

Research Briefing

By Nerys Roberts
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Assessment and testing in primary education (England)



Summary

- 1 What assessments do primary-aged children take part in?
- 2 Historical background: primary assessment

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Summary

SATs, or national curriculum assessments

SATs, or national curriculum assessments, are assessments of primary pupils' progress and attainment. They are currently completed at the end of key stage one (infant phase) and key stage two (end of primary/ junior phase). 2022/23 is the last year of statutory assessment at the end of key stage one. Key stage two SATs will continue.

At key stage two, the tests are more formal and school-level results are normally published in national performance tables allowing for comparison with other schools. These are often known as league tables.

SATs cover core academic subjects – English, maths, and science.

SATs during the coronavirus pandemic

There were no national curriculum assessments at either key stage one or key stage two in the 2019/20 or 2020/21 academic years, because of the pandemic.

The assessments – for both key stage one and key stage two pupils – took place as normal in the 2021/22 academic year, although school-level performance data hasn't been published for this year.

Phonics screening check

Children in year one, which is usually the second year of primary education, also take a phonics screen to check their ability to decode words. They complete the screen again in year two if they don't reach the expected standard in year one.

New times table check in year four

Since the 2021/22 academic year, all qualifying schools have administered an online multiplication tables check for children in year four (normally aged eight or nine). This tests recall of times tables up to 12.

A new statutory baseline assessment in reception class: September 2021

Children in state-funded primary and infant schools now take a new baseline assessment within the first six weeks of entering reception class. This focuses on maths, language, communication and literacy. The results will be used as the starting point to assess how much progress schools are making with their pupils. Results for individual children or schools are not published.

Target for 90% of key stage two pupils to meet expected standards

In its January 2022 white paper, [Levelling Up the United Kingdom](#), the Government announced an ambition for 90% of key stage two pupils to reach the expected standards in reading, writing and mathematics by 2030, and for the proportion meeting the expected standard in the “worst performing areas” to improve by a third. The 90% target was also restated in the March 2022 schools white paper, [Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child](#).

The Department for Education has released provisional national and local authority-level statistics for 2021/22. This cohort have had their learning significantly disrupted by the pandemic. 59% of pupils reached the expected standard in all of reading, writing and maths, down from 65% in the 2018/19 academic year.

The DfE measures the comparative attainment of disadvantaged children and their peers, using its own disadvantage gap index. In 2021/22, [provisional data show the disadvantage gap, as measured by the index, increased significantly](#), for the first time since 2010/11. It is now around the same as it was in 2011/12.

1 What assessments do primary-aged children take part in?

The table below shows the tests and assessments normally undertaken in state-funded primary phase schools in England.

Assessments in primary education England		
What?	When?	Reporting
Baseline assessment; looks at maths, literacy, communication and development (statutory from 2021/22)	Within first 6 weeks of starting reception	Results not published
Early Years Foundation Stage Profile	Reception class (age 4-5)	Not reported at school level
Phonics screening check (reading ability)	Year 1 (age 5-6)	Reported at local authority level
National curriculum assessments in maths, English reading and writing, and science	Year 2 (age 6-7)	Reported at local authority level
Multiplication tables check	Year 4 (age 8-9)	Reported at local authority level
National curriculum assessments ('SATs') in English reading and writing, grammar, punctuation and spelling, and science (for a sample of schools)	Year 6 (age 10-11)	Usually reported at school level (but not between 2010/20 and 2021/22)

All maintained schools are required to participate in national curriculum assessments; these are sometimes referred to as SATs – particularly in year six.

Primary-phase academies and free schools will normally have clauses in their funding agreements requiring participation in assessments. There are different arrangements for some pupils in non-mainstream settings, such as hospital schools.

1.1

Changes during the coronavirus pandemic

Suspension of statutory assessment in 2020 and 2021

From the end of March 2020, most schools in England were closed to all but children of critical workers and vulnerable children. As such, primary assessments due to happen during the attendance restrictions didn't take place. Schools re-opened to most pupils in September 2020, but in recognition of the pandemic-related disruptions, and second period of attendance restrictions in early 2021, primary statutory assessments were also suspended in the 2020/21 academic year, for the second year running.

This also means there is no published primary performance data at any geographical level for 2019/20 or 2020/21.

Resumption of primary assessment/ SATs in 2021/22

Primary assessment took place as normal in the 2021/22 academic year. For both key stage one and key stage two, the main assessments took place in May 2022.

Normally, school-level performance data from the national curriculum assessments, is published for key stage two. However, this data has not been published at school level for the 2021/22 academic year, owing to pandemic-related disruption to teaching and learning.

Performance on key measures is lower in 2021/22 than pre-pandemic

In September 2022, the DfE published [provisional results from key stage two SATs](#) in the 2021/22 academic year. Pupils undertaking these assessments have had their education disrupted by the pandemic.

In 2021/22, 59% of pupils met the expected standard in all of English reading, writing and maths, down from 65% in 2018/19.

In terms of separate subjects, the proportion meeting the expected standard in reading increased slightly in 2021/22, from 73% to 74%. In all other subjects, the proportion meeting the expected standard decreased. In 2021/22:

- 69% met the standard for writing, down from 78% in 2018/19
- 71% met the standard for maths, down from 79% in 2018/19

- 72% met the standard for grammar, punctuation and spelling, down from 78% in 2018/19.¹

The performance gap between disadvantaged children and peers increased significantly in 2021/22 tests

The Department for Education (DfE) compiles its own measure of the gap in attainment at the end of key stage two, between disadvantaged children and their peers. Its disadvantage gap index measure compares the performance of children who have been eligible for free school meals at some point in the last six years, to those who haven't.

Since 2010/11, the disadvantage gap (as measured by the index) has generally been decreasing. However, in 2021/22, there was a substantial increase in the gap, from 2.91 in 2018/19 to 3.21 in 2021/22 – meaning that it is now at a broadly similar level to what it was in the 2011/12 academic year. The DfE says that this indicates that “disruption to learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has had a greater impact on disadvantaged pupils.”²

Reaction to 2021/22 data

When initial national-level data was published in June 2022, the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) said the data underlined the need for more Government support for education recovery:

We need to be very careful with the conclusions we draw from SATs data this year. The disruption caused by Covid impacted children in many different ways, with some families and school communities hit far harder than others. This means that attempts to compare SATs results between schools is a pointless endeavour. It is impossible to discern the extent to which differences in results are reflective of changes to the quality of education provided by the school or simply indicative of the degree of disruption experienced.

“What this data does seem to show at a national level is that government needs to do more to support schools with childhood and educational recovery of our nation's young people. Further analysis is needed to ascertain precisely how much the attainment gap has widened between children from poorer families and their more affluent peers. With rising costs and dwindling resources in schools, the government's decision not to invest in plans drawn up by their own 'Catch-up Tsar' may yet prove a costly decision for the life-chances of those children hit hardest by the pandemic.”³

¹ Department for Education, [Key stage 2 attainment, Academic Year 2021/22](#), updated 25 October 2022

² As above

³ National Association of Head Teachers press notice, [NAHT comments on 2022 SATs results](#), 5 July 2022

Later, the union raised “deep concerns about the management of end of primary school SATs this year, after a growing number of complaints regarding missing – and even incorrectly allocated – marks for pupils.”⁴

In response to a PQ on 15 July 2022, Minister Will Quince said:

The department welcomes the increase in reading attainment from 73% in 2019 to 74% in 2022, despite the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, attainment in maths and writing has fallen, with the percentage of children meeting the expected standard in maths being 71% (down eight percentage points from 2019), and a decrease of nine percentage points in writing, down from 78% in 2019 to 69% in 2022.

It is vital that the department knows the impact on this cohort of pupils nationally and can give support to schools that need it the most. This is why we went ahead with the full programme of statutory assessments in 2022.

Unlike GCSE and A level exams, key stage 2 assessments were not adapted for pupils in 2022, and the expected standards in the assessments remained the same as in 2019. This consistency means assessments can be used to help understand more clearly the impact of the pandemic on pupils and schools, and how this varies between groups of pupils, schools and local authority areas. National level attainment data at key stage 2 will give us an important baseline as we work towards our target of 90% of children leaving primary school at the expected standard in reading, writing and maths by 2030.

The National Education Union (NEU) later drew attention to the attainment gap between disadvantaged children, and their peers:

Whilst we do not believe that Key Stage 2 SATs are a fair and accurate method of judging children’s learning, this data shows an insight into the effects of long-term underfunding, as well as the effects of the Covid pandemic.

‘The attainment of disadvantaged children has again, been disproportionately affected. This is not only due to school closures, but because poverty reduces access to food and learning resources. It also affects the physical and mental health of children and their social development. These are all factors which impact learning.’⁵

Levelling up white paper: target for 90% of key stage two pupils to meet expected standards

In its January 2022 white paper, [Levelling Up the United Kingdom](#), the Government announced an ambition for 90% of pupils to reach the expected standard in all of reading, writing and mathematics by the end of key stage two by 2030 and for the proportion meeting the expected standard in the “worst performing areas” to improve by a third.⁶ These ambitions were

⁴ National Association of Head Teachers press notice, [Reports of incorrect and missing marks shaking confidence in SATs, say school leaders, as government refuses to reveal the scale of the issues](#), 12 July 2022

⁵ National Education Union news story, [KS2 SATs attainment data](#), 6 September 2022

⁶ HM Government, [Levelling up the United Kingdom](#), CP 604, 2 February 2022, p xviii

restated in the Government's March 2022 schools white paper, [Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child](#).

1.2

Commentary on decision to re-start SATs in 2022

[The Government argued that](#) reintroducing SATs in 2022 was necessary to help gauge the impacts of the pandemic on primary pupils' attainment and progress, and the success of education recovery policies and funding.⁷

However, many in the education sector argued against their re-introduction. There have been questions about the usefulness of the resulting data, and concerns SATs could distract teachers and pupils from education recovery. In March 2022, the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) [cited survey data](#) suggesting only three per cent of around 2,000 respondents thought key stage two SATs should go ahead in 2022. The union continued:

[T]he results of SATs this year really can't be compared, either with previous years or with other schools. There is a real danger that the data from these tests could paint a very misleading picture of an individual school's performance and lead to incorrect conclusions being drawn.

Teachers don't need SATs results to tell them about a pupil's progress. They are already constantly assessing that, and are more aware than ever of what each child needs to help them recover any lost learning from the pandemic. SATs are not something teachers find valuable for assessment and are simply a distraction during a time when there is still significant disruption in schools.

The week schools will need to spend putting children through these tests could be far better spent focusing on teaching and learning. That is particularly true this year given the time pupils have already missed from school due to Covid.

SATs are really used to assess schools more than pupils – but the data from this year's tests will be largely useless when it comes to judging a school's performance. If the government is determined that SATs must go ahead, the data should only be used at a national or local level, and not to draw conclusions about the performance of individual schools.

Although the government has told us that SATs data will be treated with caution by inspectors, local authorities and Regional Schools Commissioners, our members tell us that they simply do not trust that this will really be the case. The government needs to do a lot more to convince schools that SATs should go ahead as planned and to rebuild the trust of the profession.⁸

⁷ See eg [PQ 98946 \[National curriculum tests: coronavirus\], 14 January 2022](#)

⁸ National Association of Head Teachers press release, [SATs results this year will be 'useless' and tests should be cancelled, say school leaders](#), 18 March 2022

The National Education Union's (NEU) President, Daniel Kebede, reportedly described the decision to resume SATs in 2022 as "utterly brutal".⁹ The union also criticised the plans to share SATs (and secondary exam performance) data with Ofsted, for use in the inspectorate's consideration of a providers' quality of education¹⁰ - albeit with cautions about comparability of 2022 data with previous years, and the need to use it sensitively.

1.3 King Charles' coronation – changes to KS2 SATs timetable for summer 2023

Originally, Monday 8 May 2023 was due to be the first day of the KS2 test timetable. This date is now a bank holiday, for the coronation of King Charles III.

The [DfE has announced](#) that all KS2 test dates will be pushed back by one day, with the test window starting on Tuesday 9 May 2023. Key stage one national curriculum tests and assessments, the phonics screen, and the multiplication tables test, will take place as planned.¹¹

1.4 Legislative basis for SATs and other assessments

The following primary and secondary legislation provides the statutory framework for national curriculum assessments in maintained schools:

- The Education (National Curriculum) (Key Stage 1 Assessment Arrangements) (England) Order 2004, as amended.
- The Education (National Curriculum) (Key Stage 2 Assessment Arrangements) (England) Order 2003, as amended.

The Orders are made under section 87 of the Education Act 2002, as amended.

⁹ ["‘Utterly brutal’ not to cancel next month's Sats"](#), TES [online], 11 April 2022

¹⁰ National Education Union press notice, [Ofsted use of 2022 SATs and GCSE results](#), 25 March 2022

¹¹ Department for Education news story, [Changes to key stage 2 assessment dates in 2023](#), 25 November 2022

What rules do schools have to follow in administering SATs and other assessments?

The Standards and Testing Agency (STA) publishes statutory guidance on the arrangements for reception, key stage one and key stage two assessment in 2022:

- STA, [Early years foundation stage profile: 2023 handbook](#)
- STA, [2023 key stage one: assessment and reporting arrangements \(ARA\)](#)
- STA, [2022 key stage two: assessment and reporting arrangements \(ARA\)](#)

Duty to ensure assessments and tests are administered

Maintained school head teachers are under a duty to ensure that eligible pupils undertake national curriculum and other statutory assessments, in line with any published assessment and reporting arrangements. For academies, the duty is enforced through the academy trust's funding agreement.

There's no parallel statutory duty on parents to ensure that their children participate in tests and assessments, but they are required by law to ensure their children attend school regularly.

Pupils absent during SATs

Key stage one assessments can be taken at any point during May. They aren't strictly timed. If a child is temporarily absent because of illness or for another reason, they would usually be able to complete the assessments when they return to school.

At key stage two, there is a national timetable for the tests to ensure they're taken on the same days in all schools. For 2023, if a pupil is absent, for example because of illness, on the day of a test, but returns to school within five school days, the school may be able to apply to the STA to let the child sit the test(s) late. This is known as a timetable variation.

Can a parent withdraw their child from SATs?

There is no parental right to withdraw children from sitting SATs, but head teachers have the power to determine whether a particular child should undertake the assessments.

Parents are responsible for ensuring their child attends school regularly, if they are on a school roll. Where a child of [compulsory school age](#) is absent from school on an unauthorised basis, during the SATs period, then the usual [parental responsibility measures](#) are available to schools and local authorities. These include issuing fixed penalty notices (fines) in lieu of prosecution. Fixed penalty notices must be issued in line with the relevant local authority's code of conduct.

1.5

New assessments for primary phase schools

Times tables check in year four

From the 2021/22 academic year, all qualifying schools administer an online multiplication tables check to children in year four (normally aged eight or nine). This tests recall of times tables up to 12.

Originally, the check was planned for earlier introduction, but was delayed because of the coronavirus pandemic.

A new statutory baseline assessment from September 2021

From the 2021/22 academic year, children in qualifying schools have taken part in a new statutory baseline assessment within the first six weeks of starting school. This focuses on maths, language, communication, and literacy. It's intended that the results will be used as the starting point to see how much progress schools are making with their pupils, over time. Results for individual children or schools are not published.

The DfE trialled three previous baseline assessments in 2015, but concluded the available assessments were not sufficiently comparable to be used as a fair starting point for measuring pupils' progress for school accountability purposes. The current baseline assessment has been developed by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

There is more information about the baseline assessment on the STA website:

- STA, [Reception baseline assessment](#)

The introduction of a reception baseline assessment has been controversial, with many early years educators expressing the view that it is inappropriate for children to be assessed at the very beginning of their school careers. The [More than a score](#) coalition argues that baseline assessment is “pointless and damaging” and that the results will “inevitably be unreliable”. They argue that baseline assessment has little predictive value in terms of children's later outcomes, and also that the assessments may interfere with children settling into school.¹²

The Government says the baseline assessment gives schools credit for the progress they make with pupils between reception and year two. Historically, key stage one SATs results have been used as the starting point for calculating progress measures.

¹² More than a score petition, '[Four year olds don't need exams](#)', undated.

Special educational needs, SATs, and other statutory assessments

Adjustments to enable pupils to participate in national curriculum and other statutory assessments are known as access arrangements. These might include allowing additional time in tests, readers, scribes, use of technical aids such as word processors, or papers in different formats. For some types of changes, the school must apply to, or notify, the STA in advance.

In 2017, the Department for Education held a consultation on assessment arrangements for children with special educational needs:

- [Link to DfE/ STA consultation on implementing the Rochford Review](#)

This followed a review chaired by Diane Rochford, to advise on assessing the progress and attainment of children working below the level of the national curriculum tests.

The consultation asked for views on implementing the Rochford Review's recommendations, which included:

- Removing statutory assessment using the then-current P-scales for pupils engaged in subject-specific learning.
- Interim pre-key stage standards should be made permanent and used to assess all pupils working below the level of the national curriculum but who are engaged in subject-specific learning.
- Assessment of those not engaged in subject-specific learning should focus on seven aspects of cognition and learning:
 - Responsiveness;
 - Curiosity;
 - Discovery;
 - Anticipation;
 - Persistence;
 - Initiation;
 - Investigation.

The DfE published its [response to the consultation](#) on 14 September 2017. This confirmed the plans, including that the requirement to assess pupils engaged in subject-specific learning using P scales would be removed, and the interim

pre-key stage standards would be made permanent.¹³ Further guidance can be found in:

- STA, [Pre-key stage one standards](#)
- STA, [Pre-key stage two standards](#)

In November 2018, the Department for Education [announced](#) that pupils with complex special educational needs would in future be assessed using an ‘aspects of engagement’ approach. The new assessment, the announcement said, would be based on the seven aspects outlined above, and would be refined by an expert group, led by Diane Rochford, based on findings of a [pilot](#) completed by the DfE in 2018.¹⁴

The STA has published guidance supporting the assessment of pupils working below the level of the national curriculum tests:

- STA, [The engagement model](#)

1.6 How are SATs results used for school accountability purposes?

National curriculum assessment results are one of the ways in which the DfE holds schools accountable for their performance.

As noted above, the coronavirus pandemic led to temporary suspension of national curriculum assessments and the publication of the resulting school performance data. These changes affected academic years 2019/20 and 2020/21.

For 2022, and as noted above, the DfE has published key stage two data at local authority, regional and national levels. School-level data has not been published, although it is being shared with the schools’ inspectorate, Ofsted, academy trusts, local authorities, and with primary schools themselves.

1.7 Finding school performance data

The DfE publishes a range of statistics on primary attainment and progress. Summary statistics for individual schools can be found on the DfE’s [Compare School Performance](#) website.

¹³ DfE, [Primary school pupil assessment: Rochford Review recommendations, 14 September 2017](#).

¹⁴ DfE, [Pioneering new approach to assessing pupils with complex disabilities to be introduced in schools](#), 22 November 2018

Data on performance in the early years and in key stage one is normally published at local authority, regional and national level – with the latest available data being for 2018/19:

- DfE collection, [Statistics: early years foundation stage profile](#)
- DfE collection, [Statistics, key stage one](#)

Most of the key stage two national curriculum assessments data is normally reported at school level; parliamentary constituency-level data is also normally published as part of the underlying data – again, the latest available data is for 2018/19:

- DfE collection, [Statistics: key stage two](#)

2

Historical background: primary assessment

2.1

SATs reform – timeline of key developments since 2010

A short summary of the key milestones in the reform of national curriculum assessments, or SATs, since 2010 is provided below.

- **June 2011.** Lord Bew's Government-commissioned review of key stage two assessment arrangements and the role of SATs is published.¹⁵ Among other things, this backed the retention of external school level accountability (e.g., assessment). It also recommended that, in the medium term, the use of national curriculum 'levels' for reporting children's attainment should be reviewed. The then-Government's response was published on 18 July 2011, accepting all of Lord Bew's recommendations.¹⁶
- **June 2012:** phonics screening check becomes mandatory for pupils at the end of year one (age five to six). This tests whether children are secure in 'decoding' words (as opposed to recognising them on sight).
- **July 2013:** the Coalition Government published final proposals for primary assessment and accountability arrangements under the new curriculum, for consultation.¹⁷ This confirmed the intention to scrap national curriculum levels as a way of reporting attainment. This move, the then-Government said, would allow schools greater freedom to decide for themselves how to track the progress pupils make.¹⁸
- **Summer 2013:** a new focus in key stage two SATs on punctuation, grammar, spelling and vocabulary.
- **February 2015:** Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, announces that a Commission on assessment without levels would be set up to support primary schools.¹⁹

¹⁵ Lord Bew, [Independent review of key stage two testing, assessment and accountability: final report](#), 23 June 2011

¹⁶ DfE, [Government response to Lord Bew key stage two review published](#), 18 July 2011

¹⁷ DfE, [Primary assessment and accountability under the new national curriculum](#), 17 July 2013

¹⁸ As above, p5

¹⁹ DfE press release, [Assessment without levels commission announced](#), 25 Feb 2015

- **November 2015:** Education Secretary Nicky Morgan announces plans to require students to resit their SATs if they don't meet the required level at the end of key stage two.
- **March 2016:** Government publishes white paper, Educational excellence everywhere; among other things, this promises reform of primary assessment.
- **April 2016:** Government announces the three 'baseline tests' for reception children are not sufficiently comparable and will not be used as planned for school accountability purposes.
- **Summer term 2016:** first key stage one and key stage two national curriculum assessments based on revised national curriculum, reported as scaled scores rather than levels.
- **September 2016:** Provisional results from 2016 key stage one and key stage two assessment announced. At key stage two, 53% of children achieved the expected standard in all of reading, writing and maths.
- **October 2016:** Education Secretary makes [Statement to Parliament](#) on the future of primary assessment. This confirms no new national tests or assessments would be introduced before the 2018-19 academic year, and that the plans to make some year 7 (secondary) pupils resit their SATs were being scrapped.
- **March 2017:** two consultations are launched by the DfE: [one on the future of primary assessment](#) and the other on [implementing the recommendations of the Rochford Review](#) for assessing attainment and progress of children with SEND.
- **September 2017:** Government publishes response to the March 2017 consultations.
- **2019/20 and 2020/21 academic year:** statutory national curriculum assessments suspended owing to the coronavirus pandemic.
- **2021/22 academic year:** assessments return in their usual format.
- **2022/23 academic year:** the last planned year of statutory assessment at the end of key stage one – the infant phase. Participation in future will be optional for schools.

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