population of schools that had used the tests was not known and the only population for which characteristics were known was the national population of all schools. Characteristics of all schools (in terms of 1998 GCSE performance, school type and region) are presented, for information, in Appendix 3.2 alongside those of the survey reply-samples. The characteristics of the questionnaire respondents did not seem to diverge radically from those of all schools generally (in terms of the characteristics identified) – although there appeared to be somewhat higher percentages of middle-achieving schools, somewhat smaller percentages of independent schools, and somewhat higher percentages of comprehensive schools.

3.3 Results

Appendix 3.2 presents the results of the questionnaire analyses, on a question-by-question basis. For each question, results are presented for English and maths separately, and

separately for non-pilot and pilot schools. In addition, results are presented separately for each of the three tests. As such, for many of the questions, results are broken down 12 (2x2x3) times.

It will be noticed from Appendix 3.2 that the 'samples' for each breakdown within each question (and often between questions) differ. This was a crucial feature of the analysis, since responses to each question were analysed only in relation to those respondents who would have been expected to provide a response. Question 1a was key in this respect. If, for example, a respondent had ticked 'no' in the year 7 progress test row – indicating that their school had not used this test during 2001 – then it would not have been appropriate to include them in analyses for subsequent questions relating to the year 7 progress test. Therefore, responses to Question 1a acted as 'filters' for subsequent questions. Occasionally, responses to other questions also acted as filters.

Finally, it should be realised that many of the schools that responded had used more than one of the three tests during 2001. Where this was true, their responses would have been analysed in up to three of the breakdowns presented; that is, responses concerning each of the three tests (within each subject) were not necessarily independent. Bearing this in mind, similar results across the three tests (within the same subject), could represent the fact that many of the respondents were the same. This might be particularly significant for attitudinal questions, as opposed to questions requiring more factual responses.

3.3.1 Postal survey results for non-pilot schools

The main intention of the survey was to focus on the views of non-pilot schools, that is, schools that had not participated in the key stage 3 strategy pilot during 2001. Alternative patterns of responding from pilot schools are discussed in 3.3.2.

The following abbreviations will be used:

7PT	year 7 progress test
7OT	year 7 optional test
8OT	year 8 optional test
Y7:B4	year 7 students below level 4
Y7:4+	year 7 students at or above level 4
Y8	year 8 students

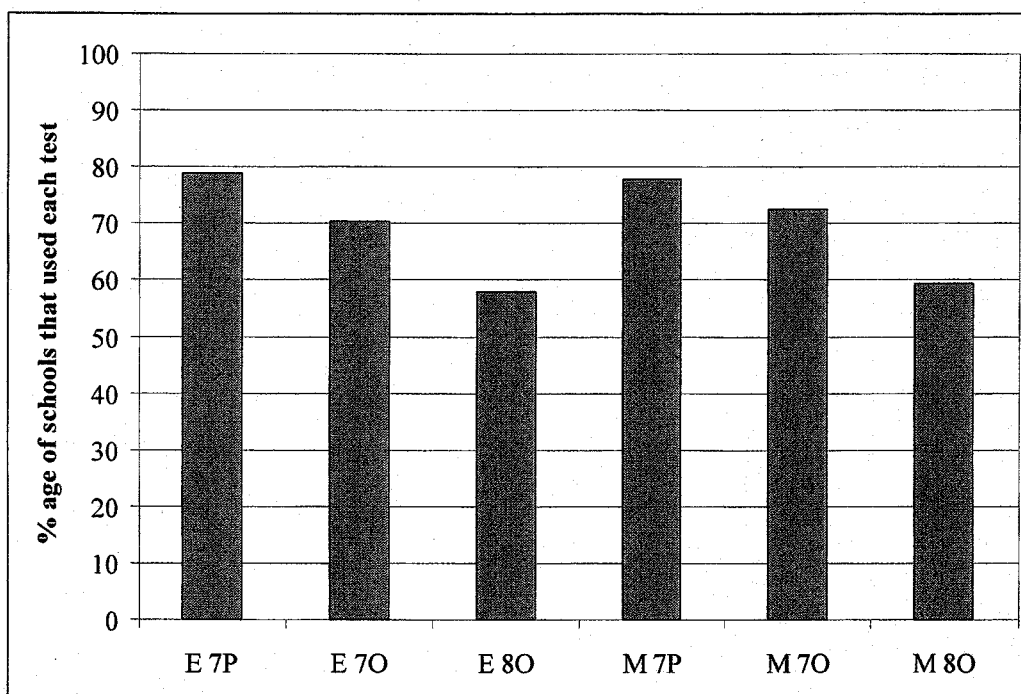
3.3.1.1 Present and past test use (Q1a, Q1b, Q1c, Q14, Q22a, Q22b)¹

Of the 128 non-pilot schools that returned questionnaires for English, 101 (79%) used the 7PT, 90 (70%) used the 7OT and 74 (58%) used the 8OT (see Figure 3.1). Over two-fifths (41%) used all three tests.^{Q1a}

Of the 167 non-pilot schools that returned questionnaires for maths, 130 (78%) used the 7PT, 121 (72%) used the 7OT and 99 (59%) used the 8OT. Again, over two-fifths (45%) used all three tests.^{Q1a}

In fact, for each test in both subjects, there were a small number of respondents that did not answer either 'yes' or 'no' to the test use question. For the purpose of calculating the above percentages these were counted as 'no'. However, they were simply omitted from subsequent analyses that used the test use question as a filter.

Figure 3.1 Test usage amongst the maths and English respondents



Only a small number of schools did not use the tests, and fewer still reported reasons for not using the tests. However, the most commonly selected reasons for not using the optional tests tended to be that they were 'too expensive' and that schools had a

¹ At the end of each paragraph, the question to which it relates is recorded in superscript.

'preference for other tests'. For both maths and English, around one-fifth of schools that did not use the progress test explained that they did 'not believe in the principle of re-testing students below level 4', while nearly one-third rejected the English progress test due to a 'preference for other tests'.^{Q1c}

Teachers were asked to record why they had chosen to use the tests during 2001. Of the six response categories provided for them, three were selected with particular frequency: 'national policy recommendation', 'recognised as a nationally validated assessment', and 'to obtain reliable assessments of performance'. The last of these options was the most commonly selected option for all four of the optional tests – by 48% (7OT) and 51% (8OT) of English respondents, and by 69% of maths respondents (7OT and 8OT). The first option was the most frequently selected for the maths and English progress tests – by 53% and 59% of respondents, respectively. In fact, the most common response pattern for both progress tests was for respondents to tick only the 'national policy recommendation' box (around one-third of respondents); and the most common response pattern for all four optional tests was for respondents to tick only the 'to obtain reliable assessments of performance' box (again, around one-third of respondents).^{Q14}

Only around half of all respondents claimed that their department had reviewed the optional test sample materials. The figures were slightly lower for maths (44% – 7OT and 41% – 8OT) than for English (53% – 7OT and 50% – 8OT).^{Q1b}

When asked to indicate what other tests had been used to assess the achievement of students in years 7 and 8 during 2001, between one-sixth and one-third of respondents reported that no other tests had been used. The most commonly selected alternative was 'internally designed tests', used by around half of maths respondents and one-third of English respondents. These tended to be used as frequently in year 7 as in year 8, and as frequently with lower ability year 7 students as with higher ability ones – generally speaking, results for this question did not differ greatly across years nor across ability levels. Across both subjects, and both year/ability groups, only two response patterns were particularly common: the selection of 'no tests' only; and the selection of 'internally designed tests' only. For maths, the latter was more common than the former, while the reverse was true for English. These two patterns alone represented around half of all respondents. Of the other response categories, the Cognitive Ability Test was most commonly selected – by between one-tenth and one-quarter of respondents (being used more frequently with year 7 students than with year 8).^{Q22a}

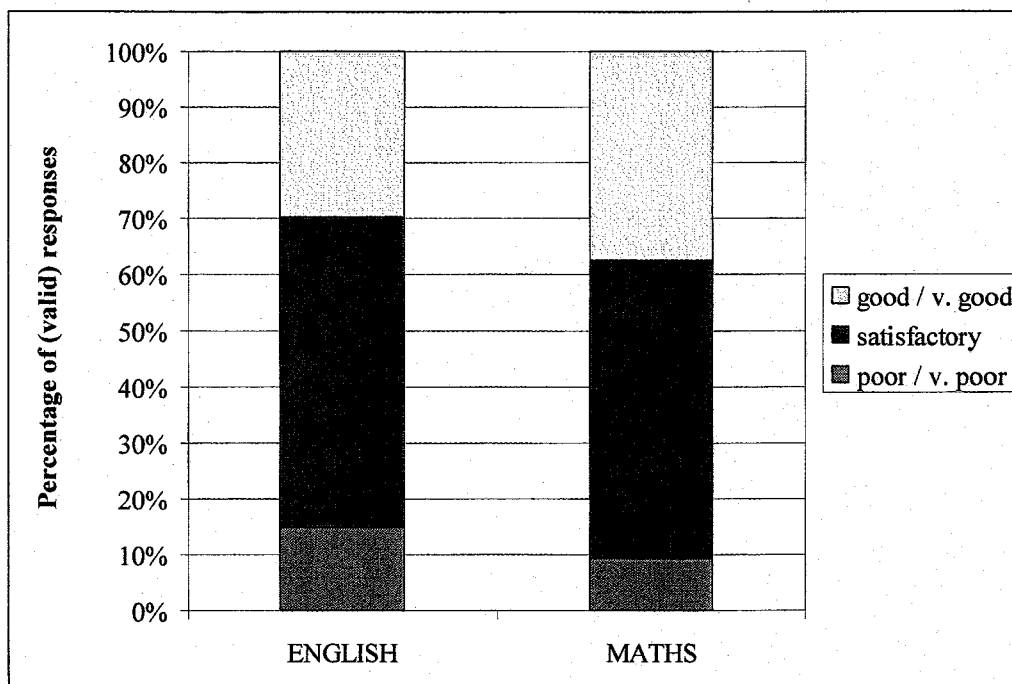
The same question was posed in relation to test use in previous years. The general tendency was for more tests to have been selected (perhaps as the question referred to previous years, rather than to the previous year). No more than 9% of respondents claimed not to have used tests in previous years. Around three-quarters of maths respondents claimed to have used internally designed tests, as had around half of English respondents. Again, the Cognitive Abilities Test was the next most frequently used (although, once more, this was selected more frequently for year 7 students than for year 8).^{Q22b}

3.3.1.2 Test administration procedures (Q2a, Q2b, Q2c, Q2d, Q2e)

No fewer than 76% of respondents considered that communication and liaison with QCA was at least satisfactory, although 6% of English respondents considered it to have been very poor.^{Q2a}

Similar levels of satisfaction with the ordering and invoicing of tests were expressed (see Figure 3.2). No fewer than 85% of respondents considered this to have been at least satisfactory, although 5% of maths respondents considered it to have been very poor.^{Q2b}

Figure 3.2 Satisfaction with ordering and invoicing of tests



Likewise, registration procedures for the progress tests were viewed positively. No more than 14% of respondents considered the process either poor or very poor.^{Q2c}

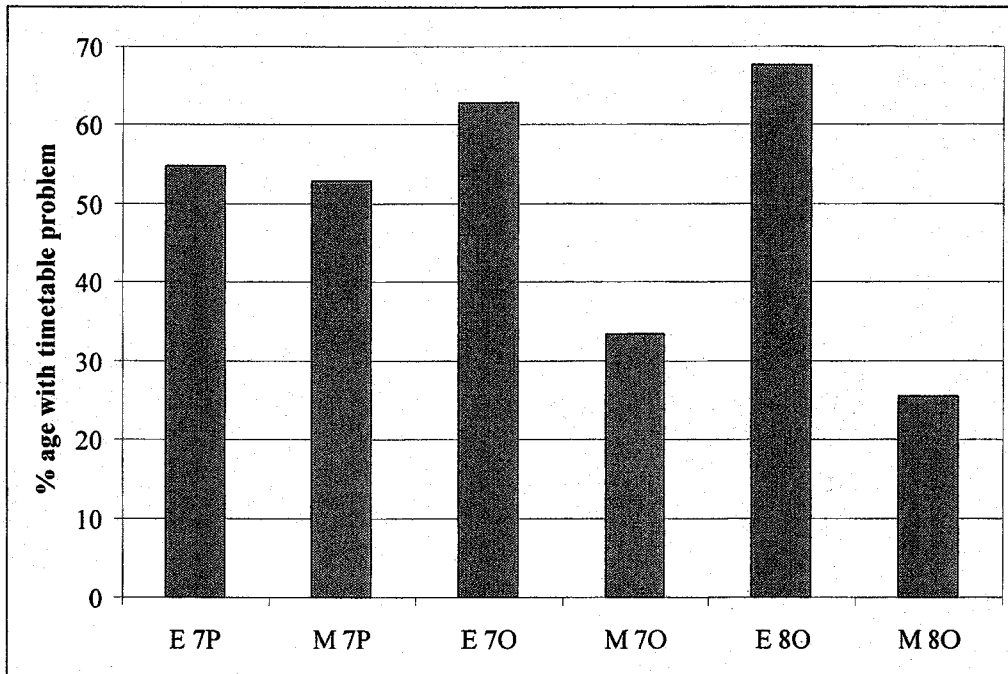
As for communication and liaison with QCA, the delivery of materials to schools was viewed slightly more positively by maths respondents than by English respondents. However, even for English, only just over one-fifth of respondents claimed that the delivery was poor or very poor.^{Q2d}

Finally, the vast majority of respondents felt that the Parcelforce collection service for the progress test scripts was either efficient or very efficient (77% for English, 84% for maths).^{Q2e}

3.3.1.3 Test scheduling (Q3a, Q3b)

Respondents were asked whether the length and/or structure of the tests had caused any timetabling problems, and between one-third and two-thirds of respondents replied that it had (see Figure 3.3). Problems were most frequently reported for both of the English optional tests (around two-thirds), then for the two progress tests (just over half), and then for both the maths optional tests (around one-third).^{Q3a}

Figure 3.3 Percentage of respondents that experienced timetabling problems



The questionnaire highlighted five possible reasons for scheduling problems, of which three were typically selected by more than half of the respondents, in relation to each of the different tests in each subject: 'total time taken to administer the test'; 'timing of the separate test papers'; 'the timetabling of other school tests or examinations'. The 'total time taken to administer the test' was reported with particular frequency (by three-

quarters of respondents) with respect to both of the optional tests for English. Indeed, around one-fifth of respondents ticked only this reason for the English optional tests (making this the most common response pattern by a considerable margin).^{Q3a}

Schools that had administered both the 7PT and the 7OT were asked how this had been achieved. Responses were divided almost equally between 'lower ability students took the progress test, while higher ability students took the optional test' and 'lower ability students took the progress test, while all (or most) took the optional test'.^{Q3b}

3.3.1.4 Selection of students (Q5a, Q5b)

When asked how they selected students for the 7PT, the vast majority of respondents ticked the box indicating 'all (or most) students with 2000 key stage 2 results in English [maths] below level 4' (87% for English and 96% for maths). Indeed, at least four-fifths of respondents ticked only this method. Current level of achievement (as assessed within school) was selected by 11% of English teachers and 3% of maths teachers.^{Q5a}

When posed the same question regarding the 7OT, alternative criteria were recorded. Almost half of maths (43%) and English (49%) respondents selected the entire cohort. Key stage 2 test results (alone) were used as criteria for the selection of year 7 students by 27% of schools for English and 37% of schools for maths. The large majority of schools used the 8OT with the entire year 8 cohort (76% English and 77% maths).^{Q5b}

3.3.1.5 Test preparation (Q6a, Q6b, Q6c, Q6d)

Around three-quarters of English (75%) and maths (72%) respondents claimed that their students did not receive any specific preparation for the progress tests. Of those who did prepare students, the majority (83% English and 58% maths) explained that this was through following the school's own revision programme. More than half of schools that had prepared students for the tests had spent more than 2 days in preparation, with around four-fifths of these providing this preparation as part of regular classes (and the majority of these schools only providing preparation within regular classes).^{Q6a-d}

3.3.1.6 Teachers' perceptions of the tests (Q7, Q8a, Q8b, Q9, Q21)

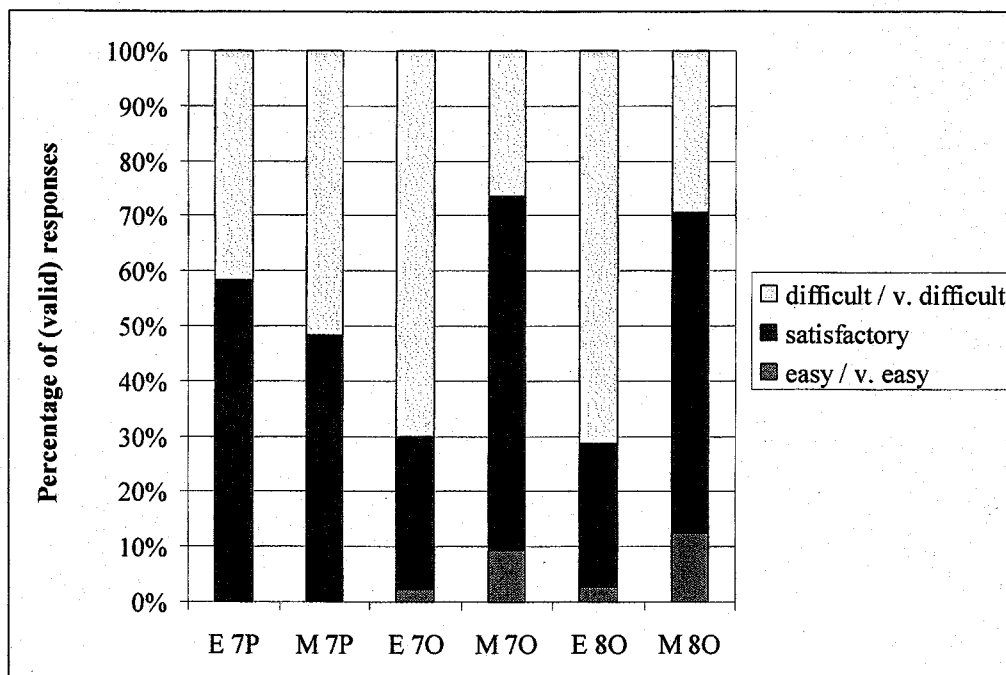
Respondents, across each of the tests in each subject, generally felt that the clarity of instructions in the Teacher's Guide was at least satisfactory. The most dissatisfaction was expressed by English teachers in response to the optional tests (where dissatisfaction was

expressed by 10% of respondents in relation to the 7OT and 13% in relation to the 8OT).^{Q7}

Teachers were asked to consider the appropriateness of the content of the test for the target group and this resulted in a reasonably large disparity of views. In relation to the three tests, across both subjects, between 19% and 42% of respondents claimed that the content was either appropriate or highly appropriate. The most positive responses came in relation to the maths optional tests. On the other hand, between 16% and 46% of respondents claimed that the content was either inappropriate or highly inappropriate for the target group – and the most negative responses concerned the English optional tests.^{Q8a}

The next question concerned the difficulty of the test for the target group, and responses tended to be more consistent: respondents tended to feel that the tests were either satisfactory or difficult (see Figure 3.4). Two-fifths (42%) of respondents claimed that the English 7PT was either difficult or very difficult, while the corresponding proportion for the maths 7PT was over half (52%). Although just over one-quarter of maths respondents claimed that the optional tests (year 7 and year 8) were either difficult or very difficult, over two-thirds of English respondents felt this.^{Q8b}

Figure 3.4 Teachers' perceptions of test difficulty



When asked to estimate the degree of overlap between the school's scheme of work and the content of the tests, the majority of English and maths respondents claimed that there was at least some. The most positive response category was 'a considerable amount' which was chosen by around 60% of schools for both of the optional tests in maths, by 40% of schools for the progress test in maths, but by 10% or fewer respondents for each of the three English tests. For each of the three English tests, 7% of respondents ticked the 'none' category, suggesting that there was no overlap in content.^{Q9}

Teachers generally felt that the optional tests were acceptable in terms of value for money, with almost half selecting the box corresponding to 'acceptable' across both years and both subjects. However, a substantial proportion felt that the optional tests were poor or very poor value for money: two-fifths of English respondents felt this way, as did one-quarter of maths respondents.^{Q21}

3.3.1.7 Students' perceptions of the tests (Q10, Q11, Q12)

Teachers were asked to estimate the extent to which students felt motivated to achieve on the tests. Responses tended to be higher from the maths respondents than from the English respondents, and higher in relation to the optional tests than in relation to the progress tests. No more than one-quarter of respondents reported that students were either generally 'motivated' or 'very motivated' to perform well on the progress tests (c.f., 'moderately motivated' or 'not at all motivated'). In contrast, over one-third of respondents replied that students were generally 'motivated' or 'very motivated' for the English optional tests, and over three-fifths of respondents reported this level of general motivation for the maths optional tests.^{Q10}

Developing this impression, just over two-thirds of respondents – for maths and English – reported that students felt at least 'a little' stigma in being required to take the 7PTs. In contrast, over 90% of respondents reported that their students felt no stigma in being required to take either the 7OTs or the 8OTs.^{Q11}

To explore reasons for students' reactions to the tests, teachers were asked to give their impression of whether students thought the test results could have an impact upon their future schooling arrangements. Respondents generally indicated a limited amount of awareness amongst students, with slightly more awareness being reported by maths teachers in relation to the optional tests. Of course, it was not always the case that the results would have had a great deal of impact, therefore this question was reanalysed only for respondents who reported that results were used in setting or streaming. Within these restricted samples, there was a greater reported awareness amongst students. However, as

many as 17% of respondents (answering in relation to year 7 English students) still ticked the 'not at all' box in response to this question. On the other hand, as many as 21% of respondents (answering in relation to year 7 maths students taking the optional test) ticked the 'a great deal' option.^{Q12}

3.3.1.8 Marking (Q16, Q17a, Q17b, Q17c)

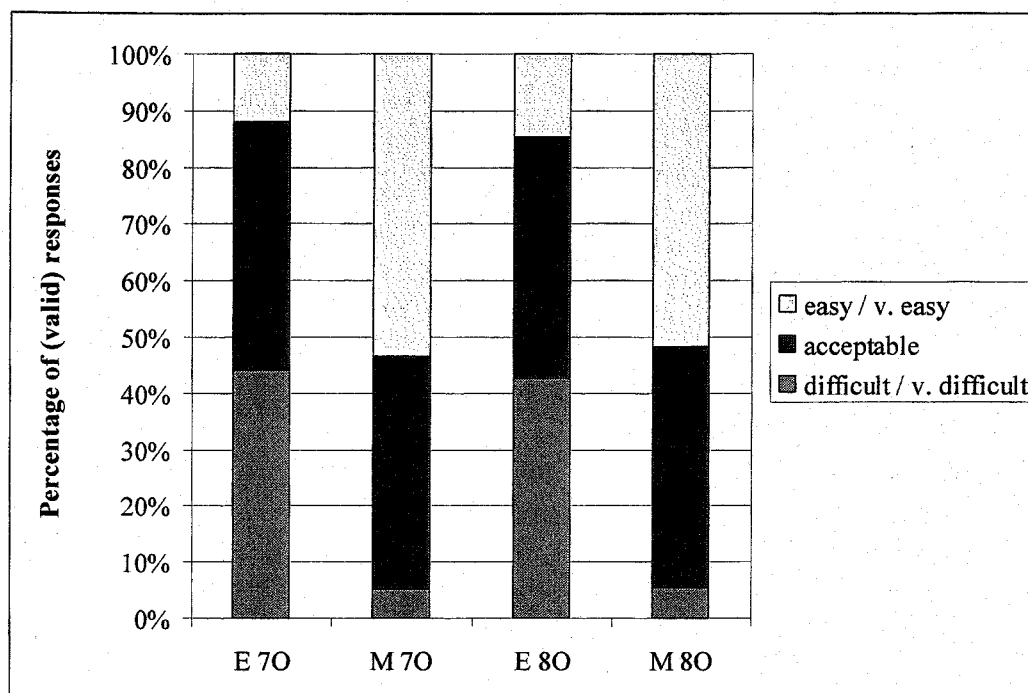
The vast majority of respondents reported the marking of the 7PTs to be at least 'acceptable'. Only 6% of English respondents considered the marking to have been 'poor' or 'very poor', as did 2% of maths respondents. On the other hand, while half of the maths respondents considered the marking to be 'good' or 'very good', only one-quarter of English respondents felt this way.^{Q16}

The optional tests, in both subjects and for both year groups, were marked predominantly by the teacher responsible for each class – this was reported for between 69% and 75% of schools. Marking was conducted by a single teacher for between 15% and 19% of schools.^{Q17a}

In the majority of schools (around two-thirds for English and around nine-tenths for maths) there was no trial marking or moderation exercise carried out before the marking process began. For both optional tests, just over half of maths respondents (whose departments had not carried out prior standardisation) considered that this was not necessary. Yet no more than 15% of English respondents gave this as a reason. Just over 80% of English respondents reported that workload restrictions prevented them, while just under 60% of maths respondents gave this answer. Between one-third (7OT) and two-fifths (8OT) of English respondents ticked both the 'due to workload' box and the 'due to lack of suitable INSET time' box.^{Q17b}

There was a considerable disparity between maths and English in relation to whether teachers had found the mark schemes easy to use (see Figure 3.5). Whereas 95% of respondents, for both of the maths optional tests, had found the mark schemes at least 'acceptable' (c.f., 'difficult' or 'very difficult') only around 56% of English respondents felt the same way. In fact, 16% (7OT) and 13% (8OT) of English respondents reported that the mark schemes were 'very difficult' to use.^{Q17c}

Figure 3.5 Teachers' perceptions of mark scheme usability



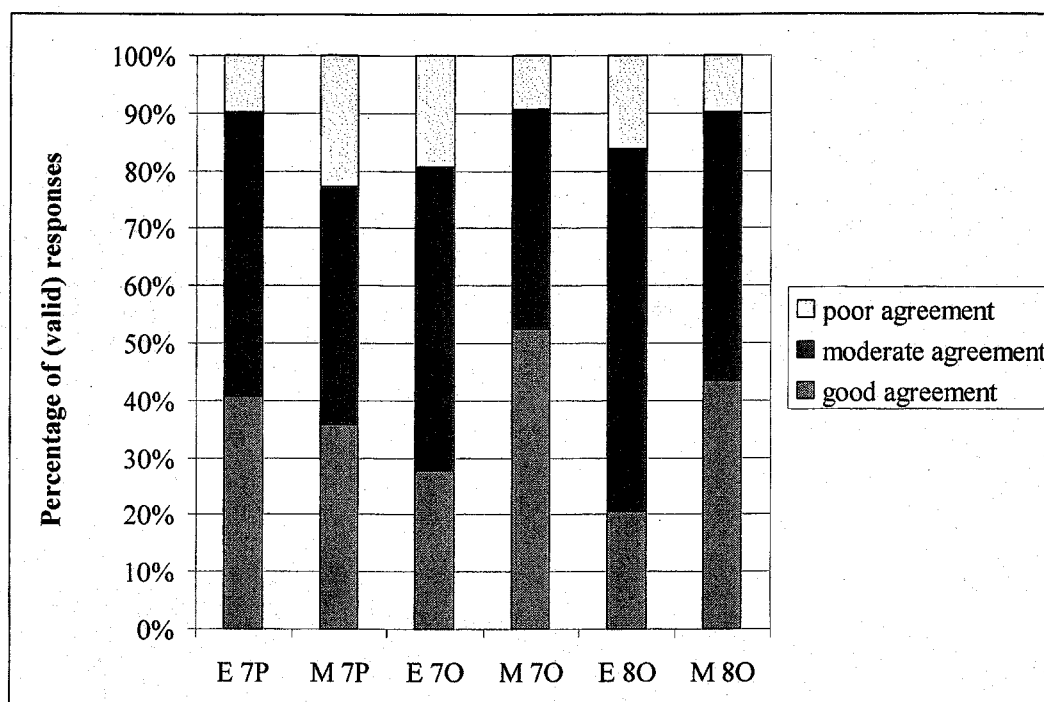
3.3.1.9 Views and uses of test results (Q13, Q18, Q19, Q20)

None of the tests led many teachers to report that the results were particularly useful. For the maths optional tests, responses tended to cluster just below the borderline between 'useful' and 'very useful'. For the English optional tests, and for both progress tests, responses tended to cluster at or just above the borderline between 'moderately useful' and 'useful'. Maths respondents much more frequently ticked the 'not at all useful' box for the progress test (35%) than for the optional tests (6% each); while the reverse was true for English (with 29% and 24% finding the optional test results 'not at all useful', compared with 19% for the progress test results).^{Q13}

Except for the maths 7OT, the most frequently expressed opinion on the agreement between test results and teacher assessment results was that this was 'moderate' (see Figure 3.6). For the maths 7OT, the majority reported 'good agreement'. Between 9% (maths 7OT) and 23% (English 7PT) of respondents reported 'poor agreement'.^{Q18}

Perhaps for these reasons, the majority of schools did not formally report results to parents. Progress test results were the most frequently reported, by 41% (English) and 39% (maths) of schools. The maths optional test results were reported to parents by around one-third of schools, while the English optional test results were reported to parents by just under one-fifth of schools.^{Q19}

Figure 3.6 Teachers' perceptions of agreement between test results and teacher assessments



The questionnaire asked respondents to tick boxes corresponding to the uses that they made of test results. The most frequently selected option was to 'assess strengths and weaknesses of students' – reported by over two-fifths of respondents in relation to each of the optional tests and by around one-third of respondents in relation to the progress tests. The second most frequently selected option was 'to help decisions about setting/streaming' – reported by over half of respondents for the years 7 and 8 optional maths tests and by just under one-third of respondents in relation to the progress tests and the optional tests for English. The stronger option – 'to allocate students to sets/streams' – was also recorded with reasonable frequency, particularly for maths (21% for the 7PT, 33% for the 7OT, and 39% for the 8OT).^{Q20}

When examined in greater detail, it appeared that at least 14% of respondents, for each of the three tests in both subjects, ticked only the two options referring to setting or streaming (i.e., ticked either one, or both, of these options). More than one-quarter of respondents, for both of the maths optional tests, ticked only these options.^{Q20}

The option 'to identify levels of support required for individual students' was mentioned particularly in relation to the progress test results (42% for maths and 37% for English) – slightly more so even than ticked the related 'to assess strengths and weaknesses of students' option. At least one-fifth of respondents for English, for each of the three tests,

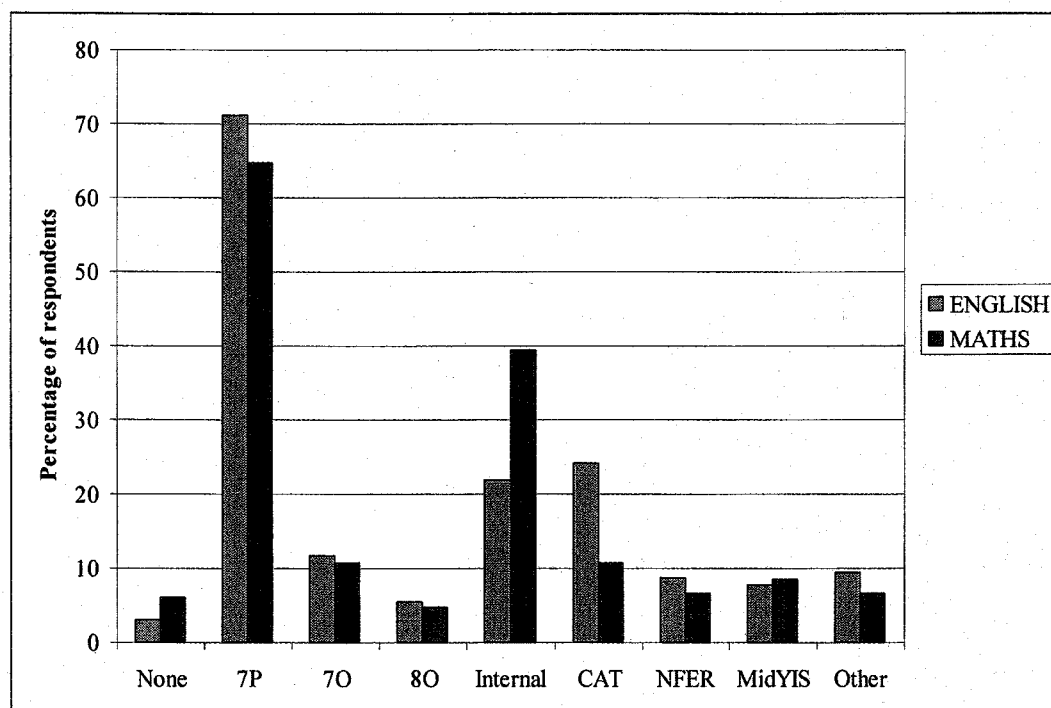
ticked only these two options referring to the formative assessment of pupils (i.e., ticked either one, or both, of these options). While one-quarter of respondents for maths ticked only these two in relation to the progress tests, no more than 8% ticked only these options for either of the optional tests.^{Q20}

Gauging how well students had covered the year's work was mentioned particularly in relation to the maths optional tests (42% for both). Finally, although no more than 4% of respondents recorded that they did not use the maths optional test results for years 7 and 8, over one-fifth of respondents reported this in relation to both progress tests and both optional tests for English.^{Q20}

3.3.1.10 Future use of tests (Q15, Q21, Q22c)

The final 'closed' question of the survey asked what tests the respondents planned to use during 2002, with each of three target groups: year 7 students below level 4 (Y7:B4); year 7 students at or above level 4 (Y7:4+); and year 8 students (Y8). Of the English respondents, 71% said that they would use the 7PT for Y7:B4 students (see Figure 3.7), 52% said that they would use the 7OT for Y7:4+ students, and 39% reported that they would use the 8OT with Y8 students. The comparable percentages for maths were 65%, 62% and 49%.^{Q22c}

Figure 3.7 Tests intended to be used with year 7 students below level 4 in 2002



For both subjects, and for each of the year/ability groups, the most frequent response pattern was to select only the progress/optional test corresponding to the appropriate year/ability group. Thus, 37% of respondents proposed to use only the 7PT with Y7:B4 English students during 2002 (28% for maths); 29% of respondents proposed to use only the 7OT with Y7:4+ English students (29% for maths); and 25% proposed to use only the 8OT with Y8 English students (21% for maths). Around 15% of respondents proposed only to use internally designed tests with Y8 students during 2002 (for maths and English), while around 9% of respondents proposed only to use internally designed tests with Y7:4+ students (for maths and English). Around 6% proposed only to use internally designed tests with Y7:B4 students (again, for both maths and English). The only other prevalent response pattern was noted for maths, across all three year/ability groups, where two boxes, corresponding to internally designed tests plus their respective progress/optional test, were ticked by around 10% of respondents.^{Q22c}

In comparison with the first 'closed' question of the survey – concerning uptake of the tests during 2001 – the predicted uptake for 2002 appeared to be slightly lower. However, the two questions were not identical (particularly as the former did not distinguish between target populations). It is possible, therefore, that at least some of the observed difference may have been attributable to the different question formats.^{Q1c & Q22c}

Respondents who intended not to use any of the tests again were asked to record their reasons why. There were only 11 such respondents for English and 13 for maths. Most frequently selected options tended to be 'content not relevant to schemes of work taught', 'results did not reflect students' abilities', and 'caused anxiety for students'. In relation to the optional tests for English (only), marking stood out as the most frequently selected of all options. Timetabling problems were also cited with relative frequency in relation to the English optional tests.^{Q15b}

3.3.1.11 Respondents' comments (Q23, Q24)

The final questions on the questionnaire asked whether respondents had any further comments on the progress and optional tests. A random sample of 49 questionnaires was selected, for maths and English respectively. These were used to develop a rough coding scheme for comments and were then coded according to this scheme.

The two 'open' questions were used with considerable frequency. Over two-thirds of each sample of (49) respondents provided at least one coded comment. Comments tended to be varied, addressing a range of issues, some of which extended responses to the 'closed' questions and others of which introduced new issues. There was not a great deal

of overlap in the comments raised in response to either question – only a few issues were raised by more than a couple of respondents.

The most commonly recorded comments relating to the English progress test were:

- some pupils had found the material difficult to read and understand;
- the use of the key stage 2 test seemed crude; and
- there had been administrative problems with tests coinciding.

All three of these issues were also raised by more than two respondents for maths, as were the following comments:

- the tests had been de-motivating for low ability pupils;
- it was not acceptable to have level 5 questions for pupils not expected to have reached this level; and
- pupils who had taken the progress and optional tests had achieved better on the optional test.

Comments concerning the optional tests similarly covered a wide range of issues (although they were not always directed specifically at the year 7 or the year 8 test). Three comments were raised by more than 10% of the maths and English samples, respectively. For English these comments were:

- the marking load was too great;
- there was too much test material; and
- the reading passages were too difficult.

The three most frequently reported comments for maths were:

- the papers did not stretch the most able students;
- the papers were too difficult for pupils of lower ability; and
- there should be tiers.

3.3.2 Postal survey results for pilot schools

Schools that had participated in the key stage 3 strategy pilot during 2001 were unusual, as far as the Evaluation was concerned. Not only were the optional tests designed with the literacy and numeracy strategies in mind, but pilot schools were very strongly encouraged to use both the optional tests and the progress tests during 2001 (indeed, they did not have to pay for the optional tests and a few received financial support from their LEA for marking). Therefore, it was important to consider these schools separately from those not involved in the pilot.

In designing the Evaluation, a decision was made to gather a small amount of feedback from pilot schools, despite the main focus being upon non-pilot schools. (The investigation of responses from pilot schools was not central to the Evaluation, as their perspectives were to be considered as part of separate evaluations conducted by other research teams.) The survey was sent to 50 pilot schools for maths and 50 for English. Responses were received from 18 English respondents and 23 maths respondents.

With response frequencies at this level, it is important to realise that any inferences from results should be made with extreme caution. First, it would be very unwise to assume that the reply-sample was representative of all pilot schools. Second, even if it was, small idiosyncratic responses by individual respondents would have considerable impact: in a sample of 18, for example, each respondent's answer would contribute 5½ per cent to any analysis; two 'peculiar' responses to a question would make a difference of 11 per cent. Third, for many of the questions on the questionnaire, the sample size was effectively reduced further still – either as respondents simply failed to record answers, or as question filters meant that they were not eligible to answer. The smaller the number of respondents for any question, the more problematic it becomes to read anything meaningful into the results.

The following sections should be read with these caveats in mind. Results are only presented where they appeared to diverge from those of non-pilot schools by a considerable amount. Even then, it should not be assumed that these differences necessarily carry great meaning.

3.3.2.1 Present and past test use (Q1a, Q1b, Q1c, Q14, Q22a, Q22b)

Perhaps the least surprising difference between pilot schools and non-pilot schools was in their use of the tests. Over 90% of pilot schools, for both maths and English, used all three tests.^{Q1a}

In contrast to the non-pilot schools, and to English pilot schools, the large majority of maths pilot schools had reviewed sample materials for both of the optional tests before deciding to use them.^{Q1b}

3.3.2.2 Test administration procedures (Q2a, Q2b, Q2c, Q2d, Q2e)

No major differences were observed between non-pilot and pilot schools.

3.3.2.3 Test scheduling and selection of students (Q3a, Q3b, Q5a, Q5b)

While non-pilot schools reported a considerable problem with the scheduling of tests, the pilot schools were more emphatic. Almost all pilot schools, for each of the three English tests, reported problems. The percentage of pilot schools reporting scheduling difficulties for the maths optional tests was also higher than for the non-pilot schools. This may, to some extent, reflect the fact that a higher proportion of pilot schools used all three of the tests. Notably for maths, the 'timetabling of other school tests or examinations' was reported to be a particular problem for those pilot schools that had reported scheduling difficulties.^{Q3a}

For both maths and English, over two-thirds of pilot schools used the 7OT with higher ability year 7 students but used only the 7PT with lower ability students. That is, the 7OT was generally not used as an end-of-year test for the entire cohort (as it seemed to have been for a large number of non-pilot schools). This conclusion was supported by the fact that a larger percentage of pilot schools selected students for the 7OT on the basis of key stage 2 test results and a smaller percentage selected the entire cohort.^{Q3b}

3.3.2.4 Test preparation (Q6a, Q6b, Q6c, Q6d)

Pilot schools reversed the pattern of response observed with non-pilot schools when asked whether their students had received any specific preparation for the 7PT. For both maths and English, over three-quarters of respondents said that students had received preparation, while only one-quarter said that they had not.^{Q6a}

Not unexpectedly, this preparation was predominantly in terms of literacy progress units/Springboard 7, although half of the respondents for English also mentioned summer schools. Schools' own revision programmes were cited considerably less frequently for pilot schools than for non-pilot schools. Time spent preparing students for the tests was also higher for pilot schools – particularly for English, where 64% of schools had spent more than 10 days in preparation.^{Q6a-b}

More pilot schools than non-pilot schools had used the literacy progress units (n=13) or Springboard 7 (n=15). When asked to rate their usefulness in preparing students for the progress test, 67% of English respondents said they were poor or very poor, as did 47% of maths respondents.^{Q6d}

3.3.2.5 Teachers' perceptions of the tests (Q7, Q8a, Q8b, Q9)

No major differences were observed between non-pilot and pilot schools.

3.3.2.6 Students' perceptions of the tests (Q10, Q11, Q12)

No major differences were observed between non-pilot and pilot schools.

3.3.2.7 Marking (Q16, Q17a, Q17b, Q17c)

While two-thirds of non-pilot schools did not conduct any trial marking or moderation exercise for English before the marking began, two-thirds of pilot schools did. Still, though, the vast majority (over four-fifths) of pilot schools conducted no prior exercise for maths – and nearly three-quarters of these reported that they did not consider it necessary.^{Q17b}

3.3.2.8 Views and uses of test results (Q13, Q18, Q19, Q20)

There was somewhat more of a tendency for pilot schools to use the English results (from all tests) to 'assess strengths and weaknesses of students'. On the other hand, there was somewhat less of a tendency for pilot schools to use the optional maths tests for this purpose.^{Q20}

3.3.2.9 Future use of tests (Q15, Q21, Q22c)

A higher percentage of pilot schools, for each of the three tests across both maths and English, reported that they intended to use the tests in 2002. The difference between non-pilot and pilot schools was most marked for the optional tests, with at least 25% more

pilot schools than non-pilot schools planning to use the tests in 2002 with the appropriate target group of students.^{Q22c}

Section 4 The Focus Group Interviews

4.1 Introduction

To contextualise responses to the questionnaire, four focus group interviews were conducted. Their target populations were the same as for the larger surveys (typically secondary school heads of English and mathematics departments) and the same issues were addressed. In addressing those same issues, the aims of each focus group were:

1. to explore the range of reasons that may have motivated particular questionnaire responses; and
2. to uncover salient issues that may have been inadequately addressed within the questionnaires.

4.1.1 Participants

4.1.1.1 The sampling approach

It was intended to recruit 12 participants for each focus group: 6 heads of maths departments and 6 heads of English departments. In fact, it was not a specific requirement that participants be heads of departments; however, it was intended that they should have a good overview of the political and practical issues relating to the use of the test(s) within their department, and it was assumed that heads would be most likely to contribute this perspective. As such, communication was channelled initially to heads of maths and English departments, via headteachers.

As was the case for the questionnaires, it was decided that the target population should be restricted to those teachers whose departments had used at least one of the three tests under investigation – teachers who would be able to pass significant comment on the manner in which the tests functioned during 2001.

To ensure that schools were not inappropriately burdened, those that had been sampled for the questionnaire were not approached for the focus group. Nor was it intended that more than one teacher from the same school should be invited to attend. A further restriction was added by the physical location of each meeting: London, Slough, Birmingham and York. For each focus group, schools were selected that were within a reasonable travelling distance.

4.1.1.2 The recruitment process

Unfortunately, owing to the acute lack of time in which to approach and recruit participants, it was not possible to populate any of the four groups with an ideal sample. While there was considerable enthusiasm for participation amongst the teachers approached, most explained that it was simply not possible to take part at such short notice.

The number of teachers attending each meeting ranged from 7 (London) to 11 (Birmingham). Amongst the 8 participants of the Slough focus group, two pairs shared the same school (representing maths and English, respectively). One pair from the 9 participants in York also shared the same school, as did three pairs from the 11 participants in Birmingham. The most frequently represented teaching position was head of department, although deputy heads, literacy and numeracy co-ordinators, examination officers, and special needs co-ordinators also attended.

Tables 4.1a to 4.1d present the breakdown of each focus group by tests used within the departments of each of the participating teachers.

Table 4.1a A breakdown of test usage amongst the participants in London

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Subject	E	E	E	E	E	M	M
7PT	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7OT	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
8OT	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓

Participant 4 ordered the 7OT but did not use it, and she only used part of the 8OT.

Table 4.1b A breakdown of test usage amongst the participants in Slough

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Subject	M	E	M	M	M	E	E	M
7PT	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓
7OT	✓	x	✓	x	x	✓	✓	✓
8OT	x	x	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓

Participant 2 used the 7PT for year 8 as well. Participant 4 used only half of the 8OT. Participant 7 used only the reading papers of the 7OT and 8OT.

Table 4.1c A breakdown of test usage amongst the participants in Birmingham

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Subject	E	E	M	E	M	M	M	M	M	E	E
7PT	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7OT	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓
8OT	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	x	✓

Participant 9 used only the reading papers of the 7OT and 8OT.

Although the first three focus groups were supported by schools that had not participated in the KS3 strategy pilot, the problems faced in recruiting for York led to the decision to populate this focus group predominantly with teachers who had been involved; as a result, only two teachers from this group had not participated in the pilot.

Table 4.1d A breakdown of test usage amongst the participants in York

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Subject	E	M	M	M	M	E	E	E	M
7PT	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7OT	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8OT	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Across all four of the focus groups, only a few participants said that they had used the optional English spelling tests. Most relied simply upon the reading and writing papers.

4.1.2 The Interview Schedule

An interview schedule was developed to guide the discussions within each of the four groups (the same schedule was used for each). It was divided into two sections, dealing respectively with the 'more practical' and the 'more professional' issues relating to test usage (see Appendix 4.1).

The more practical issues addressed included the following:

- test usage (reasons for using or not using each test, review of sample materials, etc.);
- test administration (ease of obtaining information, quality of distribution, etc.);
- timetabling (how the tests were scheduled, relation to scheduling of other tests, etc.);
- selection of students (how the students were allocated to the tests, etc.).

The more professional issues included the following:

- test content (suitability for students, ease or difficulty of tests, etc.);
- test preparation (amount and nature of preparation, etc.);
- optional test marking (ease to mark, duration of marking, etc.);
- validity and uses of results (relationship with other assessments, uses of results, etc.);
- quality of tests (value for money, future use of tests, etc.).

As the more practical issues were not subject-specific, they were addressed to all participants in a single group. The more professional issues, on the other hand, were subject-specific and participants were divided into two groups – English and maths – to discuss them separately.

4.1.3 The conduct of each meeting

Each meeting was scheduled for a 13:00 to 16:00 time period, commencing with lunch. After an initial welcome and introduction to the exercise, participants were introduced to the issues to be discussed through completion of a questionnaire.

After the questionnaire, each focus group began in earnest with discussion of the practical issues. This first discussion session lasted for 45 minutes and was audio-recorded. After a break for coffee, the maths and English groups convened separately for a further 45 minute discussion of the professional issues. Once again, the discussion of both groups was audio-recorded. Results from each of these three sessions are presented below.

4.2 The discussion of practical issues

The following presentation of results will follow the order of discussion as it tended to develop within each of the four focus groups. It covers each of the main issues presented within the interview schedule.

It should be remembered that, as most of the participants' schools used all of the tests, the comments that arose from the focus group discussions cannot be assumed to represent the beliefs, attitudes or experiences of the wider population of schools. In particular, it would be unwise to assume that the views expressed represented those of schools that did not use any of the tests.

4.2.1 The process of deciding whether to use the tests

4.2.1.1 Factors affecting the 7PT decision

The York group differed from the others, owing to a predominance of teachers from KS3 strategy schools. This explains why most of the participants suggested that they had no choice in whether to use the 7PT, treating it as part of the package that they had subscribed to through the pilot.

The Birmingham group tended to differ from the others on the basis of a slightly higher predominance of less senior teachers. This may help to explain why the majority of this group believed that the 7PT was a compulsory requirement (perhaps not having been personally involved in the school's decision to use it). In fact, a more general sense of obligation seemed to be one of the most common reasons for choosing to use the 7PT – the desire to participate in a national initiative that was likely to increase in prominence in future years.

Mentioned by two of the teachers, within two of the focus groups, was the opportunity to move children from level 3 to level 4; that is, formally to recognise progress without having to wait until the key stage 3 tests.

Those teachers that mentioned reasons for not wanting to use the 7PT tended to refer to queries over the utility of the test, in particular, whether the test would provide useful additional information or whether the gap between the key stage 2 tests and the 7PT was sufficient to allow students to progress. Other teachers mentioned that they did not welcome additional paperwork and noted concerns with the quality of the tests (which were explored in more depth in the subject-specific sessions).

Finally, one participant mentioned that his school had decided not to use the 7PT because they had received insufficient key stage 2 data from their feeder schools and, therefore, were unsure which students needed to be assessed again.

4.2.1.2 Factors affecting the 7OT and 8OT decisions

Many of the participants agreed that an important motivation for using the 7OT and the 8OT was the desire to 'be in at the ground floor' for this new assessment (rather than enthusiasm for the 'if it moves, test it' philosophy). There was a widespread feeling that the tests would become compulsory in future years and that it was best to be familiar with them as early as possible.

On the other hand there were a small number of teachers who explicitly welcomed being able to introduce a formal test where none previously existed. One maths teacher said that, prior to the introduction of the 8OT, year 8 was something of a 'dead year'.

A more positive response, that was observed from all of the focus groups, was the hope that the 7OT and 8OT would replace in-house end-of-year tests. Indeed, most of the teachers commented that their schools used the optional tests for this purpose. One participant explained that his department had chosen to use the optional tests (to replace their in-house end-of-year exams) after a formal cost-benefit analysis.

Occasionally, there was explicit reference to a desire for the kind of 'objectivity' provided by the optional tests.

Objections to using the optional tests fell into a range of categories, with none being especially prevalent across groups (remember that most *did* use the tests). Issues that arose concerned:

- the cost of the tests;
- the marking requirements upon teachers;
- the lack of discrimination of the tests (particularly for the 8OT – which many felt should be tiered – especially when it is used to help allocate students to sets and streams for year 9);
- their lack of consistency with schemes of work studied; and
- the duration of the tests.

One participant mentioned that her school had been confused as to whether the optional and the progress tests were the same thing, which is why they had only entered for the 7PTs.

4.2.1.3 The locus of decision-making

The decision as to which tests were to be used was not always taken by heads of departments. In many cases, the decisions were made by Senior Management Teams or by headteachers. However, there was considerable variation across participants and, for many of the schools represented, decisions were taken by department heads. There was also some evidence of shared responsibility with, for example, PT decisions falling to headteachers and OT decisions falling to department heads.

There were a number of schools in which decisions were made by the headteacher without consultation with teaching staff. One school did not even realise that the 8OT had been ordered until a week after they had administered another end-of-year test to year 8 students – the students ended up taking both. In another school, the English teaching staff had discussed 7OT and 8OT sample materials, and decided not to use the tests, only to be subsequently presented with the test materials by their head. This kind of detached decision-making had caused a significant amount of resentment and a number of participants explained that they felt that the tests had been ‘forced’ upon them.

The focus groups did not uncover much evidence of pressure to participate being applied by LEAs – with the exception of the KS3 strategy schools.

One participant noted the opposite encouragement from her LEA, with her advisor recommending that, as the tests were only optional, not to worry too much about them. Other participants mentioned that their LEA advisors were very supportive in providing encouragement and information relating to the tests. This was particularly true within the London focus group.

4.2.1.4 Optional tests that were ordered but not used

Only one participant reported that she had ordered a test but subsequently not used it. This was the 7OT in English, which she considered too verbose. The same teacher used only two sections of the 8OT, again considering it too verbose.

More common was the decision not to administer optional tests to the entire cohort, or to provide amended versions of the tests for some pupils. One participant noted that only

one of the test papers had been administered because the head had allocated insufficient time.

4.2.1.5 The review of sample material

A substantial number of the participants explained that they had not reviewed the sample materials because they had not been responsible for deciding whether or not to use the tests (there was often an assumption that those who had made the decisions would have reviewed the sample materials). Many more responded that they had simply not known there were sample materials to review.

Where sample material had been reviewed, it had typically been done by department heads. Moreover, although some participants explained that LEA advisers had been helpful in finding them information, it was generally felt that such information was not simple to locate.

4.2.2 The administrative procedures

As many of the participants had not been involved in the administration details of the tests, the feedback on ordering, delivery, liaison with QCA, etc. was limited. Moreover, where problems were identified, it was not always possible to determine whether they were due to idiosyncratic confusions by individual members of staff, or whether they were more general with further-reaching implications.

4.2.2.1 Information gathering and liaison with QCA

Although few participants mentioned having had problems in obtaining information from QCA, this may simply have been because of the small numbers that had sought it. The question of liaison with QCA generally resulted in very little discussion and, where comment was passed, it was typically positive (e.g., 'good') or neutral ('no problems'). Occasionally, concerns were raised with the quality of information provided in response to telephone queries.

Participants in two of the focus groups mentioned problems in obtaining the threshold boundary marks. One participant even commented that on the morning of the meeting (15 October) her head had phoned the QCA to ask what the boundary marks were and had still not managed to find out. Another explained how frustrating it had been for students, who knew that their optional tests had been marked, but who were unable to be given their final results.

A final information-related concern was expressed by a participant who explained that if a document came to her school, addressed to the headteacher, then it would be likely to sit in his in-tray for two weeks – perhaps key information would be better addressed directly to heads of departments?

4.2.2.2 Ordering and invoicing

The majority of participants were not involved in the ordering and invoicing process and passed little comment on their schools' experiences. Those that did tended to refer to the cost of the optional tests. One middle school teacher raised a concern that they were funded as a primary school but were required to take secondary school tests, which she felt to be somewhat unfair in financial terms. Another participant mentioned an internal debate concerning whether to charge the optional tests to the department or to the school. Although the headteacher wanted to charge the department, the department head considered that the tests were part of a national initiative (and eventually won this funding argument). Other participants in this focus group recognised the concern and echoed it.

4.2.2.3 Delivery

A few participants mentioned concerns with the delivery of test materials, which had tended to result in last minute panic. One school had received all of the optional tests, but had not realised that the progress tests were not included in the same package. The lack of delivery was not noticed until 2 days prior to the test date. A participant from a separate focus group explained the 'terrible problems' that her school had experienced, with only half of the 7OT English test scripts arriving, and the rest not even coming in one go. A teacher within a third group explained how the 7PTs did not arrive on time but that the examinations officer had not noticed this until the day of the examination. Instead, on the day of the examination, she began giving the 7OTs to the progress test students as well. QCA were not prepared to fax the progress test, so the students were forced to complete them a week late.

During the Slough focus group, it became apparent that none of the participants were aware of having received their 7PT scripts back from markers. It was not clear to them why this was the case.

One final issue that arose in discussion of the delivery was the necessity of photocopying writing scripts for the English optional tests. This was not only felt to be an expensive and time consuming burden, it was also a threat to the testing process when this

requirement had not been noticed – as one participant commented: ‘we discovered just in time!’

4.2.2.4 The Teacher’s Guides

The previous comment linked directly to discussion of the Teacher’s Guides. The participant in question followed her comment by explaining that she had made her secretary ring the QCA up about the need to photocopy writing scripts because she ‘hadn’t read the book.’ As it turned out, many participants had not read the book! And there were tales of confusion to testify to this.

In addition, there were confusions relating to what information should be reviewed in advance and what should not. It was also recommended that test administration instructions should not be located within the Teacher’s Guides, but should be separate and presented to invigilators well in advance of the tests.

The issue of confusion between tests was raised by another participant, who commented that similarity between the covers of the optional and progress tests had led to members of staff muddling them up on various occasions.

While it was common for teachers to report referring only to the key sections of the Teacher’s Guides (rather than reading the documents in full), some schools apparently failed to locate even some of the most important pieces of information, such as for whom the tests were intended. In each of the four focus groups there were schools that had entered all of their ‘below level 4’ pupils for the 7PT – even those who were performing at level 1 or 2 – despite instructions to the contrary on page 4 of the 7PT Teacher’s Guide.

It is fair to note that many (though certainly not all) of the most ardently voiced concerns with the Teacher’s Guides came from English teachers. Only one participant (a maths teacher) voiced particular satisfaction with them – his feeling was that they did not depart significantly from the key stage 3 guides and, as such, were fairly straightforward. His only concern was that there was just one mark scheme provided for the 7PT.

The typical concern was not with the content of the Guides, but with their length and with the lack of time available to read them. (Of course, to comment on the content would have required the participants to have read them, and many had not.)

4.2.3 The scheduling of the tests

As many of the participants had to timetable two year 7 end-of-year tests (7PT and 7OT) as well as one year 8 end-of-year test (8OT) – not to mention additional versions that had been adapted for different ability levels, let alone tests and examinations for other year groups – scheduling was typically not straightforward.

Schools represented by the focus group participants took a variety of different approaches to scheduling the tests. Some organised for all students to be sat under the scrutiny of a small team of invigilators within a single hall, while others used regular classrooms and teachers. Some scheduled the 7PT as a formal examination but treated the 7OT more informally, while others accorded both equal status. Yet others treated certain papers formally (i.e., reading and maths A) while administering others informally in class (i.e., spelling and mental arithmetic). Finally, some fitted the tests into a normal timetable, while others instituted a formal ‘examination week’.

One of the main factors that caused problems for administration (and that led some schools to institute ‘examination weeks’) was the length of the tests. A particularly common concern was that the papers typically did not fit into even a double period. One school that used the 7OT within a regular lesson required students to finish the final 15 minutes-or-so of their test a few days after they had started it.

With so many pupils taking tests at the same time, space was at a premium. Indeed, some schools reported major problems, particularly a middle school that had to find room for progress test students to take the same test at the same time as an entire year of key stage 2 pupils. As they ended up resorting to the use of many different classrooms, they reported that no-one knew where anyone should be. Other problems were experienced, such as an insufficient supply of resources like calculators, tracing paper and mirrors. Being required to distribute students across many classrooms also meant that invigilators were frequently not subject-matter-experts, which was felt to put students at a disadvantage. Indeed, even when subject-matter-experts were used to invigilate large groups within large examination halls, this still had an impact on their own personal teaching timetables.

A number of schools specifically scheduled tests for all year 7 pupils at the same time, so that the 7PT students would not feel stigmatised by having to take a ‘special’ test. Unfortunately, this did raise one problem in a school that had failed to realise that the 7PT for reading required that instructions be read out in advance – 7OT students were required

to wait until the passage had been read to their 7PT peers. Other schools that had combined the tests did not experience significant problems.

4.2.4 The selection of students for the tests

4.2.4.1 The 7PT

As specified on page 4 of the progress test Teacher's Guide: 'The tests are designed to be taken by eligible pupils whom you judge to be attaining at least level 3 and are not suitable for pupils working at levels 1 and 2.' As echoed on page 5 of the Guide, relating to English: 'The tests are for pupils working at level 3 or above. The levels 3-5 test will award level 2 to pupils who **narrowly** miss achieving level 3. Pupils whom you judge to be working at levels 1 or 2 should not be entered for the year 7 progress tests.' Very similar guidance was given on page 11 in relation to maths.

Despite clear instructions in the Teacher's Guide, there was a widespread misunderstanding of the manner in which students should be selected for the progress tests. In each of the four focus groups there were participants whose schools had entered all pupils who had achieved below level 4 on the previous year's key stage 2 test, including those working at level 2 and level 1. Most of these participants realised, in retrospect, that this was not an appropriate strategy. Yet not all had come to realise that it was also a misunderstanding of the formal guidance. The spurious myth of the progress tests was that they were simply 'for pupils who had achieved below level 4'. And this incomplete story seemed to be the one that guided practice for a number of schools.

Exactly where, within the schools, the selection decisions were made was occasionally unclear. Comments like 'all of our candidates were centrally selected' were not uncommon. There was some indication that the misunderstanding of entry requirements for the 7PT had occurred particularly amongst members of Senior Management Teams.

Instead of relying simply upon a straightforward key stage 2 test result selection criterion, a number of participants mentioned other approaches. One maths teacher administered the progress test to all pupils in the lower maths groups; then, before sending scripts to be marked, withdrew those from pupils who had achieved level 4 in the previous year. Some schools with pupils who had followed Progress Units entered only those pupils for the progress tests. Others relied more directly upon 2000 key stage test results, but commented that this meant that only some of the pupils taking the 7PT had had Progress Unit experience.

Finally, one teacher mentioned that his school had decided not to use the progress tests because they had not received full data from their feeder schools and were, therefore, unsure exactly which students had not achieved level 4 in the previous year's tests. Rather than entering students inappropriately, they decided not to use the tests at all.

4.2.4.2 The 7OT and 8OT

Selection was somewhat more straightforward in relation to the 7OT. A number of participants, whose departments felt that progress test pupils should not feel different from others, decided that anyone who was not taking the 7PT should take the 7OT. However, this did raise a problem of whether to test pupils below level 3. A number of participants mentioned that these pupils were simply not tested at all. Others developed new tests for pupils working at levels 1 and 2.

Some participants mentioned that pupils who had taken the progress test were also tested with the optional test (as part of a policy to assess all students with the 7OT as an end-of-year test). This enabled teachers to compare results from the two assessments. Their typical response was to comment upon pupils who had received different levels.

One particular problem was noted with the 8OT. While many teachers wanted to give it to all students as an end-of-year test, many also felt that it was not appropriate for all students. Specifically, it was felt to be too hard for many students. One maths teacher explained that pupils who would not achieve level 4 were given an easier paper, which was based upon the 8OT, but which had been amended by teaching staff to make it more accessible to lower ability students. He explained that the lowest ability students were also given this amended test, but in a classroom context rather than as a formal examination.

4.2.5 The stigmatisation of low achieving students

A specific concern, which was mentioned as a factor that would discourage schools from using the 7PT in future years, was the fact that the 7PTs were exactly the same as the 2001 key stage 2 tests. While many students may not have noticed, others certainly did – particularly those with siblings in year 6, or students in middle schools who were taking exactly the same tests as their peers in year 6 in the same place at the same time. Participants believed that students would feel de-motivated on discovering that they were taking the same tests as younger children and that this would harm their self-esteem.

More generally, the idea of targeting only a select group of low-achieving students for re-testing, was felt by some participants to be undesirable. However, particularly amongst the London focus group, there was a feeling that these pupils were being singled out long before the testing occurred. Any pupils who were following Progress Units were required to be taken out of lessons throughout the year, and were not simply being stigmatised by the tests.

There was also a strong feeling that students below level 3 in year 7 were the ones who were especially stigmatised, as they were not even 'good enough' to be entered for the progress tests.

Despite these comments, it was not universally felt that the tests were stigmatising. A few teachers explained that their students were used to sitting tiered tests, so delivering the progress tests alongside the optional tests was little different for them. Another explained that the students already knew that they were in Set 1, 2 or 3, so taking a different test was not really an issue.

4.3 The discussion of professional issues for maths

4.3.1 Introduction

A total of eighteen maths teachers took part in the four focus group discussions. Three of the schools represented were middle schools, with the rest being secondary comprehensives. Only two teachers were able to attend the maths focus group in London. While this was not ideal, the session still generated useful feedback. Each of the other sessions had at least five participants.

4.3.2 Students' reactions to the tests and teachers' comments on test content

4.3.2.1 Progress test

Many teachers had been unaware of the content of the 7PT until very near the date of its administration. There was a great deal of criticism of the practice of having the 7PT as an identical test to that used in key stage 2. Some teachers only discovered that this was the case from their students. The general feeling was that this duplication of material could only lead to stigma for those taking the test in year 7, and showed that its content bore little relation to the scheme of work for year 7 prescribed in the numeracy framework. Because Springboard 7 and the framework were still in the process of filtering into schools, some teachers held that these would afford better access to the material in the

7PT in future years. Those in pilot schools who were familiar with the framework were more critical at the disparity in content.

Several teachers mentioned high levels of anxiety among students taking the 7PT, and considered that this was due to it being seen as an external and therefore 'more serious' test. In other schools, however, it was seen as 'just another test'. The observation was made that students of lower ability tend to experience more stress at assessment than those of higher ability, as the latter welcome the challenge and opportunity to demonstrate achievement to a greater extent.

The strong general opinion was that the 7PT was too difficult for lower ability students in the target range of level 3 to 4, and that it was not suitably tailored to showing any progress which they might have made. Very few teachers reported an improvement in results over year 7 for students taking these tests, and some students even dropped from level 4 to level 3. In one school where students had taken both the 7PT and the 7OT, many students achieved a higher mark in the 7OT. One teacher, who had entered some level 4 students only for them to be awarded level 3s, dubbed the 7PT a 'regression test'. It was felt that questions on the 7PT started off at too high a level of difficulty, excluding many of the students at whom it was aimed. The wording and vocabulary of the test was similarly felt to be of too high a level, and some questions required two or three separate operations to be performed without this being made explicit in the question format (that is, there were complaints at a perceived lack of a guided sequence to show the students how to work through to their answer). As a result, many teachers felt that students who were capable of performing certain operations had been confounded by the context in which these had been applied.

The inclusion of level 5 questions (for example on prime numbers or percentages) was considered inappropriate for a test targeted at those who were below level 4 in the previous year.

Some suggested having a 7PT that started at level 2, rather than a test which posed a significant challenge to those students at the bottom of level 3 even in its initial questions.

4.3.2.2 Optional tests

The optional tests were held by all the teachers to be of a much more suitable level, although there was a feeling that they might be too easy for those of high ability, especially in year 8. Here an additional tier was suggested for the higher ability end of the

cohort, stretching them to include level 7 material. Two teachers reckoned that the 8OT was set at slightly too difficult a level.

Several teachers suggested an additional tier for the higher ability students in the 8OT. In a similar vein, it was felt that a progress 'band' or tier at the bottom of the 7OT that explicitly assessed movement between levels 3 and 4 would have been of benefit.

4.3.3 Preparation for the tests

Few teachers reported doing preparation specifically focussed on revision for the 7PT or OTs, although around a quarter of teachers had used the Springboard 7 programme. There was a general opinion that the pressures of the year 7 schemes of work were too great to devote much time to revision. Due to the pressures of time in delivering the syllabus, some felt that it would be more sensible to have the tests at the end of summer term.

Many of the teachers had not been aware of the content of either the PT or the OTs until their arrival and therefore did not prepare their students. In many schools, the numeracy framework was just filtering in and was available only in draft form. Teachers who had found themselves in this situation tended to suspect that not using the framework had contributed to the low scores on the 7PT, although those who had taught in pilot schools were less convinced.

A few teachers had gone back to the key stage 2 syllabus for practice questions, and this practice was more common in middle schools. Indeed, those teachers in middle schools reported much more familiarity with the key stage 2 syllabus.

One teacher had used the Springboard 7 as the basis for the entire maths syllabus, using the 'Maths Boosters' (presumably those produced by Letts Educational for year 6) in the last two weeks before the exam. She reported that this had worked well, and praised the Springboard scheme, noting its system whereby the most important topics were highlighted. The great majority of those who had used the Springboard were similarly happy with it as teaching material, and reported that students had found it engaging. However, some pointed out that its content was somewhat divergent from the numeracy framework, and that its format was significantly different from that used in the 7PT. It was noted that students found it very demoralising to do well on Springboard review tests and then struggle on the 7PT. Those who had used the Springboard 7 pointed out that it

was not suitable for students below level 3, and asked what material was recommended at this level.

Those who had run summer schools reported that the summer school material was of good quality and included a large amount of activity material that engaged students. However, it was again felt that this material was of little use as preparation for the 7PT.

Those who had devoted a great deal of effort to preparation for the 7PT spoke of their disappointment and the effect on morale of having students falling levels rather than going up. Several complained that the perceived need for preparation for the 7PTs would inevitably put pressure on the delivery of the syllabus and result in a reduced opportunity to teach new material.

It was also argued that having OTs in coming years which were essentially the same tests with different numbers would result in some teachers teaching specifically to the test. That this would be the case was perhaps evidenced by the OTs in years 3, 4 and 5 being almost identical from year to year.

4.3.4 Marking of optional tests

No salient problems were reported with the marking of the OTs, except the time that this took. They were considered to be straightforward and of particular help in clarifying one or two questions. Some teachers pointed out that the marking workload had been increased by adopting external tests rather than internal assessments, but in general there were few problems. All the teachers were familiar with the format of the mark schemes for key stage 3, which the OT mark schemes followed.

One teacher suggested the inclusion of a précis sheet which summarised the mark scheme onto one page, and others agreed that this would be useful.

4.3.5 Results

Several schools did not let the students know their results on the progress test, knowing that it would be discouraging for students to be told that they had not gone up a level or had even gone down. Others simply reported a percentage mark. It was generally considered very disheartening for weaker students who had embarked on a 'new start' at secondary school to be given results that failed to reflect any progress made during the year.

All of the teachers reported using the test results to feed into the streaming or setting process, though the great majority explained that these were only one factor in a more global assessment of a pupil. For the OTs, results were found helpful in confirming the placement of students which had already been suggested by other assessments and professional judgement. For the 7PTs, some teachers found that they could not use the results alone to set, simply because this would have resulted in far too large a bottom set.

Several teachers suggested the use of grades within levels for the 7PT, arguing that this might make progress more apparent. One suggested that the Teacher's Guide for the 7PT could have level indicators by the questions to show the proportion of marks that are level 4 or 5. Similarly, the splitting of level boundaries for the OT results to give a high, middle and low grade within a level was also suggested. Some reported that they split the levels in this way internally in order to give a clearer indication of the spectrum of ability.

There was criticism of the practice of 7PT results being returned without a report detailing which questions the students had done well on or found difficult, similar to that provided at key stage 3. As a result, some teachers felt that they were unsure how to improve what seemed to be an unsatisfactory level of progress. One teacher asked for the 7PT papers to be returned.

Around a third of the schools represented did in-house analyses of results on the OTs to identify areas which the cohort of students had performed particularly badly on as a whole. None reported using individual test results to identify areas in need of development.

Many teachers noted that students taking the OTs were very interested in the fact that the marks for these tests were standardised on a national basis. This had a noticeable effect on their motivation in taking the test, especially in year 7. For those of lower ability, this tended to increase anxiety, while for those of higher ability it tended to be seen as a chance to confirm and demonstrate their potential. For this reason, students taking these tests tended to be more interested in their (standardised) levels on the OTs than their (raw) marks.

4.3.6 Quality of test

The OTs were seen to be valid and a useful replacement for internal end-of-year tests. They were held to be of good value, though few teachers had paid for them from department funds. One teacher warned that although the OTs were aligned with the

numeracy framework, he had a feeling that there was not 'total harmony'. He was unable to be more specific at this early stage.

Others voiced continued stress at what was perceived to be a centrally imposed and increasingly assessment-focussed pedagogical culture. They expressed worry that the pressure of tests every year created a very demoralising context in which to learn for students who did not make the demanded progression. This was held to be particularly relevant for those students below level 4 upon their entry to secondary school, a time when performance has been regularly found to 'dip'. It was argued that students in year 7 should be given a chance to settle without assessment at such an early stage. Others, taking an opposite view, held that internal end-of-year tests had been in place previously, and that these tests made little difference to a student's perception or experience of education.

Asked whether they would use the tests again, around half of those who had used the 7PT said that they would, because they believed that it would become compulsory. Those who understood that they had a choice tended to be split in their opinions: some were keen never to repeat the experience, others felt that there was improvement to be made in the provision for weaker students in this year group and held the 7PTs to be an important component in their targeting of students just below level 4.

Reaction was more positive to the OTs, although the issue of a broader range of levels was often raised. Many felt that a range of 3 to 8 would be more suitable, and thus that tiering was necessary. Some pointed out that they had students entering the school at level 6, making a level 4 to 6 test irrelevant. One teacher who worked in a middle school said that she would not use the 8OT in future (as an end-of-year 'transfer test') as it was not discriminating enough to provide evidence of level 7 for selective high schools.

4.3.7 Conclusions

Additional tiers for the OTs to encompass a broader range of levels were suggested at all of the focus groups. Some asked for two tiers, others for three. It was a common belief that this would decrease stigma among those currently doing a separate progress test, and provide the opportunity for students of higher ability to perform to their capabilities.

It was strongly held by all of the participants who had used them that the 7PTs should be of an appropriate level for the target group. That is, if those below level 4 in the previous year were to be entered, it was seen as inappropriate to have level 5 questions. The wording and vocabulary used in the tests was also seen as inappropriate for an ability

group that was often at a similarly low level in English. Teachers remained unclear as to what provision was available for those students below level 3.

A central criticism of the 7PT was that it bore little similarity to the numeracy strategy year 7 scheme of work. The replication of the key stage 2 test was generally disliked. Although those teachers who had used it liked the Springboard 7 scheme, it was pointed out that its format was significantly different to that of the 7PT and also that it was not designed to stand alone as a scheme of work.

For both the 7PT and the 7 and 8OTs, the grading of results within levels was suggested, to offer a more precise indication of a student's achievement.

4.4 The discussion of professional issues for English

4.4.1 Introduction

A total of seventeen English teachers took part in the four focus group discussions. Two of the schools represented were middle schools and the remainder were secondary comprehensive schools. Of these, several who attended the London meeting were in LEAs in which there are grammar schools, so the schools are likely to have a higher than average number of lower ability pupils. The secondary teachers at the York meeting all came from schools which are participating in the literacy framework pilot.

The discussion followed the same format for each group, with some variation dictated by the particular interests and concerns of the group involved. Overall, however, the format remained consistent, allowing for comparison and analysis of views.

4.4.2 Students' reactions to the tests and teachers' comments on test content

4.4.2.1 Optional tests: overview

All teachers agreed that the students found at least some aspects of the optional tests very difficult. Particular examples were given: one teacher commented that the students were 'just shivering looking at [the year 7 optional reading booklet]'; another told of one child in tears because he failed to understand anything in it; yet another teacher arranged readers for students with SEN as they could not deal with the amount of material. All teachers agreed that the optional tests had a demoralising effect on all but the highest ability pupils, with students needing considerable support both during and after the tests.

This was in spite of their tendency to approach the situation fairly phlegmatically, with a 'tests are tests' philosophy.

4.4.2.2 Optional tests: reading

The predominant complaint was the length of the reading material; this discriminated against slow readers, raising the issue that the test was one of 'reading ability' rather than comprehension; in some cases students barely finished one page in the reading time.

This was an issue with all three tests, with teachers commenting that the demands of the reading exceeded that of key stage 3. The time taken to administer the tests was related, causing considerable timetabling problems in schools which did not run an examination week for these students. One teacher raised the issue of the additional difficulties faced by students with visual impairments; she requested that in the future materials be provided in Braille, or otherwise adapted for students with either visual or aural impairments.

Most teachers agreed that the reading material was quite stimulating, but there were also criticisms: in 'Traces of Evidence', the year 8 text, the extract from a Sherlock Holmes story was seen as culturally specific by at least two teachers who felt that it would discriminate against EAL students. In addition, the introduction to this text caused confusion in a few schools as students were unsure whether the introduction was an integral part of the text. The vocabulary in the article about the Romanovs was also seen as too demanding for this year group; examples given were 'mitochondrial DNA' and the Russian names. Two teachers estimated that the reading age for these passages was about sixteen and therefore very demanding for the target group.

The content of the year 8 text linked with an issue raised by the York teachers; they were aware, because of their exposure to the key stage 3 literacy strategy, that the framework for teaching English is cross-curricular. This means that teachers of all subjects will have responsibility for delivering literacy targets, replacing the idea that literacy teaching is the sole preserve of English teachers. The York teachers therefore viewed these tests 'not as a test of English, but a test of literacy' because they incorporated historical and scientific texts; they felt that this was unfair because the strategy is not yet in place across the curriculum.

The format of the questions also raised issues; several teachers liked the 'inventive use of ticks and boxes', but there was a general consensus that the style of questions did not bridge the gap between key stage 2 and key stage 3 tests, with the format of the optional

tests much closer to key stage 2, rather than the longer questions found on paper 1 of key stage 3. Several teachers commented that students were unsure about what was expected of them, as some questions appeared to address the same issue twice and others focused on such things as the function of punctuation rather than comprehension of the texts.

One teacher raised the issue that the material was boy focused because of its emphasis on non-fiction texts, but this was not raised by others.

4.4.2.3 Optional tests: writing and spelling

The writing tasks were better received, but in one Birmingham school students were confused by the need for planning and were surprised that no marks were awarded for this. Other teachers echoed this with complaints that there was too much to read in the prompts and too much to do in the time available. The planning frames for the writing tasks caused some disagreement, with some teachers welcoming the support and acknowledging that the intention was to make the material exciting and stimulating, while others felt that it led to confusion. For example, a Birmingham teacher said that many students spent too long planning and therefore failed to show their true ability. However, in the year 8 test, most teachers liked the format of the newspaper article and appreciated the support given, but several commented that students needed to be 'led in' to the Mystery Review. In the year 7 test there was considerable criticism of the use of the words 'proposal' and 'caption' as these terms do not appear in the framework and are not in general use in English classrooms. There was agreement that the terminology used should be consistent and match the words found in the literacy strategy. Several argued that the term 'persuade', with which students are familiar, would have given them a firmer grasp of what was required. Generally teachers felt that two tasks allowed students more opportunity to show their ability than a single one.

Relatively few teachers had used the spelling test, but those who had considered the year 8 spelling test to be very difficult.

4.4.2.4 Progress test

The 2001 progress test was the same as the 2001 key stage 2 test. This caused some difficulties in one of the middle schools because some students from year 7 were upset to discover that they had sat the same test as younger siblings or friends. The result of this was that the students involved were demoralised. In the other middle school this did not appear to cause problems. In general, there was disagreement about the difficulty of the test, with some teachers considering it fairly easy, but with more concerned about the

amount of reading involved. Most agreed that the reading material was potentially engaging, but there were comments that some of the questions drew on cross-curricular skills, such as labelling a diagram. While the cross-curricular nature of literacy is accepted in primary and middle schools, it has not yet been fully adopted in all secondary schools.

Some teachers also raised the issue of the appropriateness of the progress test for year 7 students; because it was the key stage 2 test and therefore designed for year 6 students, it was felt to be inconsistent with year 7's move to key stage 3 work. At least one teacher commented that the layout was 'babyish'.

4.4.2.5 Relationship of the tests to schools' schemes of work

There was a general feeling that the optional tests in their current format do not equate very well with the schemes of work in place in secondary schools, other than in their coverage of fiction and non-fiction texts. Most teachers acknowledged that this should improve as the framework is implemented, because the focus of the tests – on word, sentence and text level features – is broadly in line with the framework. Several teachers said that they had very little knowledge of the key stage 2 programme of study and that this disadvantaged their students in the progress test. Schools that were not in the pilot had received the literacy progress units too late to impact on the teaching of students entered for the test. One teacher commented that 'at primary level literacy is cross-curricular, but not quite yet in secondary'. This reflected a general view that results should improve in all tests, but particularly the optional ones, as the framework is incorporated into all schemes of work. A consistent complaint was that there is currently a mismatch between key stage 2 and key stage 3 testing, which makes it difficult to track a student's progress.

4.4.3 Preparation for the tests

4.4.3.1 Progress test preparation

There was general agreement that the Progress Units were useful for preparing students for the progress test, but as indicated above, not all schools had access to these sufficiently far in advance, with several teachers commenting that they had received them and had the training in June. There was, however, considerable support for these units, but some of the York teachers thought that revisions to them have already been carried out, apparently without consultation. They were concerned that English teachers should

be involved with any evaluation and subsequent amendment as it is teachers who will use them and who have the classroom experience of their use.

There was considerable variation in the ways in which students were prepared for the progress test. Some were part of groups which were withdrawn from regular classes for Progress Units which were delivered by other teachers, learning support assistants or, more rarely, their own English teacher. In some instances, teachers tried to deliver the units to the whole class because so many students were involved. In one area, York, the LEA had advised that the students should not be extracted from English lessons for additional support. Time-tabling issues then meant that these units had to be delivered by other teachers and it was found that having several teachers, often without specialist English knowledge, merely confused the students. One commented that having one teacher for both regular English classes and the Progress Units allowed her to consolidate points with students more effectively. There was little awareness of the availability of the Progress Units (still called 'Catch up' by many) via the Internet or CD.

4.4.3.2 Optional test preparation

For the optional tests, preparation was much less consistent; all teachers felt that their preparation was minimal and late, often because they only saw the tests a very short while before the students were to sit them. In these cases, most teachers were alarmed by the demands of the tests, and felt that any intervention would have little effect in the time available.

Where preparation was done, it tended to focus on such things as techniques for writing fuller answers in response to multi-mark questions; revision of grammatical terminology, and general writing skills. There was a general expectation that the introduction of the framework would mean that students should be better prepared for the tests in future years because the emphasis on word, sentence and text level features should improve the students' writing skills and their knowledge about language.

4.4.3.3 Summer schools

Most schools had used summer schools and these were generally perceived to be useful in motivating the less able students, but with little specific effect on literacy. One teacher saw a measurable increase in reading ages, but suggested that this was not surprising as the students read for three hours a day and were rewarded for their efforts. Others saw the

effect as more generally helpful in adjusting the students to a new school and boosting confidence.

4.4.4 Marking of optional tests

Without exception, all teachers found the marking of the optional tests a very daunting task. Most found the reading mark scheme more difficult than the writing mark scheme, but this view must be balanced with the fact that a large number of teachers did not use the writing mark scheme. At least one would have abandoned the tests had he seen the mark scheme in advance and one other, who abandoned the tests after review, said that the mark scheme was a major factor in the decision.

Only two schools managed to do consensus marking and training before the marking process and one other had informal discussions. This lack of training was usually due to time constraints, because other public examinations took priority. One head of department pointed out that a request to the examinations secretary for the release of sixteen teachers from invigilation would have simply been greeted by laughter and disbelief. However, teachers recognised that it would be worthwhile if the time could be found, and, in one school, teachers moved to moderation after marking because there was so much variation.

The Teacher's Guide was acknowledged to be generally helpful, but few teachers had had time to read it thoroughly, and were aware that other members of their departments would not have had time to read and absorb it either. As a result, in several cases, only the specific mark schemes were extracted and distributed. One teacher denied any knowledge of the mark schemes, saying she had never seen them.

All agreed that the process was enormously time-consuming and caused staff problems at a very pressured time of year. Although in most cases there would have been marking of end-of-year examinations anyway, these were seen as far less onerous than the complexities of the optional test mark schemes. Some of these problems were alleviated in a small number of pilot schools, where extra funding from an LEA had been used to pay teachers for marking, or, in one case, to employ external markers.

There were specific complaints about both mark schemes: the reading mark scheme caused disagreements over marks for longer questions. Teachers tended to award marks for answers which they thought indicated understanding, rather than adhering to the guidance of the mark schemes. This means that the marks between schools could vary considerably, with some schools using their own discretion and others using the published

mark scheme more rigorously. Most were more discretionary with marks than was recommended and several teachers wrote their own modified versions of the mark schemes.

Several thought the writing mark scheme was slightly easier to use, but all agreed that the necessity for taking the strands one at a time made the process more onerous. However, many teachers found it difficult to apply in practice and abandoned it in favour of national curriculum levels, which were more familiar.

There were also complaints that there was no correlation between the numbers and national curriculum levels, and it was this, as well as the difficulties in applying the writing mark scheme, that led many to mark according to national curriculum levels.

Teachers generally recognised that the diagnostic intention of the mark scheme was worthwhile, but there was some dissent about the intended purpose of the tests; one teacher commented on the fact that they were called attainment tests and were therefore in effect summative, rather than the formative assessment implied by the term 'diagnostic'. All agreed that the time constraints made it very difficult to produce learning plans for individual students as a result of test information. One head of department assessed ten papers diagnostically but decided that she could end up with a different learning plan for each student and that these would be impossible to implement. Another examined the sentence structure strand for three hundred papers and decided that the diagnoses added nothing to what was already known. With the spelling tests, the few who used them agreed that they knew where the problem areas lay without the need for a diagnostic test.

4.4.5 Results

4.4.5.1 Results of the progress test

There was considerable dissatisfaction with the marking of the progress test. In one case, the school appealed against the results because they felt that they were too high. The appeal was made because of the impact of unexpectedly high results on 'value added' in later years. This school's results, however, were the exception, as the vast majority of schools reported very disappointing results for this test.

One issue that was raised very strongly by a Birmingham teacher and echoed by others related to the guidance given about which students should be entered. In some cases, teachers were presented with a list of all students who had failed to achieve level 4 at key stage 2 and told to enter them. Teachers were upset that this contradicted their

understanding that only those who had achieved level 3 or were insecure level 4 should be entered. Even this guidance received some criticism as teachers felt that it was unlikely that weak level 3 students would have any chance of achieving level 4.

The teachers were keen that guidelines about this should be more widely understood. Generally, the two middle schools fared better than the secondary schools in terms of performance, but all pleaded for the introduction of sub-levels which would allow progress to be acknowledged even if the student had not achieved level 4. Most teachers did attempt to do this on an individual basis, but they felt that it needed more systematic validation, with some analysis of those aspects of reading and writing which had prevented the students from achieving level 4.

4.4.5.2 Results of the optional tests

The results of the optional tests varied, but highlighted the mismatch between the progress test, the optional tests and the key stage 3 assessments. In at least four schools many students who had achieved level 5 at key stage 2 achieved level 4 in the year 7 test. In addition, students who did both the progress and optional year 7 test frequently had better results in the optional test. Teachers were firmly of the opinion that these results did not reflect students' ability and understanding adequately; they based this on the evidence of core assignments, other work and teacher assessment.

The levels set for the test were 4 to 6, but some teachers felt that the level of difficulty exceeded level 6. In view of this, two teachers expressed some surprise that the levels did not extend to level 7 in order to reward those students who demonstrated high levels of achievement.

4.4.5.3 Use of the results

These concerns meant that very little use was made of the results. The majority of those for the progress test were reported to parents, as most schools thought this was a statutory obligation, as it was in pilot schools. Where the results of optional tests were reported (in very few instances) they were usually raw scores accompanied by a teacher assessment level. This was because departments were suspicious about the validity of the results, even though they were aware that this situation was less than satisfactory either from the point of view of the Senior Management Teams or in terms of professional standards. In at least two cases the results were deliberately 'lost'. The middle schools sent the results to senior schools but not to parents. In one school, where students had been keen to hear

their levels, teachers had to provide considerable moral support to the students in the face of unexpectedly poor results.

A few schools retained the papers to pass on to the teacher for the following year; this was often with a view to using the papers diagnostically, or to provide some sort of follow up work. None of the secondary schools used these tests as a single measure for any setting or streaming, and this was only one factor among others such as TA in one school.

Many were also concerned that the focus was on the testing of teachers rather than the assessment of students. This view was quite widespread with some teachers at most meetings expressing similar concerns about the relationship of these results to performance management. The concerns arose because of the emphasis on 'value added' as indicated above.

4.4.6 Quality of test

4.4.6.1 Previously used tests

Most teachers had used end of term or end-of-year tests in the past; these were set by individual departments and provided the basis for end-of-year summative assessment. These assessments would then be combined with the results of core assignments or end of module units where students had more time to write to specific objectives in order to arrive at an estimate of each student's national curriculum level. Cognitive Ability Tests and tests of reading ages were also widely used and generally felt to be more reliable than the results of the optional tests. There was widespread agreement that the new optional tests involved more work for both teachers and students, although the provision of materials was appreciated.

4.4.6.2 Use of the tests in 2002

All the schools reported that they will continue to use the progress test because they thought that it was either compulsory or will shortly become so. Several schools were adamant that they will not use the optional tests because they regard them as too difficult for the students in their schools and too much of a burden on the staff. In some cases the decision will rest with senior management and there was a feeling that these teams would be keen for all the tests to continue because they are a national measurement and can be used to compare performance between schools. Others who were undecided felt that they might use parts of the optional tests, breaking them into smaller components which might make them less daunting to students. Even those who had been keen to participate

because they felt it would be advantageous to know about the new cycle of tests from the beginning were unlikely to use the entire optional tests in the recommended way.

4.4.6.3 Suggested amendments

Teachers did think that a test for these year groups could be worthwhile, but they wanted to see several amendments. The first priority for all was a shorter paper; most said that a maximum of one and a half hours for both reading and writing should be sufficient; several suggested a scaled down paper 1 from key stage 3 with, for example, a reading task and a linked writing task. There was also general support for the provision of tiered papers which would allow the entire cohort to participate, rather than the specified levels of the progress and optional tests. These changes would benefit both students and teachers and would make the tests more acceptable.

One teacher requested modified papers for students with visual or aural impairments.

Teachers were also interested in the tests as diagnostic tools, but made the proviso that these have to be useful and applicable for busy classroom practitioners. Suggestions were made about a diagnostic sheet with in-built targets. This should be related to the objectives of the literacy framework, identifying the skill being tested in any particular question in order to show the student's level of mastery of that skill. The provision of a marking grid could link the objectives to each question, particularly in the reading papers.

4.4.7 Conclusions

Most teachers acknowledged that a national assessment measure for year 7 and 8 students was inevitable, but they were concerned about the current suite of tests. Their concerns centred around the content and length of the optional tests, particularly the reading papers. They felt that these were very difficult for the students and disadvantaged lower ability students; an additional concern was the increased work load for teachers if they are expected to mark these tests.

There were concerns about the suitability of the progress test for year 7 students, and some expression of dissatisfaction that this was a renamed key stage 2 test. Other concerns centred around the selection of students for inclusion in this test and the results of these students. There was a call for more sensitive guidance about selection and the provision of a tiered results structure which would enable progress to be rewarded, even if the student did not move up a complete level.

Teachers were keen to see clear links and transition from key stage 2 to 3; they commented on the current mismatch between the style of assessment at these two key stages and wished to see a more coherent approach that would allow them to track student progress with more certainty. The variation of results of those students who did both the progress test and the year 7 optional test highlighted this concern.

The introduction of the literacy strategy into secondary schools is still in progress; even in pilot schools the strategy is not yet reliably cross-curricular. The optional tests were seen as intrinsically linked to the strategy and were therefore, in the opinion of virtually all the teachers, introduced too soon.

Section 5 Synthesis of Findings from the Evaluation

The focus groups and postal surveys were conducted in parallel and written up separately. The following sections synthesise the main findings from both studies. They focus primarily upon the findings from non-pilot schools.

5.1 The Evaluation findings

5.1.1 Test use

As intended, virtually all focus group participants and questionnaire respondents had used at least one of the three tests during 2001 (and many had used all three). While this meant that the Evaluation could concentrate effectively on teachers' experiences of test use, it also meant that it was not possible to reach reliable conclusions concerning why schools had chosen not to use the tests during 2001.

Motivations for choosing to use the tests varied, but two major themes characterised the progress tests and optional tests, respectively. Schools tended to choose the progress tests primarily to participate in a new national initiative. It was clear from the focus groups that many wished to be 'on the bandwagon' of the progress test right from the outset. Although this was also true (to a lesser extent) of the year 7 and year 8 optional tests, the main reason for choosing these seemed to be to obtain reliable assessments of performance. Particularly from the year 8 optional tests, schools wanted an end-of-year test that could be administered to the entire cohort.

As was clear from the questionnaire, half of the maths respondents reported having used internal tests in addition to the progress/optional tests during 2001, as did one-third of English respondents. As a number of focus group participants explained, purchasing the optional tests took the responsibility for designing yet another internal test away from them. Unfortunately, perceived problems with the tests – especially a narrow target population – often defeated this objective, as teachers had to design additional tests/questions for students of high or low ability.

Evidence from the focus groups suggested that not all teachers that had used the optional or progress tests during 2001 had been positively disposed toward doing so. Especially where the requirement to use the tests had been imposed by senior management, without significant consultation at a departmental level, some teachers had expressed both concern and resentment.

Only around half of the questionnaire respondents (for maths and English in both years) reported having reviewed sample materials for the optional tests prior to ordering them. Many of the focus group respondents had not even realised that they existed.

5.1.2 Administrative procedures

Neither the focus groups nor the postal surveys uncovered a great deal of dissatisfaction with the various administrative details of:

- information gathering and liaison with QCA;
- ordering and invoicing of tests;
- registration for the progress tests;
- delivery of materials to schools;
- the collection of progress test scripts by Parcelforce.

Concerns that were raised within the focus groups centred on problems of communication with QCA and occasional examples of tests not having been delivered.

On the other hand, the impression gained from focus group participants was that few of them (and, by extension, few of the questionnaire respondents) were directly involved in many of the administrative stages and therefore did not necessarily have full information on their functioning.

In a similar way, although focus group participants claimed to have been generally happy with the Teacher's Guides for the various tests, it was soon clear that many had given them little more than a cursory review. It was reported that they had simply not had time to read these documents in depth.

5.1.3 Selection of students

The vast majority of questionnaire respondents claimed to have selected for the progress tests 'all (or most) students with 2000 key stage 2 results in English [maths] below level 4' – for both maths and English, four-fifths claimed only to have used this selection criterion. More surprisingly, a large number of focus group participants revealed that their school had followed this principle to the letter – having even entered students working at level 1 and 2, despite the Teacher's Guide explicitly advising against this.

Presumably this exemplifies the previous point that teachers had often not read the guides in sufficient depth.

As discussed earlier, many schools wished to use the year 7 and year 8 optional tests as end-of-year tests, which would explain why over three-quarters had entered their entire cohort for the year 8 optional tests (for both maths and English).

5.1.4 Test scheduling

Test scheduling posed least problems for the year 7 and year 8 optional maths tests. However, one-quarter of schools – for even the least affected test, the year 8 optional test in maths – experienced difficulties. Problems were most acute for the English optional tests, both of which caused concern for around two-thirds of schools.

Some of the schools represented within the focus groups had decided to institute an ‘examination week’ in which to accommodate all of the tests that they had planned to use. To a large extent, this was a response to the fact that the test papers, particularly for the English optional tests, required longer than the typical double period.

Responses to the questionnaire, for both subjects, revealed that just under half of the schools that had used both the year 7 progress test and the year 7 optional test had administered the latter to all (or most) students. This appeared to imply that students from these schools, who had been required to take the progress test(s), had also been required to take the optional test(s).

5.1.5 Test preparation

Most questionnaire respondents reported that students did not receive any preparation for the progress tests. Those schools that had prepared students for the progress tests had tended to use their own revision programmes. There was a general feeling amongst the maths focus group participants that the year 7 schemes of work were too demanding to devote much time to revision. English teachers commented that the optional tests had arrived too late for effective preparation.

5.1.6 Teachers’ perceptions of the tests

5.1.6.1 Test difficulty

In response to the questionnaire, almost no respondents thought that any of the three English tests were easy. Similarly, only a small minority of maths respondents thought

that either of the optional tests were easy, and none thought that the progress test had been easy. Although many considered test difficulty to be satisfactory, a substantial proportion, for all tests in both subjects, considered the tests to have been difficult. Over two-thirds of respondents thought that the English optional tests were difficult.

This view was developed by teachers from the focus groups. For example, maths respondents explained that the progress tests were not simply hard for pupils at levels 1 and 2 (who had been inappropriately entered) but also for pupils at levels 3 and 4.

Teachers from both the English and maths focus groups complained that the wording of the tests tended to have been unnecessarily complex. One English questionnaire respondent wrote to the Evaluation team with a readability analysis of papers from the optional tests which suggested that reading ages as high as 16 were required for certain of the passages. The focus group sessions for English emphasised particular concerns with the difficulty of the optional tests, as well as concerns with the progress test. The reading burden was highlighted, both in terms of complexity and length.

Few of the focus group participants for English reported having used the optional spelling tests – although the extent to which this might have been true nationally was unclear.

Maths teachers, in particular, expressed concern during the focus group interviews that level 5 questions had been included in the progress test for students who could not realistically have been expected to have reached level 5. Similarly, they were concerned that the maths progress test did not discriminate effectively between students and that a finer series of sub-levels would be required to enable a demonstration of progress. Also recommended were tiered papers for both the year 7 and year 8 optional maths tests (to provide an appropriate challenge for both low ability and high ability students). Some teachers within the English focus groups also supported the use of tiers (this view was expressed strongly by a few participants).

5.1.6.2 Test content

The questionnaire included a question which asked about the appropriateness of the content of the tests. As for the question concerning difficulty, which followed it, this revealed least satisfaction in relation to both of the English optional tests. (It is possible that some respondents may have answered the 'content' question in a way that incorporated their concerns over 'difficulty'.) The majority of respondents for the other tests felt that they were at least 'satisfactory' in terms of content.

When asked to estimate the degree of overlap between the content of the tests and their own schemes of work, most respondents said that there was at least 'some', while the most positive response came in relation to the maths year 7 and year 8 optional tests, where three-fifths of schools responded with 'a considerable amount'. No more than one-tenth of respondents ticked this option for any of the English tests. This seemed to be supported by views expressed within the focus groups, where it was felt that the optional tests for English did not equate well with what was being taught in secondary schools, other than in their coverage of fiction and non-fiction texts.

Finally, the focus groups revealed a strong feeling (for both subjects) that the progress tests should not have been identical to the key stage 2 tests.

5.1.6.3 Value for money

Two-fifths of English questionnaire respondents felt that the optional tests (for both years) were poor value for money, as did one-quarter of respondents for maths.

5.1.7 Students' perceptions of the tests

More maths teachers tended to think that their students were motivated to perform well in the tests than English teachers, and estimates were higher in relation to the optional tests than the progress tests. With the exception of the maths optional tests, the majority of teachers felt that students were generally no more than 'moderately motivated'. For both maths optional tests, two-thirds of respondents felt that students were generally 'motivated' or 'very motivated'.

Teachers were specifically asked whether their students had experienced any stigma in being required to take the year 7 progress test. There was a mixed response to this question, although just over two-thirds of questionnaire respondents, for maths and English, said that students had felt at least 'a little' stigma. There was some concern amongst the focus groups that this was either not an appropriate question to ask (as it was believed to be the strategies that were stigmatising the students, not the tests) or that it was not the most appropriate question (as it was believed to be those students who were not even entered for the progress tests who were the most stigmatised).

5.1.8 Marking

The marking of the optional tests raised a number of issues. While the vast majority of schools had not conducted any prior standardisation exercise for either maths or English,

reasons why tended to differ between subjects: maths respondents considered that it was not necessary, while English respondents claimed not to have had sufficient time.

In contrast to the general satisfaction expressed by maths respondents, a large percentage of English respondents reported that the usability of the mark schemes was less than acceptable (more than two-fifths of respondents for both years). The focus group participants for English echoed and extended these concerns: all agreed that the process was very time consuming at a very pressurised time of year, and noted that the complexities of the mark schemes – particularly for reading – compounded this. It appeared that the mark schemes for English were often not adhered to precisely. Although fewer concerns were raised in relation to writing, a considerable numbers of teachers had simply rejected the writing mark schemes and awarded national curriculum levels instead.

5.1.9 Views and uses of test results

Questionnaire respondents tended not to have found the results for any of the tests particularly useful: the proportion that ticked the ‘very useful’ box ranged from less than one-tenth (for all English tests and the maths progress test) to just over one-quarter (for the maths year 8 optional test). Maths respondents tended to have found the optional test results more useful than the progress test results, while the reverse was true for English respondents. Similarly, maths respondents reported slightly higher levels of agreement between test results and teacher assessments for the optional tests (than for the progress test), while English respondents reported slightly higher levels of agreement for the progress test (than for the optional tests). Poor levels of agreement were expressed most frequently in relation to both English optional tests (by just under one-fifth of respondents) and in relation to the maths progress test (by nearly one-quarter of respondents). Most schools did not formally report test results to parents.

Teachers reported a variety of uses for the test results. Overall, the most prevalent use was ‘to assess strengths and weaknesses of students’ (reported by between one-third and one-half of respondents, across tests). A large percentage of teachers also used the test results in setting or streaming students. This was particularly true for both maths optional tests, where the majority of schools used results to support this task.

Some concerns were expressed by maths and English focus group participants that the optional and progress test results would be used more for the assessment of teachers than of students, particularly as the tests become more established.

5.1.10 Future use of tests

Although it was not possible to make direct comparisons between actual test use in 2001 and anticipated test use in 2002 (as the respective questions were framed slightly differently), the predicted use of each test in 2002 appeared slightly lower. The differences did not appear to be great though. There was a general feeling amongst participants of the focus groups that the progress and optional tests were likely to become compulsory in future years, and this was a central reason why they anticipated using them again in 2002. (Indeed, some believed that the tests had been compulsory during 2001.) Some participants explained that they would not use the optional tests during 2002 because they were too difficult for students, not effectively targeted at an appropriate ability range, or too much of a burden for staff.

5.2 The Evaluation recommendations

The results of the Evaluation provided feedback from samples of schools that typically had used both progress and optional tests during 2001. This feedback gave insight into teachers' perceptions of how effectively the tests had functioned, and this insight supported the following recommendations for future development of the tests.

1. Certain confusions and misapprehensions were detected amongst teachers concerning the status and purpose of the progress and optional tests. Future publicity should ensure that these are communicated effectively to a wide audience. Better publicity of sample materials for the optional tests should also be considered.
2. There was evidence that the Teacher's Guides were not being used effectively and that core guidance was being overlooked. Steps should be taken to ensure that core guidance is communicated effectively. The structure, content and purpose of the Teacher's Guides should be re-examined.
3. Teachers expressed strong opinions on the inappropriateness of using key stage 2 tests as progress tests. Unique progress tests should be developed in future years.
4. The progress tests were frequently felt to have been too hard for the target population and concerns were expressed that the reporting scale was too broad to identify progress. Future tests should be better designed to target the intended populations and consideration should be given to developing a finer reporting scale, although it is recognised that there are technical difficulties associated with this.

5. The optional tests in English were considered to be too long and, for the reading paper in particular, to carry too great a reading burden. Future tests should be shorter and should pay close attention to the reading burden placed upon students.
6. Teachers believed that the optional tests in maths and English were not targeted at a sufficiently broad population. To enable schools to test an entire cohort using a single metric, it is recommended that the feasibility of producing tiered papers should be explored. (As the issue of tiering, per se, was not addressed within the surveys, further research may be needed to explore the acceptability of this prospect with a wider sample of schools, particularly for English).
7. As many maths and English students appeared to have been entered for both the year 7 optional test and the year 7 progress test, consideration should be given to amalgamating these two assessments into the same system or suite of tests.
8. The optional test marking schemes for English were not necessarily being followed by all teachers, and were considered a burden by those that had used them. Marking models should be reviewed with an intention to simplify the mark schemes and to make them quicker to apply. Consideration should be given to the promotion and support of within-school standardisation exercises for English.



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