



EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

AGENDA

1st Meeting, 2019 (Session 5)

Wednesday 9 January 2019

The Committee will meet at 10.00 am in the Robert Burns Room (CR1).

1. **Declaration of interests:** Gil Paterson will be invited to declare any relevant interests.
2. **Decision on taking business in private:** The Committee will decide whether to take agenda item 4 in private. The Committee will also decide whether to take future considerations of evidence on its Scottish National Standardised Assessments inquiry in private.
3. **Scottish National Standardised Assessments inquiry:** The Committee will take evidence from—

Mhairi Shaw, Director of Education, East Renfrewshire Council on behalf of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland;

Juliette Mendelovits, Director of Assessment and Reporting for the Australian Council of Education Research (ACER);

Professor Sue Ellis, Professor of Education, University of Strathclyde;

Professor Christine Merrell, Professor in the School of Education and Deputy Head of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Health, Durham University.

4. **Review of evidence:** The Committee will consider the evidence it heard earlier.
5. **Music tuition in schools (in private):** The Committee will consider a draft report.

ES/S5/19/1/A

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The papers for this meeting are as follows—

Agenda item 3

SPICe briefing paper

ES/S5/19/1/1

Submissions paper

ES/S5/19/1/2

Agenda item 5

PRIVATE PAPER

ES/S5/19/1/3 (P)

Education and Skills Committee

Scottish National Standardised Assessments

Wednesday 9 January 2019

INTRODUCTION

The Committee has agreed to seek views on Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSAs). These are assessments in literacy and numeracy completed by school children in P1, P4, P7 and S3 which were introduced in 2017/18. The inquiry is focused on:

- the evidence base for moving away from the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) and introducing standardised assessments at P1, P4, P7, S3;
- international comparisons to understand similar and differing approaches used elsewhere; and
- what information the Government's assessments can provide that contribute to improving the educational outcomes of children and young people.

The Committee's first evidence session is on Wednesday 9 January 2019 and the Committee will take evidence from—

- Professor Sue Ellis, University of Strathclyde;
- Ms Juliette Mendelovits, Director of Assessment and Reporting, Australian Council of Education Research (ACER);
- Professor Christine Merrell, Durham University; and
- Mhairi Shaw, Association of Directors of Education Scotland and Director of Education in East Renfrewshire Council.

Prof Sue Ellis is a professor of Education at Strathclyde University. Her interests are how to make literacy research, policy development and implementation more effective. She has written several articles broadly in support of the SNSAs.

Juliette Mendelovits is currently the Director of Assessment and Reporting for the Australian Council of Education Research (ACER) in Melbourne. She was formerly Research Director and General Manager for ACER in the UK and led the ACER team who developed and implemented the SNSAs in partnership with the Scottish Government and local implementing partners SCHOLAR and Twig.

The Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring (CEM) at Durham University produces standardised assessments, including those used by several Scottish local authorities. At different times, Professor Christine Merrell has led on monitoring systems and research within CEM and has hands-on experience of designing and developing assessments.

Mhairi Shaw is representing the Association of Directors of Education Scotland. She is the Director of Education in East Renfrewshire Council. East Renfrewshire has experience of using its own standardised assessments and now also uses the SNSA. Ms Shaw last

appeared before the Committee in January 2018 as the lead for the West Partnership Regional Improvement Collaborative.

This paper is in two parts. The first part includes possible themes to discuss with witnesses. The annexe contains background on: the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy; the Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels; and the introduction of SNSAs. Further papers providing examples of information generated from standardised assessments and also providing international comparisons will be circulated during the course of the inquiry.

SUGGESTED THEMES FOR DISCUSSION

THEME 1: SNSA as a formative and diagnostic assessment

The OECD 2011 review identified a number of drivers for the introduction of standardised assessments. These include: a push for increased accountability for autonomous elements of the education system; the implementation of national standards; a response to increased international competition; demand for particular subject areas; and test industry pressure.

The OECD 2011 review also identified three types of standardised assessments:

- Summative;
- Formative; or
- For monitoring and evaluation.

Summative assessments are an assessment of learning at the end of a unit, course or year. They can result in a grade or mark and are more often associated with high-stakes assessments (e.g. National qualifications).

Formative assessments, which are sometimes called assessments for learning, are where assessments are used to inform teaching practice.

Northern Ireland's [Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment](#) (CCEA) stated that whether an assessment is formative or summative is not intrinsic to the test itself but relies on how the assessment is used. It says—

“What makes an assessment formative is what the teacher does with the information it generates. Unless the result of the assessment is used to change something in the teaching or learning, there is nothing formative taking place ... Formative and summative are not labels for different types or forms of assessment but describe how assessments are used.”

Assessment for monitoring or evaluation is used to measure the performance of an education system or parts of an education system. The SSLN was such an assessment for Scottish school education as a whole.

The CCEA also list a further type of assessment, diagnostic assessment. This is linked to formative assessment, and “often takes place at the beginning of a learning programme and can be used to identify pupils’ strengths and areas for improvement”. In this sense, a diagnostic assessment is linked to the concept of formative assessment. The Scottish

Government's submission stated that the SNSA is a diagnostic assessment. The University of Glasgow also states that SNSA are diagnostic, "in that they are linked to proposals for action based on each young person's performance."

Professor Christine Merrell stated:

"Baseline assessment is an essential component of monitoring progress across the primary phase, and the start of Primary 1 is a good starting point for monitoring. Providing teachers with high-quality information about their pupils' development linked to research-based effective strategies for teaching and learning will enable them to make the most of this crucial developmental period of children's lives. The early identification of potential special educational needs is important and whilst a single baseline assessment will not constitute a diagnosis of a specific problem, it can flag issues that can be followed up in more detail over time."

GL assessments, which provides a range of assessments to schools, stated:

"The lack of formative and diagnostic elements in the Government's tests highlight their weaknesses and without these elements, their usefulness when it comes to supporting pupils' next stage of learning is limited. Our assessments are used at teacher level to assist them identify pupils' areas of need and then to support implementation of support programmes as appropriate."

The recent Year 1 review of the SNSA stated that "there is growing evidence that the information generated by the assessments and reports is being used to plan effective next steps in learning." The review reported a positive response from senior local government officials about the SNSAs.

The OECD 2011 review highlighted that combining different purposes in one assessment carries risks and that this is a debated topic. Many countries have more than one stated purpose for national standardised assessments; however, the researchers and academic networks quoted by the OECD warn that doing so is problematic. The OECD quoted the Eurydice Network's 2009 report on education in Europe which said, "assessment experts have warned that the use of a single test for several purposes might be inappropriate where the information ideally required in each case is not the same".

The OECD lists the purposes identified by several of its member countries who perform standardised assessments. The Danish Ministry of Education identifies two purposes for its standardised assessments: monitoring education performance and providing diagnostic evidence to support learning, which are similar to the purposes set out by the Scottish Government.

The GL assessments submission stated that:

"In his paper 'Clarifying the purposes of educational assessment'¹, Dr Paul Newton outlined how assessment can be used for 22 different, distinct purposes – ranging from formative and diagnostic assessments, to assessments that enabled various types of monitoring and accounting. His conclusion was that you should only use one kind of assessment for one thing; the moment you try to do more than that, it will not work."

¹ Paul Newton: Clarifying the purposes of educational assessment 2007

In announcing the SNSAs during her speech on the programme for government in September 2015, the First Minister stated:

“Teachers need to know which pupils are doing well and which ones need more support; governments—local and national— need to have reliable data to inform policy; and all of us need to know whether the twin aims of raising attainment overall and closing the attainment gap are being met.” ([Official Report 1 September 2015](#) Col 19)

The First Minister’s also stated that the data would not be used to create “crude league tables” and that the purposes of the SNSAs would be to monitor the performance of the education system, to provide information to parents, to support learning in the classroom and to inform policy. The Scottish Government’s position appears to have been refined since then; the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills told Parliament on 5 September 2018—

“Scottish national standardised assessments are formative assessments. That is what they are—they are designed to inform teacher judgment. If they were the other type of assessment, they would be summative. If they were summative, they would be high-stakes testing. That is not what they are.

“The fundamental point is that the assessments contribute to teacher judgment, and teachers across Scotland have been supported to deploy the assessments effectively in the classroom.” ([OR 5 September 2018](#))

ACER UK’s submission set out the purposes of the SNSA:

“The Scottish Government’s decision to introduce SNSA combined the valuable features of supporting teacher judgements, providing consistent national assessment data, and giving individual-level reports of children and young people’s progress in literacy and numeracy.”

The Royal Society of Edinburgh’s submission stated that:

“...when they were proposed there seemed to be a lack of clarity over the primary purpose of the SNSAs, particularly whether they were meant to evaluate the performance of the school education system or if they were to provide a diagnostic assessment at the level of the individual child, or perhaps even a combination of these two potential aims.²”

ACEL data has been published with a caveat against making comparisons across local authorities and schools “without knowledge of the underlying approach to assessment and the context of the authority or school”. The [first national report on the SNSAs](#) was published in December 2018 and stated—

“Given the possibility of administering SNSA throughout the school year, results from all learners should be interpreted with some caution when making any comparative judgements about individuals or groups.” (p9)

The OECD’s 2011 report stated that the “frequency and timing of standardised tests are closely linked to the purpose of the national test”. The timing of SNSAs are in years P1, P4, P7 and S3 – each of those years being the last years of the early, first, second and

² See, for example, the report of a roundtable discussion on the National Improvement Framework which the RSE hosted in November 2015: https://www.rse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/AP15_25.pdf

third/fourth stages of CfE respectively. There is discretion within the year when a pupil or group of pupils undertake an SNSA. The Scottish Government's review of the first year of SNSAs found that around half of the assessments were undertaken in May 2018.

The Committee may wish to explore the following issues with the panel:

- **Whether the purposes of the SNSA are clear and well-understood across the education system and how these purposes are linked to improving teaching and learning.**
- **How the design of the SNSAs have matched the purposes of the SNSA of formative/diagnostic assessment in the classroom and supporting teacher judgements on the progress of pupils.**
- **Whether there are risks in the SNSA having two purposes. How these risks are mitigated.**
- **The accuracy of the national level data that can be achieved given the assessments can be taken at different points in the academic year.**
- **When is the best time to undertake this type of formative or diagnostic assessment and whether this is also the best time to support teachers' judgements to inform their returns for the ACEL.**

THEME 2: Functions of the SNSA as a low stakes assessment

Assessments can be used to measure performance of teachers, schools and local authorities (or school districts). These results can inform "league tables", for example tables are produced in the United States and in England. Proponents of this approach argue that this creates an incentive to improve performance and for schools and teachers to internalise the norms expected of them by stakeholders. Objections to this approach are that education outcomes are co-produced between families, students the school and others and therefore schools would be held accountable for outcomes over which they have little control.

Furthermore, if a school's performance is measured solely or mainly on a particular assessment, the assessment becomes "high-stakes" for the school and therefore will likely influence behaviours of the school. For example, teaching to the test or narrowing the curriculum; some argue that this behaviour would invalidate the assessment as it would no longer provide a true picture of the quality of education. The Scottish Government has stated that it will not publish data from SNSAs at a school level. Its submission stated:

"The SNSA is a diagnostic, supportive assessment that is designed to improve children's learning, giving teachers helpful feedback on children's next steps in aspects of reading, writing and numeracy. This is fundamentally different to other models of standardised assessment which are about 'proving' learning, with results being published."

The EIS has told the Committee in its submission that it had been influential in persuading the Scottish Government that not to introduce "tests to be undertaken during what resembled an exam-type diet, and results of which would be published on a school by school basis". The EIS argue that this would have been "potentially damaging".

The Scottish Government submission sets out the improvement purposes of SNSAs:

“The system also provides class, school and local authority level reports all of which are designed to be used for improvement purposes. The class and school level reports are comprehensive and enable detailed analysis. This allow teachers and school managers to identify patterns in learning across groups of children and identify areas of strength or development needs.”

The RSE and Upstart Scotland both highlighted the potential for SNSAs to be perceived as an accountability measure. The RSE stated:

“the role of the SNSAs in helping to inform teacher professional judgement and, in turn, the connection to the annual publication of the extent to which learners are achieving the expected CfE levels in literacy and numeracy for their relevant stage, may mean that the SNSAs are perceived by teachers and schools as an accountability measure rather than as a learning and development tool.”

Upstart Scotland stated:

“The Scottish Government claims that the SNSA will not result in these behaviours because it is not a ‘high-stakes’ assessment (e.g. children’s responses to the tablet-based task are not marked right/wrong and their scores will not be published). Yet the First Minister’s call to be judged on her record in education means that SNSA is recognised by the public and media as a key factor of a **high-stakes policy**. As such, it puts considerable pressure on local authorities, schools and teachers to maximise children’s performance.

International evidence (e.g. [Goldstein](#), 2004), shows that the linking of assessments to performance targets also raises the stakes significantly for schools and teachers. In Scotland, aspirational ‘benchmarks’ for children’s educational performance were published to accompany the SNSAs. These are, not surprisingly, interpreted as targets, along with advice to teachers that ‘there is no need to provide curriculum level judgements in all curriculum areas – stick to literacy and numeracy’, the benchmarks will exacerbate the ‘salience effect’ and ‘teaching to the test’.”

The University of Glasgow submission highlighted that:

“Even if data are not collected and published nationally, if there is a perception that data might be used to gauge performance in classrooms, schools, local authorities or nations, distortions are likely...”

Too many current national performance frameworks have not had a positive influence (Mons, 2009); there is powerful, consistent evidence that high stakes test-based monitoring systems lead to undesirable effects. Washback effects commonly include teaching to narrowly defined tests, narrowing the curriculum, teaching test behaviours, demotivating more vulnerable pupils and reducing levels of teachers’ confidence in their professional judgement and in their wider professionalism. The decision of the Scottish Government not to collect data from standardised assessment separately from evidence from teachers’ professional judgement was a welcome attempt to reduce the stakes of standardised assessment in Scotland.”

The Committee may wish to explore the following issues with the panel:

- **Whether there is a risk of the data being used for purposes other than for formative assessment and to support teacher judgement. What these purposes might be and how can or should this be regulated or supported.**
- **What action can be taken to mitigate SNSA being perceived as ‘high stakes’**

THEME 3: Alignment with the Curriculum for Excellence

For an assessment of learning to be valid – a meaningful measurement of what is intended to be measured – it needs to reflect the curriculum that is being (or should be) taught in the classroom.

Curriculum for Excellence intends to develop four capacities: i) Successful Learners, ii) Confident Individuals, iii) Responsible Citizens and, iv) Effective Contributors. Up to the end of S3, Broad General Education (BGE) aims to provide a holistic education before learners embark on the senior phase and gain qualifications.

SNSAs and ACEL assess pupils during BGE. BGE was the focus of the 2015 OECD review of Scottish Education. That review said—

“CfE privileges learning – what young people learn and what they learn how to do – rather than the negotiation by students through particular programmes and subjects. It rests on a very contemporary view of knowledge and skills and on widely-accepted tenets of what makes for powerful learning.”³

There is not a set curriculum of content to teach during BGE, rather a series of experiences, outcomes and benchmarks which teachers are expected to use to plan, design and assess learning.

The Scottish Government’s submission to the Committee stated—

“Alignment to the Scottish curriculum is also key for Scottish teachers and sets the SNSA apart from other standardised assessments previously used by schools and local authorities. All questions in the SNSA are quality assured by Education Scotland and questions are trialled during the previous year to ensure they are appropriate for children and young people.”

Some of the criticism of the P1 tests was that the questions did not align well with CfE benchmarks and the expected knowledge of P1 pupils in the early stage of CfE. More broadly, the EIS’s submission argued—

“The coverage of SNSAs in terms of the knowledge and skills assessed is, by the government’s own admission, quite limited, as is the assessment information elicited. In the case of the Literacy assessment pertaining to Writing, for example, it provides only minimal diagnostic or summative data (depending on how the assessments are used), on children’s grasp of some technical aspects of writing –

³ [Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective](#) (2015): page 13

spelling, grammar and punctuation. (In this regard, the assessments do not align well with how writing is or should be taught, which calls into question the reliability and validity of the information that they provide on children's understanding of writing.)"

ACER's submission to the Committee stated—

"Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is a wide-ranging and comprehensive articulation of an approach to teaching and learning that embodies many of the features of education that have been identified as world class, among them a conception of assessment as integrated with the curriculum, and an emphasis on formative assessment. SNSA are designed to reflect these key elements of CfE, in order to assist teachers, schools and the wider education community in identifying learners' strengths and weaknesses, in turn to inform learning and teaching."

ACER's submission explained that initially the questions were built on ACER's international pool of assessment questions. However, "every question selected for SNSA was also reviewed by the panels for its alignment with the CfE, and matched to a statement in the then-current Benchmarks documents".

ADES' submission addresses criticisms of questions being misaligned with CfE or a Scottish context more broadly, suggesting that this applied to a small number of questions and that it is "perhaps not surprising that the first iteration of the SNSA should contain a small number of such questions". ADES noted that ACER has been "very responsive to comments about specific questions and is committed to a process of improving the quality and cultural appropriateness of the assessments over the coming years".

A submission from a teacher, Alison Taylor, raises the issue of support for the CfE benchmarks themselves that underpin SNSAs:

"In my role as a SfLT [support for learning teacher] I value and use assessments of pupils' skills and knowledge to plan interventions and next steps in their teaching & learning. I am not in agreement with some of the CfE benchmarks and the Levels that some are allocated to, so this is reflected in my opinion of the content of the SNSAs. The SNSAs are based on the benchmarks which do not always tell me details about the core skills and knowledge of pupils that I need to know about with regard to learning to decode or encode. The science and evidence behind learning to read is not solely reflected in the benchmarks. In my opinion some benchmarks which are included are misguided as they are based on whole language/balanced literacy ideas."

A number of submissions also highlighted that as SNSAs cover a relatively small proportion of the curriculum, other elements of the curriculum may receive less focus. The RSE submission stated that:

"SNSAs cover only literacy and numeracy and there is a risk that too much emphasis on assessing literacy and numeracy creates a dynamic which values these areas disproportionately compared to, for instance, higher order cognitive skills that young people are expected to develop."

GL assessments submission also highlighted other assessments that focus on the health and wellbeing aspect of CfE:

“Our psychometric assessment, Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS), formed the basis of the study. It is a tool that helps schools uncover and identify attitudes that, if left unaddressed, can undermine student wellbeing as well as their academic success. The nine standardised factors PASS identifies have strong links to both the four Curriculum for Excellence capacities and the eight SHANARRI wellbeing indicators. It is therefore an ideal health and wellbeing screener for schools, and results from the measure can be used to help demonstrate progress made, and specific plans for improvement...”

The Committee may wish to explore the following issues with the panel:

- **Whether there are particular difficulties in aligning SNSAs to the Curriculum for Excellence.**
- **What impact, if any, will SNSAs have on the consistency of understanding of CfE Benchmarks and how this might improve teaching and learning.**
- **How the questions and format of the SNSAs were developed and how were teachers’ expertise utilised.**
- **Whether other standardised assessments used by local authorities were aligned with CfE.**

THEME 4: Data and the assessment literacy of users

The SNSA produces reports at an individual, classroom, school, local authority and national level. The data is only published at a national level. As noted above, the stated purpose of SNSAs is to support formative assessment in the classroom and inform teachers’ judgement on the CfE levels achieved. It is unclear whether and how SNSA data in isolation will be used at school, local authority or national levels to support improvement or whether ACEL data will be used.

As noted above, the CCEA argue that how results from assessments are used in a learning context is key to whether an assessment is formative or not. The key users of the SNSA data will be classroom teachers and it is they who will be able to use the data to inform teaching and learning.

The submission from ACER highlighted that from the beginning of the current academic year, SNSA reports will include “long scales” and “normative reference points”. The first national SNSA report explains that the long scale will provide a “more refined scale for each subject area”.

Professor Lindsay Paterson highlighted the technical quality of the information provided to teachers:

“1.2 The Scottish National Standardised Assessments are of a high technical quality, with levels of statistical reliability that are satisfactory by the standards of good-quality testing. Notably, the reliability is high at every relevant school stage, including at P1. (Statistical reliability in this context may be thought of as a measure of the extent to which a test consistently measures what it is intended to measure, which in this case is attainment according to the criteria in Curriculum for Excellence.) Nevertheless, some improvement is required to bring them to the even higher levels of statistical reliability that have been achieved by the National Curriculum Assessments in England.”

The submission from Prof Ellis at Strathclyde University stated—

“Standardised assessment data are just data. What matters is how the data are understood, who uses them, how and for which purposes. It is the use of data (including how multiple assessment measures are combined) that determines whether the impact of a standardised assessment process has positive or negative implications for teaching and attainment.”

A survey of EIS members found mixed views on the usefulness of the SNSA data. Some teachers welcomed the SNSAs as providing valuable data on their pupils’ strengths and weaknesses; some valued the SNSA as an aid to confirm their own judgements on whether pupils had met the CfE level. Other teachers were less appreciative of the data with a number of comments about the lack of detail on the questions pupils had answered and that it wasn’t providing additional information. One teacher stated—

“It did highlight some pupils requiring support but I was already aware of these from my own assessments.”

The OECD 2011 review noted that “without adequate training, teachers may not have the assessment literacy and ability to appropriately interpret results and to identify areas where curricular strategies may require adjustment”. The Scottish Government’s submission to the Committee stated—

“An extensive training programme, provided by SCHOLAR from Heriot Watt University, was rolled out across the country. The training courses have been extended to cover everything from how to set up and run the assessments to how to use the data for improvement, and how to support children with additional special needs (ASN). These courses are available in multiple formats including on-line. The evaluations have been very positive (95% rated satisfactory or better) and support teacher development.”

The [SNSA website](#) states that there are three training courses available in the current academic year. The courses take between 1 and 2 hours. The second available course, *An Introduction to Analysing SNSA Data*, includes the “interpretation of data and the pedagogical aspects of using the assessments in the context of teachers’ professional judgement”.

GL assessments submission stated that:

“The ability of schools to handle assessment data varies widely. High schools are often strong here but an average primary school struggles to manage and use data. Initial teacher training and ongoing CPD should feature effective use of data. Teachers need to be trained in standardised assessment data as well as teacher assessment and national performance data.”

The GTCS reported that “a comprehensive training package has been developed and bespoke support and training will be provided as agreed with your local authority.”⁴

The Committee may wish to explore the following issues with the panel:

⁴ <http://www.gtcs.org.uk/News/news/scottish-national-standardised-assessments-launched.aspx>

- **What data does the SNSA provide teachers that was not available to them before.**
- **What are the key data literacy skills required by teachers to be able to utilise SNSA data to improve classroom practice. How are teachers being supported to develop these skills.**
- **What training there has been for local authority officers, including school leaders on the data produced by SNSAs and how to use that data to support improvement.**
- **How local authorities and school leaders are expected to use SNSA data and whether teachers' performance will be assessed using this data.**
- **How data will be made available to researchers and journalists. What level of data will be available through, for example, freedom of information requests.**

THEME 5: Teacher judgement and practical delivery of standardised assessments

The purpose of SNSA data is not to, on its own, provide a measure of education performance. Rather, it will inform teachers' judgements which will be collected as part of the ACEL.

The NASUWT argued that for a broad suite of evidence to be used in monitoring performance. Its submission stated—

“It is important that the inherent limitations of tests as a form of assessment are recognised. All assessments, tests included, are subject to limitations in terms of their validity and reliability. In short, a test cannot tell you everything about what a learner knows and can do in a subject area. Problems arise when too much weight is placed on test outcomes to reach judgements about the performance of the system as a whole, or that of local authorities and schools. The SNSA results can only ever form a small part of the evidential framework determining how the educational outcomes of children and young people have been affected.”

In his submission to the Committee, Professor Lindsay Paterson argued that teacher judgements, on their own, are not as reliable as standardised assessments. He stated—

“Teacher judgements are – with the best will in the world – not so reliable as standardised assessments. The reason is that teachers (at all levels, from pre-school to university) inevitably are biased towards optimism and towards the level of attainment that is officially expected of the students in their class. Evidence about the extent of this understandable bias was found by the Scottish Survey of Achievement (the predecessor to the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy). Standardised assessments provide a useful reality check, allowing teachers to calibrate their own judgements against independent criteria.”

The Scottish Government explains that SNSA data will be used to drive improvement activity. Its submission stated—

“The system also provides class, school and local authority level reports all of which are designed to be used for improvement purposes. The class and school level

reports are comprehensive and enable detailed analysis. This allow teachers and school managers to identify patterns in learning across groups of children and identify areas of strength or development needs.”

ADES’ submission stated that SNSA reports will “facilitate informed professional dialogue between teachers and between schools”. ADES continued—

“It should be emphasised that teacher professional judgement remains paramount when it comes to assessment of children’s work. The SNSA is merely a further check on that judgement and, as with all assessment, should assist teachers in determining the next steps in a child’s learning.”

The EIS submission stated that

“EIS welcomes the recent endeavour of ADES and Scottish Government to ensure clarity in terms of the relationship of SNSAs to teacher professional judgement.”

In terms of practical delivery, the Scottish Government’s review of the first year of SNSAs noted that for P1s the assessments took around 20-40 minutes to complete. Similar data was not presented for other cohorts.

The guidance for teachers states—

“The assessments should not require a change to the way you teach and there should be no additional workload for you or for the children. However, you will need to think about how best to manage the assessments in your particular context and plan accordingly.”

On behalf of Connect, George Gilchrist, a former headteacher and fellow of SCEL, gathered opinions of teachers and support staff on the SNSAs through social media in the summer of 2018. A theme of the responses to Mr Gilchrist found was that teachers saw SNSAs as “just another add-on to workload, contributing little to understanding learners and where they are in their learning, they are viewed by many as another unnecessary chore driven by political agendas, not what is best for young learners.” Another “common concern” was that “the decision on when the tests should take place had been taken by the local authority and then imposed on teachers and schools”.⁵

The EIS’ survey of teachers also found that additional workload was a concern for its members and that the SNSAs impinged on other activities. The EIS stated—

“Adequate staffing, smaller classes and ICT resources are key to the smoother deliver of SNSAs. Teachers in schools which had up-to-date hardware that is fully compatible with the assessments (namely iPads) identified fewer problems with practical delivery.”

The EIS concluded that first year of SNSAs had been “expensive in terms of human resource and time”.

Its submission concluded that—

“the EIS remains clear that efforts at national and local level should be channelled more thoroughly towards enhancing the confidence of teachers in their professional judgement

⁵ Gilchrist (2018) *Report for Connect (formerly SPTC) Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSA)*

by freeing up time – as in many high-performing education systems internationally- for meaningful collaboration and professional dialogue among teachers, which is focused on learning, teaching and assessment.”

The Committee may wish to explore the following issues with the panel:

- **Whether SNSA data on its own will be used to identify areas of good practice and areas for improvement. The weight that should be given to SNSA data and teacher judgement data in understanding the performance of classrooms, schools and local authorities and identifying areas of improvement.**
- **Whether the use of SNSA data to support improvement and identify areas of development could be seen to be an accountability measure by teachers and schools. Whether this may lead to “adverse behaviours such as teaching to the test, the narrowing of the school curriculum”.**
- **What processes are there to review the SNSA, how it is being administered, how the data is being used and how effective it is in supporting improvement.**
- **The resources required to undertake SNSAs and the ease to which SNSAs can be part of the everyday learning experience of a child.**
- **If SNSAs are additional or replace existing practice and what activities are not taking place as a result of the SNSAs.**

THEME 6: The introduction of ACEL and the removal of the SSLN

In 2017, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills stated in relation to the merits of data collection including SNSA—

“The problem with the SSLN is that it does not enable us, when we see declining performance, to identify from the survey where that is happening. However, the data that we have requested to be put in place, which will be substantially reinforced by standardised assessments, will give us the ability to do that and to support young people to fulfil their potential as a result.” ([OR 9 May 2017](#), Col 26)

The Government submission identified a number of advantages of the ACEL, which SNSA contributes to, in contrast to the SSLN, namely—

- It empowers teachers and makes their professional judgement the key indicator of children’s progress prior to national qualifications;
- It looks across the full CfE level (e.g. it is broader than just literacy and numeracy);
- It is based within the curriculum and uses a broad range of sources;
- It is aligned to systems that schools and local authorities already have in place;
- It provides annual data at school and local authority level and data which is broken down by pupil characteristics, allowing school and local authority staff to analyse their own data for improvement purposes. National level data also contributes to national improvement planning.

- It provides annual data on both literacy and numeracy and includes an additional stage, Primary 1, that was not covered by the SSLN;
- The results can be published and used for improvement purposes more quickly than the SSLN – within 6 months of the data being collected.
- Reflects the OECD's view that "an assessment system that encompasses a variety of assessment evidence, that includes rich tasks and a clear indication of expected benchmarks referenced to the breadth and depth of the curriculum, can enhance teachers' assessment skills and learners' progress."⁶

Professor Louise Hayward, University of Glasgow stated—

"It is difficult to be certain why the decision was taken to move away from the use of the SSLN survey, but there were a number of contributory factors which led to a negative perception in Scotland of the survey method of monitoring achievement, in contrast to the very positive international view of this approach as it had been applied in Scotland. Possible factors were:

- A misinterpretation of the recommendations of the OECD report. A view emerged that the OECD had recommended the introduction of standardised assessment. The OECD report recommended an 'integrated framework for assessment'. The final paragraph on p.161 is clear:

'Currently, however, the way national assessment is constructed in Scotland does not provide sufficiently robust information at all levels of the system, including LAs or an individual school or across important domains of CfE for learners and their teachers. This problem does not mean that everyone must be tested at particular year levels in order to have this information. An alternative, for example, could involve sample testing of a range of learners within each school on rich tasks which can then be used to benchmark the achievement of other learners on the curriculum.'

- Problems that existed in the SSLN survey methodology, as opposed to that of the previous more extensive survey in Scotland - the Scottish Survey of Achievement (SSA).
- A concern to have nationally available information on the progress of every child and perhaps a lack of awareness that surveys can be designed to allow such data to be generated.
- Insufficient involvement of all key education authority stakeholders in the design of the survey.
- A strong commitment in some education authorities to other forms of data collection, principally standardised testing. (Although the understanding was that when SNSA was introduced Local Authorities would cease to use other standardised tests, this has not happened)."

James Mcenaney's submission considered the move from SSLN to ACEL—

⁶ [Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective](#) (2015): page 157

“The real 'data shift' has in fact been from the SSLN to the Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels (ACEL), with the SNSA theoretically contributing to the latter. There are, however, numerous problems with relying on ACEL in order to measure the Scottish education system as a whole.

The government's own publications go some way to explaining why the ACEL data is nothing like as robust as the SSLN data that it is supposed to have replaced, but the key points are:

1. There is still, even now, no properly agreed standard for what the 'achievement' of a level looks like
2. Councils themselves have expressed concerns about the reliability of the data submitted to the government
(<https://www2.gov.scot/Resource/0054/00543891.pdf>)”

ADES stated in its submission that—

“...the SSLN did not allow analysis to be made of trends at local or school levels. In several local authorities, elected members therefore complained that a lack of robust data on literacy and numeracy prevented them from fulfilling their scrutiny role in relation to attainment across the local authority area.”

Prof Sue Ellis highlighted the limitation of the SSLN sample size—

“The SSLN is premised on national sampling measures that were designed to minimise the assessment burden on teachers and pupils. However, whilst the sample size is sufficient to build a national picture of pupil performance across Scotland, it is too small to provide useful data for individual local authorities and schools.”

The submissions from James Mcenaney and Professor Louise Hayward suggest potential to expand the sample size of surveys including the SSLN—

James Mcenaney stated:

“There may well have been a case for expanding the SSLN (it could, for example, have been adjusted to give both national and local authority level data) and indeed this idea was put to the Scottish Government in a 2012 report from the University of Glasgow entitled 'Assessment at Transition' (a report which the Scottish Government funded).”

Professor Louise Hayward, University of Glasgow, stated—

“The survey sample can be adapted for different purposes, eg, a boosted sample can give a local authority or a regional collaborative information specific to that context or information can be generated relating to a specific population for a specific purpose – eg, boys' performance in reading.”

A number of submissions suggested the value of retaining to the SSLN, including to complement the SNSAs, for example in relation to data on attainment:

The Royal Society of Edinburgh stated—

“... the SSLN was a sample survey of both learners and teachers which gathered a wider range of information than that generated by the SSNA, and which was able to provide a system level analysis of attainment. The SSLN collected a wider range of information related to attainment, including information about a learner’s home background. This provided scope to investigate the effects of poverty on educational attainment, for example. The introduction of the SNSAs need not have come at the expense of the SSLN. The respective strengths of both means that they could co-exist and complement one another very well, particularly with a view to enabling a more detailed analysis of the effects of poverty on learners’ progress...”

At present, the SNSAs collect data from learners at publicly funded schools only. This is in contrast to the SSLN which provided information about the whole school system, including independent schools. This matters if there is to be a proper understanding of the ‘attainment gap’. For example, entry to university cannot properly be analysed without data from the whole cohort of pupils, including those in independent schools.”

The Committee may wish to explore the following issues with the panel:

- **The strengths and weaknesses of ACEL and SNSA data in understanding how well the education system is performing at a school, local authority and national level, including in relation to attainment; and**
- **How this compares to the quality of data provided by the SSLN.**

THEME 7– Local authority run standardised assessments

On announcing the planned SNSAs the Scottish Government stated that it would develop a “new system of national, standardised assessment that would “bring consistency to the variety of different approaches to assessments currently followed in our 32 local authorities”.⁷ 29 of the 32 local authorities were using their own standardised assessments, the exceptions being: Glasgow, South Lanarkshire and Perth and Kinross (albeit individual schools in those authority areas may have been using standardised assessments).

The Scottish Government submission stated:

“In deciding to introduce standardised assessments to support teachers’ professional judgement, the Scottish Government was aware that a range of standardised assessments were already in use by practitioners in 29 local authorities, clearly demonstrating the value that teachers see in these assessments in providing as part of their overall evidence of pupil progress. It was evident however that a variety of assessment tools were in use providing a range of information to teachers and schools. None of these tools were specific to Curriculum for Excellence. This point was also identified by the OECD⁸, who also went on to note the potential negative implications of such an approach:

⁷ [Scottish Government Programme for Government 2015-16](#) (p10 & p45)

⁸ *Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective (2015)*: page 155

“The different approaches to assessment undertaken by the local authorities open up the risk of duplication and militate against gaining a clearer all-Scotland picture. Shared approaches to assessment by the local authorities would contribute to a strengthened “middle” between the centre, on the one hand, and schools, on the other.”⁹

Professor Lindsay Paterson set out two disadvantages of systems of assessment used by many local authorities:

“(a) They were not based as closely on the Scottish curriculum as the SNSA, whose development has been monitored by the same types of committees of teachers and other educational professionals as produced the curriculum in the first place. The basis in the curriculum strengthens the validity of the SNSA.

(b) The results of these previous systems of assessment were not statistically standardised on any representative group of Scottish pupils. The standardisation of the SNSA ensures that the expectations of what pupils might achieve is realistic for pupils going through Scottish schools today.”

Professor Louise Hayward, University of Glasgow, suggested that :

“we may need to:

- reflect on current assessment practices to ensure that all the data we gather matches a clear purpose
- ensure that our system is efficient, so that different parts of the system are not duplicating the collection of information, we are not gathering more evidence that is required for our core purposes, and we are not gathering evidence where more time is spent in collecting information than in using it.”

Professor Sue Ellis, University of Strathclyde stated:

“Scotland has a national policy of scaling up successful reform. To do this, educators and policy makers need a measure of what works, for whom, in which circumstances. A single standardised measure across all local authorities would enable researchers, educators and the policy community to ensure that taxpayers’ money is invested in those reforms likely to show best impact in particular circumstances...”

Many local authorities and schools use a mix of summative assessment data, which may be age-standardised, standardised or non-standardised. Qualitative data can be used to make summative judgements. At present, how any data are interpreted and put to use by local authorities, schools and teachers is untracked and unexamined. Education professionals need clear national guidance to inform local understandings of ethical and unethical data use.”

Alison Taylor, a support for learning teacher reflected a reliance on existing local authority level assessments in her submission:

⁹ *Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective (2015):* page 165

“We have only just had time to look at last year’s P1 and P4 results. We do our own assessments in literacy and numeracy as we work through the session to help us plan interventions and next steps in teaching & learning. We have not felt that we need to go to the SNSAs to give us extra details.

The EIS suggested in relation the value of existing assessment methods:

“Currently schools and teachers use a wide range of assessment methods, involving human interaction, evaluation and observation, which gather rich data on children’s individual progress – their strengths, development needs and next steps. Coined ‘small data’ by another of the International Council of Educational Advisers, Pasi Sahlberg, this is the information that is most useful to teachers, learners and parents as they work in partnership to progress individuals’ learning. Such data may not be easily understood by those driving narrow accountability agendas either at local or national level, but this is the information on which successful learning and greater equity of outcome fundamentally depends.”

The Committee may wish to explore the following issues with the panel:

- **How the purposes of the SNSA compare to the purposes of standardised assessments undertaken by individual local authorities.**
- **Whether the panel consider it would be preferable to streamline the use of standardised assessments, replacing local authority assessments with SNSAs;**
- **Whether there is merit in retaining a wide range of assessments or ‘small data’.**

THEME 8 – Assessment information for young people and parents

In announcing the SNSAs during her speech on the programme for government in September 2015, the First Minister stated “Parents need meaningful information about the progress of their children.” ([Official Report 1 September 2015](#) Col 19)

Professor Lindsay Paterson’s submission stated the value for parents and young people of receiving information from assessments—

“1.5 Pupils can benefit from this independent assessment, because it gives them realistic targets to aim for, and reliable evidence about how well they are doing. For pupils to benefit in this way requires that teachers use the results of the assessments to set realistic targets for each pupil and to explain to the pupil what progress they are making.

1.6 The same comment also applies to parents, who can be better informed about their child’s progress than with any other system of parental information.”

Connect stated in its submission—

“Assessment should inform quality conversations between teachers, children and families, however parents tell us they often do not know about the tests, nor are they given any feedback on the outcomes.”

The National Parent Forum of Scotland stated more broadly on raising awareness of the policy—

“We acknowledge, but still dispute, Scottish Government’s reason for not highlighting the SNSA rollout to parents: they believed it would result in unnecessary profile raising; but, as NPFS made clear at the time and we then saw earlier this year, when there is a vacuum of information it allows fear and anxiety to spread. This issue is wider than the standardised assessments, it is about a repeated lack of good, direct communication from schools, local authorities and Scottish Government to parents...

The information available to teachers from the SNSAs is exceptional. It provides details of a child’s specific skills, knowledge and understanding, which enhances the teacher’s judgement when identifying strengths, as well as areas that might require more focus. Yet we are disappointed that somewhere in the education chain, this thorough summary and the teacher’s wide knowledge of each child is diluted to report cards that parents frequently tell us are almost meaningless. Report cards don’t inform parents of these strengths, or the areas needing work, or how they can support their child at home. But the SNSA report does and this makes it a valuable tool to reinforce the class teacher’s judgement.”

The SNSA website states—

“As part of the normal reporting process in your school teachers use this information, alongside a wide range of other assessment information, to discuss with you how your child is progressing with their learning.”

The Committee may wish to explore the following issues with the panel:

- **Whether accessible detailed information can be generated for parents and young people from the SNSAs; and**
- **Whether ADES has a position on the extent to which this information will be provided in the future to parents and also young people by schools.**

THEME 9: International comparisons

A number of submissions looked at the use of standardised assessments internationally in relation to pupil attainment and equity:

Prof Sue Ellis, University of Strathclyde stated that:

“Standardised assessment can, under specific circumstances, raise pupil attainment. The evidence is from the USA where researchers investigated attainment rises across different states as they adopted standardised assessment policies at different times (e.g. Wong et al 2015). Polikoff, Korn and McFall (2018) indicate that a productive system requires assessments that generate data across a breadth of desired outcomes (which the SNSA does; in fact, the SNSA literacy outcome measures are far broader, and the results are given to the class teachers more quickly, than those of the other popular standardised assessments previously bought by local authorities.)”

The EIS stated in its submission—

“...there is a strong evidence base to suggest that large-scale standardised testing/assessment is an inhibitor of equity, and of student wellbeing which is inextricably linked to young people’s ability to make good progress in their learning. Now much documented- Finland, an international champion of educational equity and excellence, almost entirely rejects standardised assessment. Andy Hargreaves- one of the Scottish Government’s own International Council of Education Advisors - warns of the growing evidence of ‘ill-being’ caused by ‘standardised testing and out-moded approaches to learning and teaching’ (based on observation of standardised assessment practice in Ontario and South Korea, in particular). Much international evidence points to the inherent bias within standardised assessments in favour of more affluent learners; there is the potential, then, for the (mis-)handling of results to exacerbate existing educational inequalities related to socio-economic background.

The Connect submission highlighted other international examples—

“China and Singapore along with Finland are all high performing education systems and have smaller equity gaps than Scotland, yet these countries have committed to test-free, play-based, early years education and childcare. This is a radical change in approach for China and Singapore - becoming more like Scotland’s system at a time when we are reversing our direction.”

The Committee may wish to explore the following issues with the panel:

- **the extent to which lessons can be learned from international approaches;**
- **the features of the SNSA system that seek to ensure it contributes to pupil attainment and equity; and**
- **what complementary features the Scottish education system requires to possess to maximise the potential of the SNSA.**

Ned Sharratt
SPICe Research
3 January 2019

Note: Committee briefing papers are provided by SPICe for the use of Scottish Parliament committees and clerking staff. They provide focused information or respond to specific questions or areas of interest to committees and are not intended to offer comprehensive coverage of a subject area.

The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP www.parliament.scot

BACKGROUND

Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy

The Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy was an annual survey that sampled pupil's performance in literacy and numeracy. The annual survey covered pupils from P4, P7 and S2 and surveyed literacy and numeracy on alternate years.

Purpose

The SSLN was introduced in 2011 and was designed to support assessment approaches for Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). [Building the Curriculum 5: A Framework for Assessment](#) (BtC5) set out the approach to assessment for CfE. With regard to monitoring the performance of BtC5 stated—

“In order to monitor national standards of performance over time, the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) will be adapted and fully aligned with Curriculum for Excellence and will focus on attainment in literacy and numeracy in schools ... The SSLN will provide an assessment of learning and progress over time to monitor standards from year to year and over longer time periods.” (p47)

SSLN was discontinued after the 2016 edition. A total of six SSLNs were conducted, providing three sets of data for Numeracy and Literacy respectively.

Methodology

All schools in Scotland, excluding special schools, were asked to register for the SSLN each year. Schools with insufficient pupil numbers were not required to participate. Using random sampling techniques, 3 pupils in each of P4 and P7 and 14 pupils in S2 were identified and took part in the survey. Nationally, about 4,000 pupils participated in the survey at each stage and would be a representative sample of the population.

Participation in the survey took no longer than 2-3 hours. Pupils selected to take part in the numeracy SSLN: completed written assessment booklets; participated in an interactive teacher/pupil assessment; and completed a questionnaire.

Pupils selected to take part in the literacy SSLN: completed assessment booklets, paper-based and online; participated in a group discussion or submitted class-based written work; and completed a questionnaire.

A sample of teachers was also surveyed on their views and experiences on how Curriculum for Excellence was being implemented.

Results

The results of the 2016 survey showed declining performance in literacy on many of the measures. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills acknowledged that the results were disappointing. ([OR 9 May 2017](#), Col 22) The results of the 2015 survey also showed declining performance in numeracy on a number of measures.

Monitoring performance over time

The SSLN followed other data collections aimed at monitoring the performance of the education system.

From 1998/99 to 2003/04, the [5-14 Attainment in Publicly Funded Schools](#) collected data on reading, writing and mathematics of P2 to S2. These data were based on teacher judgement. The data was validated by tests in 2003.

[The Scottish Survey of Achievement](#) was a sample survey of pupils' attainment in Scottish primary and secondary schools carried out annually from 2005 until 2009. It monitored performance and focused on a different aspect of the school curriculum each year. The survey also looked at performance of “core skills”.

In 2016, the Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels (ACEL), based on teachers' judgements was published for the first time. The judgements from the most recent publication in December 2018 have been supported by results of the Scottish National Standardised Assessment. More details on the ACEL can be found in the section below.

Data across the different collections can be difficult to compare due to different methodology and the different measures used.

Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels

The Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels (ACEL) was first published in 2016. The Scottish Government identifies the ACEL as replacing the SSLN. In his submission to the Committee, the Cabinet Secretary says—

“The Achievement of CfE Levels Return (not the Scottish National Standardised Assessment) is the replacement for the SSLN. Data is collected from schools each June detailing the proportion of children in P1, P4, P7 and S3 who have achieved the relevant Curriculum for Excellence level.”

The Scottish Government's submission to the Committee also notes that the SNSAs support teacher's judgements in the context of the annual returns for ACEL. The Scottish Government submission also highlights that:

- [ACEL] provides annual data at school and local authority level and data which is broken down by pupil characteristics, allowing school and local authority staff to analyse their own data for improvement purposes. National level data also contributes to national improvement planning.

The first iteration of ACEL saw a very wide variation across local authorities in the achievement of CfE levels. The statistics in 2016 were badged as experimental and [the report on the statistics stated](#)—

“Comparisons between authorities, or between schools within and across authorities, should not be made without knowledge of the underlying approach to assessment and the context of the authority or school.”

The data was more consistent in 2017 and 2018, although a similar caveat was applied to reports covering both releases. Furthermore, the reports on the ACEL in 2017-18 and 2016-17 stated that caution should be applied in comparing previous years' releases. The

2018 release was still badged as experimental and was the first iteration of ACEL where teachers' judgements could have been informed by SNSAs.

Scottish National Standardised Assessments

The Scottish Government's Programme for Government 2015-2016 included an announcement that the Scottish Government would develop a National Improvement Framework (NIF) for Scottish Education. The Scottish Government stated that as part of the NIF, it would develop a "new system of national, standardised assessment of children in P1, P4, P7 and S3, covering literacy and numeracy", that it would "inform teacher judgement" and "bring consistency to the variety of different approaches to assessments currently followed in our 32 local authorities".¹⁰ 29 of the 32 local authorities were using their own standardised assessments, the exceptions being: Glasgow, South Lanarkshire and Perth and Kinross (albeit individual schools in those authority areas may have been using standardised assessments).

In announcing the SNSAs during her speech on the programme for government in September 2015, the First Minister stated that the SNSAs would not increase workload and she continued—

"I have no desire to see crude league tables that distort rather than enhance our understanding of children's attainment and performance, but I am determined that we make available much more information about performance in primary and lower secondary school.

"Parents need meaningful information about the progress of their children. Teachers need to know which pupils are doing well and which ones need more support; governments—local and national— need to have reliable data to inform policy; and all of us need to know whether the twin aims of raising attainment overall and closing the attainment gap are being met." ([Official Report 1 September 2015](#) Col 19)

SNSAs are designed to be low-stakes or no-stakes standardised test. This means that the result of the test will have no impact on pupils' future academic career or employment prospects. Examples of high-stakes standardised tests could be National 5 or an 11-plus.

The OECD produced a review of large scale no-stakes standardised tests across OECD countries in 2011, [Student Standardised Testing: Current Practices in OECD Countries and a Literature Review](#) ("The OECD 2011 review"). The OECD 2011 review highlighted six "lessons" for policy makers to ensure that standardised testing is "more conducive to improving school outcomes". These lessons were:

- Clearly establish the purpose of the test and allow this to lead all following test design, implementation and use decisions;
- Be cautious in employing large-scale, standardised tests that serve multiple purposes;
- Testing standards should be aligned with the national curriculum to testing standards

¹⁰ [Scottish Government Programme for Government 2015-16](#) (p10 & p45)

- Develop assessment literacy of teachers and administrators
- Reduce distortion and strategic behaviour by increasing teacher involvement and buy-in from an early stage; and
- Incorporate multiple measures of achievement especially in systems where standardised tests may be perceived as ‘high-stakes’ for teachers and school administrators.

The Education and Culture Committee considered the National Improvement Framework as part of its work on the Education (Scotland) Bill in 2015. A number of respondents to the Committee’s work noted risks of standardised assessments. For example, The Learned Societies’ Group on Scottish Science Education argued that “standardised assessments can be an invaluable tool for informing policy and practice but only if used with care and in combination with other tools” and identified a number of risks of standardised assessments—

- distortion of teaching and learning, including “teaching to the test” and narrowing of the curriculum;
- high-stakes testing resulting in the creation of school league tables;
- increasing workload and bureaucracy for schools and teachers; and
- increasing stress levels among teachers and learners.¹¹

In June 2016, the Scottish Government put the contract to develop SNSAs out to tender. In November 2016, the Government announced that [ACER](#) had been successful and awarded a contract at a value of £9m, excluding VAT.¹² The ACER submission sets out the information SNSAs generate:

“The suite of online reports generated from SNSA covers a range of uses at the school level. **Individual reports**, available immediately upon a learner’s completion of an assessment, indicate the learner’s level of attainment on the SNSA long scale and their performance in that subject in relation to Scottish norms. **Group diagnostic reports** show, as well as aggregate scores, how learners have performed on individual questions, and describe what each question is designed to assess. This diagnostic information can be interpreted and used by teachers to guide next steps in learning and teaching at both class and individual level, and to indicate – alongside their own judgements of learner’s strengths and weaknesses – where interventions might be required. **Group aggregate reports** present aggregated results for subgroups of learners, such as classes within a year group, gender groups or learners with English as an Additional Language (EAL)

A suite of online and offline **reports for local authorities** is also provided as part of the SNSA programme.”

¹¹ [THE LEARNED SOCIETIES’ GROUP ON SCOTTISH SCIENCE EDUCATION November 2015 The National Improvement Framework for Scottish Education: a response to the Scottish Government](#) (sic)

¹² https://www.publiccontractsscotland.gov.uk/search/show/search_view.aspx?ID=NOV265101

SNSAs began to be used in schools across Scotland in the 2017/18 academic year. Training for teachers was made available through SCHOLAR, an online learning resource developed by Heriot-Watt University.¹³

In August 2018, the Scottish Government produced a [“user review” of the first year of the implementation of SNSAs](#). Findings of this review included that there was a 94% completion rate, training had reached 7,700 participants,

A number of “key enhancements” were identified by the review, including refreshing questions and establishing a “P1 Practitioner Improvement Forum”.

The EIS undertook a survey of its members and fed in the results to the Scottish Government’s user review. The survey received 460 responses from teachers and asked questions on: the timing of the assessments; practical delivery; alignment to CfE; user friendliness; and the usefulness of SNSA data. The survey concluded that “on all five questions, the majority of respondents provided comments that were critical of SNSAs.”

P1 assessments

In April 2018, Upstart Scotland launched a [campaign opposing SNSAs in P1](#), which it argued are not compatible with a play-based approach in the early stage of CfE. There was a public debate on the suitability of tests at P1 and whether the assessments are compulsory. The Scottish Parliament passed a motion on 19 September 2018 which called on the Scottish Government “to halt the tests in P1 and to reconsider the evidence and the whole approach to evaluating the progress of P1 pupils.”

Following the debate on 19 September, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills announced a statement to Parliament on 25 October 2018. He announced that he would commission a review of P1 tests and expects the review to be concluded by May 2019.¹⁴ The review will provide recommendations on:

- the compatibility of the assessments with the play-based approach to early levels of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE);
- the usefulness of the diagnostic information provided to teachers and how it supports their professional judgement; and
- the future of the assessments, in particular whether they continue in line with the current continuous improvement model, whether they should be substantially modified or whether they should be stopped.

The first [data from standardised assessments](#) was published in December 2018.

¹³ <https://www.hw.ac.uk/about/news/internal/2017/scholar-partners-scottish-government-in.htm>

¹⁴ [Official Report, 25 October 2018](#) (Col 44)

Education and Skills Committee

1st Meeting, 2019 (Session 5), Wednesday, 9 January 2019

Scottish National Standardised Assessments

This pack contains the submissions that the Committee has received after issuing a call for views which ran in December. These will inform the evidence sessions on the Scottish National Standardised Assessments Inquiry.

The submissions from the witnesses attending the meeting on the 9th January 2019 are listed first.

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SUBMISSIONS FROM THE WITNESSES/ ORGANISATIONS GIVING EVIDENCE ON THE 9TH JANUARY.**ADES**

The introduction of the Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSA) was broadly welcomed by ADES.

Its predecessor, the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) had served its purpose of allowing the Scottish Government to track attainment levels over time in literacy and numeracy at a national level at key points in the Broad General Education (BGE). However, while the sample size was large enough to allow judgements to be made about attainment trends at a national level, the SSLN did not allow analysis to be made of trends at local or school levels. In several local authorities, elected members therefore complained that a lack of robust data on literacy and numeracy prevented them from fulfilling their scrutiny role in relation to attainment across the local authority area.

Consequently, over the last decade or so, the vast majority of local authorities have introduced some form of standardised assessments for all young people at key stages of the BGE. In general, these were commercially produced, externally marked packages which were seen as being additional to, but not a replacement for, teacher professional judgement, which remained the principal means of assessment of young people's progress. These standardised assessments allowed local authorities, schools and individual teachers to check the accuracy of professional judgement against the external tests. They also allowed local authorities to report to elected members on attainment trends over time.

However, different local authorities used a range of different standardised assessments and administered them at different stages of a young person's education, making it impossible to use the data generated to make national extrapolations about trends in attainment levels. Under these circumstances, and given the fact that almost all local authorities were already using some form of standardised assessment, it made sense to introduce a national scheme which would be administered at the same stages across the country.

Of course, it will take some time for the full benefits of the SNSA to be realised. The first year will allow a benchmark to be set against which future years can be compared. In the longer term, the assessments will facilitate the tracking of attainment levels in literacy and numeracy for whole cohorts of young people as they progress through the school system. The datasets generated will have benefits for local and national government and will provide new evidence to assist with policy development in pursuit of excellence and equity for Scotland's children. The intelligent use of data will be a key factor in effecting improvements in Scottish education.

However, there will also be immediate benefits for individual teachers and schools. The assessments will allow teachers to check the accuracy of their professional judgement against a national assessment. Reports generated by the administrators will also allow an analysis of which aspects of learning in literacy and numeracy individual young people have mastered and in which aspects they require further, targeted support. These reports should also facilitate informed professional dialogue between teachers and between schools.

It should be emphasised that teacher professional judgement remains paramount when it comes to assessment of children's work. The SNSA is merely a further check on that judgement and, as with all assessment, should assist teachers in determining the next steps in a child's learning. The assessments should therefore be administered at the most appropriate point in the child's progress and not as "whole class" tests or examinations. Administering the assessments in this way, together with the adaptive nature of the assessments themselves, should ensure that no child is placed under undue pressure by being asked to take the assessments.

There has been some adverse publicity about the appropriateness of some of the questions in the assessments, with a suggestion that some questions are culturally inappropriate for Scottish children or do not sit comfortably with the experiences and outcomes of CfE. It should be stressed, however, that these criticisms apply to only a very small number of questions and, given the fact that the assessments were adapted to fit the CfE context from a model first developed in Australia, it is perhaps not surprising that the first iteration of the SNSA should contain a small number of such questions. However, ADES understands that ACER, the company which developed and which administers the assessments, has been very responsive to comments about specific questions and is committed to a process of improving the quality and cultural appropriateness of the assessments over the coming years.

Finally, it is noted that the well-publicised issues surrounding the P1 assessments fall outwith the scope of this call for evidence. ADES will be keen to contribute to any subsequent call for evidence in this subject at a later date.

In conclusion, ADES believes that the SNSA will become a useful tool for individual teachers and schools and will eventually generate data which will assist with policy development locally and nationally in relation to the excellence and equity agenda which ADES fully supports.

ACER UK

Assessments to improve learning

This submission from the Australian Council for Educational Research International United Kingdom (ACER UK) addresses the focus: “What information the Government’s assessments can provide that contributes to improving the educational outcomes of children and young people.” A representative of ACER UK would be happy to give evidence to the Committee in person.

ACER UK, a wholly owned subsidiary of ACER group, which is a not-for-profit organisation established in 1930, was contracted by the Scottish Government in October 2016 to implement and deliver the Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSA) at four stages across all publicly funded schools in Scotland.

THE PURPOSE OF A NATIONAL POPULATION ASSESSMENT FOR SCOTLAND

Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is a wide-ranging and comprehensive articulation of an approach to teaching and learning that embodies many of the features of education that have been identified as world class, among them a conception of assessment as integrated with the curriculum, and an emphasis on formative assessment. SNSA are designed to reflect these key elements of CfE, in order to assist teachers, schools and the wider education community in identifying learners’ strengths and weaknesses, in turn to inform learning and teaching. At ACER, assessment is core to our mission of improving learning. In the words of Geoff Masters, ACER’s Chief Executive and a world leader in educational measurement, ‘The fundamental purpose of assessment is to establish where learners are in their learning at the time of the assessment’¹ – and from there to make informed judgements about next steps in learning. In many aspects of its design and implementation, SNSA serve as a model of what large-scale assessment should be, and can be.

Before the implementation of SNSA, teacher judgement of learners’ performance, augmented with more or less frequent use of commercially available standardised assessments used at the discretion of a school or local authority, was virtually the sole method of individual learner assessment in Scotland. Whatever their particular merits, these commercial assessments did not provide a consistent national picture on which to base evaluative judgements at all levels of the system. The only national measure of primary to middle-secondary educational progress was the light sampling conducted by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) through the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN), for two-year groups. The Scottish Government’s decision to introduce SNSA combined the valuable features of supporting teacher judgements, providing consistent national assessment data, and giving individual-level reports of children and young people’s progress in literacy and numeracy.

¹ Masters, Geoff. *Reforming Educational Assessment*, Australian Education Review no. 57. See also Masters, Geoff. (2018) *A Commitment to Growth*. Camberwell, Victoria: Australian Council for Educational Research.

FLEXIBILITY AS A DESIGN FEATURE OF THE SNSA

In the approach taken to designing SNSA, a number of features promote a degree of flexibility that is rare if not unique among national assessments.

First, the assessments are available continuously throughout the school year, so that teachers can exercise judgement about when is the most appropriate time to administer them to their learners.

Second, the assessments are delivered online. Children and young people present for the assessments using a digital device: a desktop computer, laptop or tablet. The assessments are delivered online, and because all items (questions) are automatically scored, teachers can access their learners' reports as soon as an assessment is completed.

The third feature is made possible by online delivery: the assessments are adaptive – that is, the level of difficulty of questions is adjusted as learners move through the assessment, according to their responses. The adaptive methodology is a means by which an assessment can be rendered fairer by ensuring that learners are administered questions at a level of difficulty that adjusts to their current capacity. Moreover, a well-targeted assessment enhances motivation, which in turn helps to ensure that learners demonstrate accurately how much they know and can do. The assessment administered to each child or young person is neither so easy as to result in boredom, nor so difficult that it promotes frustration.

Fourth, the assessments do not 'time-out', either at the question level or at the whole tool level. Within the constraints of classroom management, learners may take as long as they need to answer the questions as well as they can; and if they need to leave the assessment before they have finished, they can come back and pick it up at the point where they left off.

And finally, SNSA include a range of accessibility affordances that allow learners with Additional Support Needs to access them with optimal independence. Accessibility experts empanelled by the Scottish Government have reviewed and provided guidance on this front since the inception of the programme.

All of these features are designed to ensure that SNSAs are fair and accessible to almost all learners. An additional way of promoting fairness and accessibility is the policy decision that, after appropriate consultation, a teacher may choose to administer an 'off-stage' assessment to a child or young person: for example, a very advanced P4 child may be administered a P7 assessment, or an S3 young person who is struggling may be administered a P4 assessment.

CONTENT FOR SCOTLAND

For the first year of implementation, the academic year 2017-18, the assessments were built using existing questions from ACER's international item pool, which had been psychometrically validated with large samples of learners. All questions from this pool proposed for SNSA were reviewed and critiqued by panels of experts from Education Scotland and the Scottish Government, to ensure their cultural and linguistic appropriateness for Scotland, and were adapted (or rejected) where necessary. Every question selected for SNSA was also reviewed by the panels for its alignment with the CfE,

and matched to a statement in the then-current Benchmarks documents.² For the 2018-19 academic year, the sets of questions were replenished by one-third with new tasks developed specifically for the Scottish context. Again, these were vetted by panels of Scottish educational experts, as well as trial-tested with Scottish children and young people to ensure their statistical validity.

SCIENTIFIC METHODOLOGY UNDERPINNING THE SNSA

The philosophy of measuring children's and young people's progress to improve learning is embodied in the Item Response Theory (IRT) psychometric methodology used across ACER's assessment programmes, and in the principles underlying its reports on learner's achievement.³ IRT calibrates learner's achievement and item difficulty in each subject area on a single long scale, allowing the location of capacity in relation to the specific skills, knowledge and understanding encapsulated in the assessment questions. The questions in each subject are calibrated on a single continuous scale across stages. This means that capacity in reading, writing or numeracy can be reported on metrics that retain their meaning across year groups and over time, making progression easy to interpret. Quantitative information provided in the various SNSA reports uses these long scales across the stages of schooling, from P1 to S3 for reading and numeracy, and from P4 to S3 for writing.

In order to provide a Scottish frame of reference for reporting, two norming studies were conducted in the 2017-2018 academic year to provide standardisation by stage and subject area: one providing a national reference point for learner's capacity in the first half of the school year, and one in the second half. The sampling design selected by Scottish Government and implemented in these studies embodied an international 'gold standard' for collecting a scientific sample to represent the Scottish school population at P1, P4, P7 and S3. ACER recommends that similar norming studies be conducted at regular intervals in the future, to track national progress in literacy and numeracy over time.

The SNSA long scales and the normative reference points were introduced into the user reports from August 2018.

DIAGNOSTIC FEEDBACK

In addition to the quantitative elements of reporting on SNSA, teachers receive detailed information about the content of the assessments: a general description of the kinds of skills, knowledge and understanding demonstrated by the learner on the assessment, and also a description of the area assessed by each question administered to each learner, and the learners' success or otherwise on those questions. These qualitative elements of the reports allow formative analysis of learners' strengths and weaknesses in the subject area. The reporting reflects the organisers identified in the CfE benchmarks, to link directly to Scottish curriculum descriptions.

² *Benchmarks: Literacy and English* and *Benchmarks: Numeracy and Mathematics* (Drafts, August 2016). For the academic year 2018 to 2019, the final version of the *Benchmarks* (published in June 2017) is used as the reference point for the assessments.

³ Adams, R. J., Wu, M. L., & Wilson, M. R. (2015). ACER ConQuest: Generalised Item Response Modelling Software [Computer software]. Version 4. Camberwell, Victoria: Australian Council for Educational Research

The data that assessments generate have no purpose until and unless they are used and acted upon. For that reason, detailed information about individual learners' attainment, and the use of data by teachers to identify how best to develop their learners' understanding and skills, are essential to a valid system of reporting in a population assessment. This is absolutely consistent with the aspirations of Curriculum for Excellence in its quest to develop the very best curriculum, learning and teaching methodologies.

A RANGE OF USER REPORTS

The suite of online reports generated from SNSA covers a range of uses at the school level. **Individual reports**, available immediately upon a learner's completion of an assessment, indicate the learner's level of attainment on the SNSA long scale and their performance in that subject in relation to Scottish norms. **Group diagnostic reports** show, as well as aggregate scores, how learners have performed on individual questions, and describe what each question is designed to assess. This diagnostic information can be interpreted and used by teachers to guide next steps in learning and teaching at both class and individual level, and to indicate – alongside their own judgements of learner's strengths and weaknesses – where interventions might be required. **Group aggregate reports** present aggregated results for subgroups of learners, such as classes within a year group, gender groups or learners with English as an Additional Language (EAL).

A suite of online and offline **reports for local authorities** is also provided as part of the SNSA programme.

ENGAGEMENT AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Providing user-friendly, detailed and comprehensive reports is necessary but not sufficient for a successful assessment programme. It is vital that the data are not an end in themselves but that the teaching community uses the information from the assessments as a means of directing learning to achieve articulated experiences and outcomes. A fundamental part of the SNSA roll-out is a programme of information forums, workshops, meetings, online and face-to-face training for teachers and school leaders, all aimed at supporting teachers and school leaders to turn data into information to enhance learning and teaching. Alongside the Scottish Government, ACER and its two Scottish-based partners, SCHOLAR and Twig, have worked closely with stakeholders in education at all levels to ensure that the programmes are appropriate for and meet the aspirations of Scottish education.

Scottish Government specified in its invitation to tender for SNSA that a comprehensive programme of engagement and professional development should accompany the implementation of its national assessment programme. This is an unusual and thoroughly admirable dimension of SNSA, which will be of great interest internationally.

IMPROVEMENT FOR ALL

The SNSA methodology of reporting on long scales, aligned to a core belief that learning improvement can and should occur for all children and young people, regardless of their starting point, is fundamentally consistent with the principles of Curriculum for Excellence and the National Improvement Framework for Scottish Schools. ACER's long scales allow for reporting of growth over time on a single, continuous metric – a metric that retains its meaning from P1 to S3 (and beyond), so that comparison of achievement across year groups is transparent and easily interpretable, and progress can be tracked at individual and group level over time.

PROFESSOR CHRISTINE MERRELL – DURHAM UNIVERSITY

I would be happy to expand upon this written evidence in person, if required.

I am an experienced academic with a substantial publication record. My areas of research expertise include assessment development; monitoring attainment and progress in pre-school and primary schools; research methods and evaluation in education; the achievements of severely inattentive, hyperactive and impulsive young children.

Working within the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring (CEM) at Durham University since 1996 (including directing the monitoring systems between 2009 – 2011 and directing research between 2011 and 2018), I have designed and developed assessments for children aged 3 – 14 years including assessments of reading, spelling, mathematics, English vocabulary, non-verbal ability and motor development. To date, the assessments which I have designed and developed have been taken by over 7 million children, including in schools within many Education Authorities in Scotland.

What information the Government's assessments can provide that contribute to improving the educational outcomes of children and young people

Development in the first few years of life is rapid, and it has long been suggested that the earlier interventions are implemented, the better. The progress made by children in their first year of primary school has a lasting impact. Children who make good progress in that year maintain that advantage up to the end of secondary school (see, for example: Tymms, P., Merrell, C. and Bailey, K. (2018). The Long Term Impact of Effective Teaching. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*. 29(2), 242 – 261. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2017.1404478>). In this study, Tymms et al. followed a cohort c45,000 children from the start of school up to the end of compulsory secondary education. Receiving an effective educational experience in the first year of primary school had a significant positive impact on children's long-term academic outcomes. No other school year was as important as that first one.

Baseline assessment is an essential component of monitoring progress across the primary phase, and the start of Primary 1 is a good starting point for monitoring. Providing teachers with high-quality information about their pupils' development linked to research-based effective strategies for teaching and learning will enable them to make the most of this crucial developmental period of children's lives. The early identification of potential special educational needs is important and whilst a single baseline assessment will not constitute a diagnosis of a specific problem, it can flag issues that can be followed up in more detail over time.

The evidence base for moving away from the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) and introducing standardised assessments at P1, P4, P7, S3

In addition to providing teachers with information to target their teaching appropriately and for the self-evaluation of their effectiveness, standardised assessments can provide a means to evaluate the impact of policy and standards over time. However, the use of an assessment to answer multiple questions requires caution. Information collected for one use (e.g. school accountability) may not be appropriate to evaluate the improvement of standards over time. For an expanded discussion of the potential issues, see Merrell, C. (2012) *Developments in Standardised Assessment: A perspective from the UK*. In Suggate, S and Reese, E. (Eds) *Contemporary Debates in Childhood Development and Education*. Pub. Routledge: London. The SSLN provides

independent, representative data which is independent from other uses, for example school self-evaluation or accountability, and in that sense is valid for monitoring the Scottish education system to evaluate the impact of policy changes over time.

Using data collected through other independent systems can also provide a cost-effective means to monitor the education system. For example, CEM's monitoring systems, (see www.cem.org for more information). For an example of how this has already been done, see example, the report about what children know and can do in Primary 1, and progress during the first school year, recently commissioned by the Scottish Executive: Tymms, P., Merrell, C. and Buckley, H. (2016) Children's development at the start of school in Scotland and the progress made during their first school year: An analysis of PIPS baseline and follow-up assessment data. Research report for the Scottish Government. **ISBN:** 9781785448942. <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/12/5532/0> . This report includes information about trends over time and a comparison with children starting school in Scotland with children in England. Reports such as this are valuable sources of information when evaluating impact of pre-school and early education policies.

In later years of primary school, it is possible to look at the pattern of learning, which can again inform policy. See, for example Luyten, H., Merrell, C. and Tymms, P. (2017). The contribution of schooling to learning gains of pupils in year 1 to 6. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*. 28(3), 374 – 405. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2017.1297312>. This study involves data from Scottish primary schools from CEM's monitoring systems.

In summary, historical data exist separately to the Scottish Surveys and the national assessments, some of which have been used to answer research questions which are relevant to the evaluation of policy.

International comparisons to understand similar and differing approaches used elsewhere

International studies provide another means of making comparisons with data collected through a sampling framework to achieve a representative sample. These cover several of the year-groups targeted by the Scottish Surveys.

The iPIPS study of children starting school (www.ipips.org) (start and end of Primary 1) includes samples of children from Brazil, Russia and South Africa, which can be compared with children in Scotland and England to help understand similar and different contexts and approaches to education.

A study by Aloisi and Tymms (2018): PISA trends, social changes, and education reforms, Educational Research and Evaluation, DOI: 10.1080/13803611.2017.1455290, examined the stability of educational test results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) over 15 years. The test results were remarkably stable, with correlations of up to 0.99 for country-level results over 2 cycles. Despite this stability, trends were observed with scores generally rising year on year, but these were very largely explained by rises in the socioeconomic indicators. Very careful statistical analysis tried and failed to find changes in PISA scores which could be linked to policy changes. Case studies suggested that the most optimistic estimate of the impact of reforms on test scores amount to about an annual effect size of around 0.02.

International studies provide detailed information about children and young people in Scotland and have the added benefit of including comparisons with other countries.

PROFESSOR SUSAN ELLIS – UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

The School of Education at the University of Strathclyde welcomes this opportunity to assist the Education and Skills Committee by providing evidence in relation to the open call for views on standardised assessment in Scotland.

The University of Strathclyde is the biggest Teacher Education faculty in Scotland. The university prides itself on being a 'Place of Useful Learning' and we are committed to research that generates actionable knowledge and that helps to make a practical and positive difference to the children and teachers of Scotland.

We believe that many forms of assessment are important and useful for teachers. In this submission we make the following broad points:

- Standardised assessment data are just data. What matters is how the data are understood, who uses them, how and for which purposes. It is the use of data (including how multiple assessment measures are combined) that determines whether the impact of a standardised assessment process has positive or negative implications for teaching and attainment.
- Many local authorities and schools use a mix of summative assessment data, which may be age--- standardised, standardised or non---standardised. Qualitative data can be used to make summative judgements. At present, how any data are interpreted and put to use by local authorities, schools and teachers is untracked and unexamined. Education professionals need clear national guidance to inform local understandings of ethical and unethical data use.
- Where standardised assessments focus on narrow, atomistic aspects of learning, and where attainment data are treated as 'high stakes', the use of data may have unintended, negative consequences for teachers, schools and learners. Both assessment design and the checks and balances within the system, as well as judicious external monitoring of impacts, can minimise this risk. Part of such system design includes a system for providing teachers, HMIE, policy makers and local authority/RICs staff with professional support to understand and interpret data appropriately.
- Scotland has a national policy of scaling up successful reform. To do this, educators and policy makers need a measure of what works, for whom, in which circumstances. A single standardised measure across all local authorities would enable researchers, educators and the policy community to ensure that taxpayers' money is invested in those reforms likely to show best impact in particular circumstances.
- In the past, under the old 5---14 curriculum, attainment was based on teacher judgement, but target--- setting meant that there were numerous reports of teachers under pressure to massage their attainment judgements upwards. A computerised standardised assessment may protect teachers and provide ballast that prevents such pressure. Also, it seems very unfair to ask teachers to close the attainment gap between rich and poor whilst offering them no support in determining what that gap might be.

The Committee is particularly interested in views about:

- **the evidence base for moving away from the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) and introducing standardised assessments at P1, P4, P7, S3;**

The SSLN is premised on national sampling measures that were designed to minimise the assessment burden on teachers and pupils. However, whilst the sample size is sufficient to build a national picture of pupil performance across Scotland, it is too small to provide useful data for individual local authorities and schools.

Too few pupils are assessed to produce results that could reliably inform specific policy or teaching recommendations or allow any insight into how attainment varies by rurality or school composition. Furthermore, the SSLN measures attainment against broad and lightly specified curriculum levels. It is not clear, when the publication of survey results shows that attainment has gone up or down or shows that there is an attainment gap linked to poverty or gender, which particular understandings or skills in the bundle as a whole have contributed to the difference. These circumstances mean that educators are not clear what the SSLN reports have to say that could inform their own, specific practices or contexts. Although it is about them, it is not particularly helpful to them.

In terms of teacher understandings, the SSLN reports teacher confidence rather than teacher knowledge or agency. Confidence is not necessarily a measure of competence (Kruger and Dunning 1999).

- **what information the Government's assessments can provide that contribute to improving the educational outcomes of children and young people.**

Assessments can be used for different purposes, particularly to inform learning and teaching, and help schools monitor their impact.

Use of Data for Learning and Teaching

Children do not make linear, consistent progress in their learning. Research by the Education Datalab (Datalab 2015) on England's attainment scores showed that only 9% of children actually follow the expected progression pathways through Key Stages 1---4. In primary schools, just 55% of children attained the KS 2 score that was predicted from their KS 1 results; 45% either over--- or under---performed. In secondary schools, the numbers are even lower: only 45% of children made the expected progress between KS 2 and 3 and just 33% made the expected progress between KS3 and 4. Children in P1 with very low initial attainment have particularly unpredictable future attainment. The authors comment "Providing pupils with the curriculum diet that is deemed suitable for the 'Level' they are working at may be doing them a profound disservice, if in reality their trajectories are much more varied." (p.13).

This does not mean that standardised assessment is not worthwhile. The above understanding of how learners progress in unpredictable ways would be impossible without the data, for example. It also gives a snapshot of what children can and cannot do at any one point in time, it allows an overview of the cohort so that teachers can reflect on the adequacy of the curriculum mix and can monitor the impact of their teaching. However, the Datalab research raises questions about tracking and differentiation systems (including those in Scotland) that are rooted in assumptions of linear and consistent learning progress. It raises ethical questions about practices which routinely prescribe differentiated curriculum activities according to 'ability'. This is an issue about data use, but not solely about standardised assessment data. In some Scottish schools, for example, qualitative data from the nursery are used to set or

stream children in P1 and some popular commercial literacy programmes actively recommend this. In some Scottish local authorities, non---standardised locally---devised tests are administered at the end of P1 and the bottom 20% of children automatically assigned to an 'intervention' program, with no detailed analysis about whether it meets their needs. Given the above points about progression, there are serious ethical questions about such practices, which reify the status quo, enshrine disadvantage and actively work against equitable teaching. Scrutiny of standardised assessment data can expose such practices and could become the prompt for national guidance around the ethics of interpreting and responding to data.

Use of Data to Monitor Impact

Standardised assessment can, under specific circumstances, raise pupil attainment. The evidence is from the USA where researchers investigated attainment rises across different states as they adopted standardised assessment policies at different times (e.g. Wong et al 2015). Polikoff, Korn and McFall (2018) indicate that a productive system requires assessments that generate data across a breadth of desired outcomes (which the SNSA does; in fact, the SNSA literacy outcome measures are far broader, and the results are given to the class teachers more quickly, than those of the other popular standardised assessments previously bought by local authorities.) Polikoff et al. also suggest that inferences need to be carefully drawn from the data, need to be transparent, fair, make sense to stakeholder groups and that the consequences need to be carefully monitored. This indicates the need for careful system design to regulate how this is done in Scotland. It would be helpful were attention paid to this.

There is a large literature on unintended negative impacts of standardised assessment, where schools or local authorities begin to 'game' the system by narrowing the curriculum, target all support at those sitting just below the threshold whilst ignoring those who are considerably below it, teach to the test, provide inordinate amounts of 'practice' (see Jennings and Sohn 2014 for an overview), or directly falsify results (Jacob and Levitt 2003). Scotland needs to be aware of these pitfalls in designing its system of standardised assessment, but it does not mean that a standardised assessment system is to be avoided. The issues that were originally raised in the Joseph Rowntree Report (Sosu and Ellis 2014) remain: we need a data---rich, knowledge rich educational community at every policy and practitioner level and in every stakeholder group that is involved in Scottish Education.

Datalab, E. (2015). Seven things you might not know about our schools. Retrieved from education data lab website: <http://www.educationdatalab.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/EduDataLab---7things.pdf>.

Jacob, B. A., & Levitt, S. D. (2003). Rotten apples: An investigation of the prevalence and predictors of teacher cheating. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 118(3), 843---877.

Jennings, J., & Sohn, H. (2014). Measure for measure: How proficiency---based accountability systems affect inequality in academic achievement. *Sociology of Education*, 87(2), 125---141.

Kruger, J., & Dunning, D. (1999). Unskilled and unaware of it: how difficulties in recognizing one's own incompetence lead to inflated self---assessments. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 77(6), 1121.

Polikoff, M. S., Korn, S., & McFall, R. (2018). In need of improvement? Assessing the California Dashboard after one year. *Getting Down to the Facts II*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University.

Sammons, P., Nuttall, D., & Cuttance, P. (1993). Differential school effectiveness: results from a reanalysis of the Inner London Education Authority's Junior School Project data. *British Educational Research Journal*, 19(4), 381---405.

Sosu, E., & Ellis, S. (2014). Closing the attainment gap in Scottish education. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

SUBMISSIONS

THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT

The evidence base for moving away from the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) and introducing standardised assessments at P1, P4, P7, S3;

Context

1. In its [2015 review of education in Scotland](#)¹, the OECD made the following recommendation:

“Strike a more even balance between the formative focus of assessment and developing a robust evidence base on learning outcomes and progression

While learner outcomes should not be the only focus of a standards or appraisal system, stronger reference to learners’ progress will create improvement. The light sampling of literacy and numeracy at the national level has not provided sufficient evidence for stakeholders to use in their own evaluative activities or for national agencies to identify with confidence the areas of strength. Nor has it allowed identification of those aspects or localities where intervention might be needed. Local authorities have sought to fill this space with their own assessments but this is fragmented. The challenge now is to improve the quality of information on those aspects of CfE that are valued by stakeholders including all the capacities of CfE, while retaining the strongly formative focus.”

Introduction

2. The Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) was introduced in 2011 and ran until 2016 (the final results were published in 2017). The replacement for the SSLN is the Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels (ACEL) Return which began in the 2015/2016 academic session. The ACEL data is based on teachers’ professional judgement as to the highest CfE level that children and young people have achieved – the Scottish National Standardised Assessment is one piece of evidence for teachers to consider in reaching that judgement.

The Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy

3. The SSLN was an annual sample survey which monitored national performance of school children at P4, P7 and S2 in numeracy and literacy in alternate years. All mainstream publicly funded and independent schools were invited to participate in the SSLN – in 2016, 97% of publicly funded schools took part.
4. The SSLN sample was made up from two P4 and two P7 pupils from every participating primary school and up to twelve S2 pupils from every participating secondary school. This produced a target sample size of around 4,000 pupils per stage. While this was a significant sample size, the results generated by the SSLN were estimates – there was an element of uncertainty within the results because the pupils sampled may not have reflected the population exactly.
5. Based on stakeholder feedback, a recognised limitation of the SSLN was that it didn’t provide a breakdown below national level (the sample size was too small to provide reliable

¹ *Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective (2015)*: page 23

school or local authority level data) so the data it provided was therefore of limited value to schools and local authorities in determining where to target improvement activity.

6. This point about the limited value of SSLN data in informing improvement activity was also identified by the OECD in its review of Scottish education:

“The light sampling of literacy and numeracy at the national level has not provided sufficient evidence for other stakeholders to use in their own evaluative activities or for national agencies to identify with confidence the areas of strength in the years of the Broad General Education across the four capacities of CfE. Nor has it allowed identification of those aspects or localities where intervention might be needed.”²

7. This informed one of the OECD’s key recommendations, referenced above, about the need to rebalance Scotland’s assessment model.

8. This limitation of the survey prompted a review of the sample design and associated aspects, including the feasibility of expanding the sample size of the SSLN in order to produce local authority level reporting, by Scottish Government statisticians and the survey administrators, SQA, in November 2014. It was concluded however that scaling up the survey model to produce local authority level results was not a viable or realistic option. The key reasons behind this decision were:

- The SSLN survey model was only designed to report at national level and, as such, it was unlikely that it would be “scalable” to the point that local authority results could be produced;
- Smaller local authorities would need to provide a very high proportion of pupils in each stage for assessment;
- Elements of the survey would be very challenging for schools to complete on a larger scale, particularly during an already busy assessment period;
- A significant increase in workload for the teachers involved as well as the need to recruit a significant number of additional writing assessors and group discussion support assessors (who assessed performance in listening and talking);
- A wider exposure of SSLN items and materials was likely to compromise the security and integrity of the survey;
- The item release and replacement strategy would need to change which would impact on the time series analysis – an increased sample size would also limit the ability to pre-test new items alongside the main survey.
- A substantial increase in SQA and Scottish Government staff would be needed to process, check, analyse and publish the data. Producing local authority level data would also make it very difficult to maintain the timeline of publishing results within a year of the survey;
- Moving to local authority level results would have substantial cost implications for schools, SQA, and the Scottish Government.

9. By April 2015, SSLN data was showing a general decline in the proportion of pupils performing well or very well in literacy and numeracy. Since the detailed assessment previously conducted had shown that upscaling the SSLN was not viable, the Scottish

² *Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective (2015)*: page 155

Government explored options for bringing forward an assessment model that would provide consistent, school and local authority level data as part of its consideration of the introduction of the National Improvement Framework for Scottish education. The development of the National Improvement Framework was in response to another of the OECD's recommendations about the need to "develop an integrating framework for assessment and evaluation that encompasses all system levels"³.

The Achievement of CfE Levels Return

10. As part of the development of the National Improvement Framework, the Scottish Government decided to stop the SSLN and adopt in its place a new, census-based approach based on teachers' professional judgement. The Achievement of CfE Levels Return (not the Scottish National Standardised Assessment) is the replacement for the SSLN. Data is collected from schools each June detailing the proportion of children in P1, P4, P7 and S3 who have achieved the relevant Curriculum for Excellence level. This ACEL data is published each December – the [2017/18 data](#) was published on 11 December 2018.

11. Adopting this approach has a number of significant advantages over the SSLN:

- It empowers teachers, placing primacy on their professional judgement as the key indicator of children's progress prior to national qualifications;
- It looks across the full CfE level not just elements of each level and determines whether a child or young person has achieved that level;
- It embeds the primary method of assessing the standard of Scottish education within the curriculum. A teacher's professional judgement on whether a child or young person has achieved a level is based on a range of evidence from a number of sources and potentially over a number of years;
- It aligns to systems that schools and local authorities already have in place to monitor and tracking each individual child or young person's progress within and between CfE levels;
- It provides annual data at school and local authority level and data which is broken down by pupil characteristics, allowing school and local authority staff to analyse their own data for improvement purposes. National level data also contributes to national improvement planning.
- It provides annual data on both literacy and numeracy rather than every two years and it includes an additional stage, Primary 1, that was not covered by the SSLN;
- The results can be published and used for improvement purposes more quickly, within 6 months of the data being collected. SSLN results were generally published 11 months after the survey took place.
- Reflects the OECD's endorsement that "an assessment system that encompasses a variety of assessment evidence, that includes rich tasks and a clear indication of expected benchmarks referenced to the breadth and depth of the curriculum, can enhance teachers' assessment skills and learners' progress."⁴

Supporting teachers' professional judgement

³ *Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective (2015)*: page 12

⁴ *Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective (2015)*: page 157

12. The Scottish Government has taken a number of steps to support teachers in making these judgements: the publication of literacy and numeracy benchmarks to provide clarity on what the achievement of a level looks like; the Quality Assurance and Moderation Support Officer (QAMSO) programme which is helping to ensure the consistency and robustness of teacher judgements across schools and local authorities; and the introduction of the Scottish National Standardised Assessment (SNSA) to bring an element of national consistency to teachers' judgements.

13. In deciding to introduce standardised assessments to support teachers' professional judgement, the Scottish Government was aware that a range of standardised assessments were already in use by practitioners in 29 local authorities, clearly demonstrating the value that teachers see in these assessments in providing as part of their overall evidence of pupil progress. It was evident however that a variety of assessment tools were in use providing a range of information to teachers and schools. None of these tools were specific to Curriculum for Excellence. This point was also identified by the OECD⁵, who also went on to note the potential negative implications of such an approach:

*"The different approaches to assessment undertaken by the local authorities open up the risk of duplication and militate against gaining a clearer all-Scotland picture. Shared approaches to assessment by the local authorities would contribute to a strengthened "middle" between the centre, on the one hand, and schools, on the other."*⁶

14. In developing a system of national assessments, the Scottish Government was mindful that there was limited public/parental knowledge about these local assessments. Introducing a national assessment system had the potential to raise the profile of assessment and raise concerns among parents and teachers about the impact such a system would have on teaching and learning and on children and young people. There is considerable evidence around the use of standardised assessments (in the UK and elsewhere) and the potentially negative impact that the use of such assessments can have. For example, we know that many approaches to standardised assessment are seen as "high stakes", with the primary purpose being to generate data for accountability purposes and that this often leads to adverse behaviours such as "teaching to the test" and the narrowing of the curriculum that results.

Assessment for learning

15. The Scottish Government directly addressed these concerns in designing and developing the SNSA. The SNSA was informed by [extensive consultation](#) with local government colleagues, practitioners, parents and other interested stakeholders. Development focused on designing an assessment system in which the purpose of the assessment is to inform learning and, in turn, school improvement – not an assessment focused on school accountability. This reflects a key principle of the Scottish education system, that assessment is for learning. This was set out in the joint Scottish Government/ ADES letter to Directors of Education about the place of standardised assessment in October 2018.

16. This has resulted in a unique assessment system that has been specifically designed for the Scottish context. The SNSA is a diagnostic, supportive assessment that is designed to improve children's learning, giving teachers helpful feedback on children's next steps in aspects of reading, writing and numeracy. This is fundamentally different to other models of standardised assessment which are about 'proving' learning, with results being published. Information from SNSA supports teachers' professional judgement of the progress that children and young people are making towards the relevant Curriculum for Excellence level.

⁵ *Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective (2015)*: page 155

⁶ *Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective (2015)*: page 165

That judgement is reached based on all the evidence available to teachers – the SNSA is just one, nationally consistent, element of that evidence.

17. The SNSA is:

- Formative assessments, the key purpose of which is to provide diagnostic information to teachers on aspects of literacy and numeracy. This helps the teacher to shape teaching and learning and to support their judgements about children and young people's progress.
- Online, adaptive assessments meaning that the difficulty of the questions that children and young people get will vary depending on the answers they give to ensure an appropriate level of challenge.
- Not for accountability purposes, no school or local authority level data is published. Some national level SNSA is published to provide the overall picture of achievement in the assessments and to inform national improvement activity. The Scottish Government does not publish school league tables.
- Not designed to provide a definitive assessment to confirm whether a child has or has not achieved the appropriate level. Instead, they are indicative and just one source of evidence that a teacher may call on in exercising their professional judgment as to whether a child has achieved a level.
- Taken at any point in the school year, not during set assessment "windows" – it is for schools, in consultation with their local authority, to decide when children and young people should undertake the assessments.
- Bespoke to Scotland, the assessments are specifically aligned to the Curriculum for Excellence literacy and numeracy benchmarks and the questions have been assured by Education Scotland as appropriate for the relevant level.

18. On 11 December, the Scottish Government published a [National Report](#) on the first year of the assessments prepared by ACER UK Ltd – the contractor who developed the SNSA system. The report provides a detailed look at the design, scope and coverage of the assessments in 2017/18 as well as a series of bar charts which provide a national level summary of how well children and young people performed in the assessments.

19. The Scottish Government, along with ACER, are also committed to continuous improvement. A [User Review](#) was conducted at the end of the first year of implementation and the report with recommendations for enhancements was published in August 2018 in time to impact on the delivery of the SNSA in 2018/19.

20. One significant enhancement is systematically to collect children and young people's views on their experience of the assessments which is now being gathered and will be fed into the improvement process.

International comparisons to understand similar and differing approaches used elsewhere

21. There is a wealth of evidence available on the performance and impact of standardised testing and assessment regimes across the world which the Scottish Government considered during the consultation on the National Improvement Framework and in developing the SNSA. What was clear from studying these approaches was that there are a number of elements of a standardised assessment system which are considered to produce negative outcomes, not

least “high stakes” models where the outcomes from the assessment are used for learning, teacher and/or school accountability, for example:

- Using results data from the assessments for accountability purposes such as school league tables can lead to adverse behaviours such as teaching to the test, the narrowing of the school curriculum and focusing time and resources on children and young people who are “borderline”.
- High stakes tests/assessments where the results are used to determine whether children and young people have successfully completed a stage of their learning or their readiness to move to the next level place children under constant stress and anxiety. In some cases the results are also used to stream or set children increasing the amount of pressure.
- Holding tests/assessments on set days, particularly for younger children, can produce unreliable results. A child could for example, be anxious, hungry, distracted or just having a bad day – all of which could negatively impact on their performance.

22. The OECD’s 2011 paper “[Student Standardised Testing: Current Practices in OECD Countries and A Literature Review](#)”⁷ identifies many of these themes and also sets out key lessons for countries in their use of standardised assessments. Building on this, the OECD also made some helpful observations in its review of education in Scotland, based on international evidence, on how standardised assessments could be successfully incorporated within an effective assessment system:

*“Standardised assessment tools can be used formatively in all parts of the system if they are referenced to the curriculum, flexible in their use, and provide high quality just-in-time information for teaching and learning, while at the same time having efficient ways to aggregate the results through the system.”*⁸

23. In developing the SNSA model as part of the National Improvement Framework, great care was taken therefore to avoid a high stakes approach (as described in paragraphs 15-17 above) and to ensure the formative benefits for learning and teaching described by the OECD.

24. This was recognised by the Scottish Government’s International Council of Education Providers (ICEA) in its [2018 formal report](#) in June 2018 the Council said:

“The ICEA initially expressed reservations about the introduction of these assessments and shared their views with the Scottish Government. The ICEA notes however, that the assessments are not “high stakes tests” and the results do not determine any key future outcomes for young people, such as which school they go to, or whether they can progress to the next level. There is no pass or fail, and the ICEA notes that this approach to assessment and its central interpretation can be of formative use.”

25. At the subsequent meeting of the ICEA in September 2018, Dr Allison Skerrett (from the University of Texas, Austin) speaking on behalf of the Council said that Scotland had carefully designed the assessments, their modes of delivery and their purpose. She said that Scotland has a real opportunity to be a model for other systems that have employed standardised assessments.

⁷ Morris, A. (2011), “Student Standardised Testing: Current practices in OECD Countries and Literature Review”, OECD Education Working Papers, No.65, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5kg3rp9qbnr6-en>

⁸ *Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective* (2015): page 157

What information the Government's assessments can provide that contribute to improving the educational outcomes of children and young people.

26. Key to the success of the SNSA is whether they provide a valid and reliable assessment of children and young people's progress in literacy and numeracy and whether they provide high quality feedback to teachers that can be used to improve outcomes.

27. Information published by the Scottish Government under Freedom of Information legislation on [18 September](#), [26 September](#) and [17 October](#) 2018 suggests that the SNSA are a valid assessment of children's literacy and numeracy under CfE. Updated data on this is also included in appendix 5 to the National Report referenced in paragraph 18 above. The evidence is also clear that the SNSA are a reliable assessment tool – ie the results they produce in relation to children and young people are an accurate reflection of their progress. This data is quoted by Professor Lindsay Paterson in a [blog](#) on the issue that he posted on 14 November 2018.

28. Alignment to the Scottish curriculum is also key for Scottish teachers and sets the SNSA apart from other standardised assessments previously used by schools and local authorities. All questions in the SNSA are quality assured by Education Scotland and questions are trialled during the previous year to ensure they are appropriate for children and young people.

29. The SNSA system generates a real-time report for the teacher each time a child undertakes an assessment. The individual report provides the teacher with rich diagnostic information on the child's capacity in the assessment on that particular day. Teachers are shown where the child sits on a common 'long scale', they are given detailed information on where the child has performed well and where less well and they are shown how the child's assessment performance compares to the national norm. Teachers value the provision of this detailed evidence alongside their existing knowledge of the child and the indicators it provides on what would be appropriate next steps in learning.

30. The system also provides class, school and local authority level reports all of which are designed to be used for improvement purposes. The class and school level reports are comprehensive and enable detailed analysis. This allow teachers and school managers to identify patterns in learning across groups of children and identify areas of strength or development needs.

31. The positive impact that the assessments and the information they provide to teachers can have on learning and teaching for children and young people is clearly demonstrated in the series of [P1 assessment case studies](#) which the Scottish Government published in October. It is particularly noteworthy that the practitioners providing feedback reported that information from the SNSA boosted teacher's confidence in their own professional judgments and highlighted areas for further learning, including aspects that may have been missed, and picked up any patterns within particular cohorts of learners. The information can also help redirect learning and support teachers in looking at how certain groupings might be working. It has already supported staff to challenge perceptions about learners and shine a light on areas that might have been missed.

32. It is also worth noting the following feedback from teachers provided through the EIS member survey on the assessments carried out in summer 2018:

"Data is incredibly detailed and personalised. Feedback will be very useful in looking for next steps. Some of our data showed areas of weakness we hadn't expected and some showed strengths, especially in P1, that we hadn't expected. I think that they will support teacher judgement and will make us look at some things and children's needs."

“This [numeracy assessment] highlighted areas which we had yet to cover towards the end of the year, and allowed me to see that 3 of my P1s already had sound knowledge of aspects they wouldn’t be learning about until the beginning of P2. I have therefore changed my approach with this group and feel confident to push them further than I may have done before.”

33. An extensive training programme, provided by SCHOLAR from Heriot Watt University, was rolled out across the country. The training courses have been extended to cover everything from how to set up and run the assessments to how to use the data for improvement, and how to support children with additional special needs (ASN). These courses are available in multiple formats including on-line. The evaluations have been very positive (95% rated satisfactory or better) and support teacher development.

Conclusion

34. There is a wide range of national level activity to support improvement in Scottish education. The Scottish Government remains absolutely committed to the twin aims of excellence and equity to help ensure that all our children and young people are able to fulfil their potential. Improving the data, we have available and using that data for improvement purposes at all levels of the system is an important part of that commitment, alongside our education reform programme. By expanding that evidence base and by providing diagnostic information to teachers and schools to help them tailor future teaching and learning, the SNSA are a key part of that reform and improvement agenda.

EDUCATION SCOTLAND

SNSA – ASSESSING THE EVIDENCE BASE AND ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

Introduction

1. Education Scotland (ES) has supported the Scottish Government in the policy development and implementation of Scottish National Standardised Assessments since their inception.
2. As a joint partner in the National Improvement Framework programme, amongst other responsibilities ES provided educational advice on:
 - Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSA): Educational advice on the implementation and delivery of the SNSA; advice on educational content of assessment questions and how schools can use SNSA information as part of the range of assessment evidence used to support teacher professional judgement.
 - Gaelic Medium National Standardised Assessments: Educational advice on the development, implementation and delivery of the GME SNSA; educational content of assessment questions and advice for implementation in schools as part of the range of assessment evidence used to support teacher professional judgement.
 - Delivery of national quality assurance and moderation support through Quality Assurance and Moderation Support Officers (QAMSO) training and advice delivered nationally, at Regional Improvement Collaborative (RIC) level and locally.

Policy development and evidence

3. The proposal to introduce the Scottish National Standardised Assessments, and the evidence base referenced (including international expertise) was led by the Scottish Government. Their submission to this Committee is expected to address these first two focus points and will include reference to Education Scotland where relevant.

Contribution of the assessments to educational outcomes

4. The Committee's third focus point asks: *'what information the Government's assessments can provide that contribute to improving the educational outcomes of children and young people'*.
5. Education Scotland has worked alongside the Scottish Government through the implementation of the Scottish National Standardised Assessments. Our educationalists and HM Inspectors are witnessing the impact of the assessments and their contribution to Scottish education.

Educational context of change

6. The Education Scotland report [Quality and improvement in Scottish education: 2012-16](#) (QulSE) gave a summary of inspection findings for that period. Within and across all sectors, QulSE highlighted the need for greater consistency, saying: “Scottish education does not yet provide all children and young people with consistently high-quality learning experiences. Unless this variability is addressed we will not achieve the national ambition of excellence and equity for all learners.”
7. The report called for a range of improvements by education providers, including:
 - improving arrangements for assessment and tracking to provide personalised guidance and support throughout the learner journey;
 - improving further the use of self-evaluation and improvement approaches to ensure consistent high quality of provision; and
 - growing a culture of collaboration within and across establishments and services to drive innovation, sharing of practice and collective improvement.
8. Key points highlighted included the need for primary schools to put in place better arrangements for assessing and tracking children’s progress, including having a shared understanding of standards within Curriculum for Excellence levels. It called on them, as a priority, to identify and address any gaps in attainment and achievement between their least and most disadvantaged children. In secondary schools, it found that the quality and impact of assessment, monitoring and tracking of young people’s progress during the broad general education is an area requiring ongoing development.

Data available to support teachers

9. There has been an evolution in the data available to, and requested from, teaching professionals to support improving educational outcomes.
10. Previously, through our inspection and curriculum support activities a picture emerged of how the former Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) was impacting the education system.
11. Anecdotal comments from practitioners revealed that they did not feel that the information from the SSLN was connected to their school or their children. The SSLN worked on a sample basis. Almost all schools across the country were represented, but only a few children from each school were selected to take part in the survey. Practitioners felt that it was not representative of their school cohort. There was a perception that the children selected to take part in the survey were not the ones they would have chosen, with a sense that they did not represent the full spread of ability and support need in the school.
12. The survey did provide a great deal of high quality information at a national level on children’s ability, comparisons of SIMD and performance, and evidence of attainment over time. One of the key features for Education Scotland was the information the

survey provided on answers to individual questions that were scrutinised by the literacy and numeracy teams. This information was used to create professional learning resources, which provided practitioners with examples of questions, types of mistakes children were making, how to teach these areas, and resources to help in the classroom. These were promoted and additional support provided through improvement conferences held for practitioners across the country.

13. The **achievement of a level data**, collected in at P1, P4 and P7 and S3 and based on a teacher's professional judgement, has now replaced SSLN. This provides data from every child and every classroom, rather than on the sample approach used by SSLN.
14. Education Scotland support is provided by National Improvement Framework Advisors (NIF Advisors) through the QAMSO network, building regional and national consistency in teacher's professional judgement of each level, and providing a national picture as well as a local and classroom perspective. This has been supported by the development of a National Moderation Hub available to practitioners via GLOW. It provides a range of high quality advice and guidance which practitioners at all levels can use to improve and support their moderation processes.
15. Evaluation from our QAMSO events in 17-18 revealed growing impacts at school and local authority level, including: assessment and moderation is becoming a priority; clearer focus through local authority steering groups; an increasing shared level of expectation amongst Quality Improvement Officers, Moderation Co-ordinators, Headteachers and teachers, and schools contributing to banks of evidence as reference points.
16. Education Scotland produced National Benchmarks to support practitioners when making decisions of children's progress between levels and achievement of a level. There have been a series of engagement sessions on the Benchmarks.
17. Before the introduction of SNSA, standardised assessments in various forms were used in almost all of Scotland's local authorities.
18. The **Scottish National Standardised Assessments** were introduced nationally in August 2017. They are not a replacement for the SSLN, but instead provide diagnostic information on how each child who took the assessment is performing in numeracy, reading and writing.
19. The information from the SNSA can be used as part of a range of evidence to support teachers' professional judgement on the progress of each child. The assessments enable a standardised score and age-equivalent score to be produced for each learner, placed on a long scale from P1-S3 which will allow teachers to track progress over time. The SNSAs support teachers in identifying key strengths in a child's or young person's progress and crucially identify areas where the learner may need further support. As such, they are designed to be used formatively and not as summative assessments.

20. Practitioners can look at the data from different cohorts of children to identify any patterns in the areas in which they are doing well or need support and can adjust their teaching. Across the school, the establishment can review its data to identify the areas which are being taught well and the areas in which children are not doing so well and can organise whole school professional development in these areas.
21. At authority level, the data can be used as above to identify areas of good practice which can be disseminated across the local authority, for example a school which has an SIMD of 1&2 performing very highly in one or two areas. It also helps identify areas that at authority level can be addressed through providing continuous professional-learning.
22. It is important that the assessments are seen as part of a bigger picture. No decision about a learner would be made on the basis of their SNSA assessment alone. Instead, the SNSA contributes towards a range of assessment information which teachers draw on to develop next steps in learning and determine progress within a level and achievement of a level. At a national level the data from SNSA can be used in a similar way to the SSLN data informing the development and maintenance of support and professional learning materials.

Impact of SNSA assessments

23. For the Scottish National Standardised Assessments User Review Year 1 – Session 2017/18, Education Scotland provided some initial feedback from the sample of school inspections conducted throughout 2017/2018. They noted that 'positive steps are being taken to make effective use of assessment as part of learning and teaching in some schools. SNSA were mentioned positively in that staff were using them to support identification of learning needs'. The inspection evidence highlights that schools need to make use of a range of assessment tools to support the improvement of children and young people's learning.
24. In the review, as Chief Inspector I commented 'The SNSA provide teachers with an invaluable resource to identify key strengths in a child's progress and crucially identify areas where a child may need further support. This is especially valuable in the early years. P1 teachers use the information the assessments provide to tailor support and to personalise approaches to ensure children get the very best start in their education. It can also inform how the curriculum is shaped across a cohort. For example, where a gap has been identified for a number of children, appropriate learning opportunities and support can be developed in a more targeted way'.
25. In addition to the Review, Education Scotland conducted interviews with individual teachers and headteachers on the impact of the assessments in primary 1 settings provide anecdotal evidence which is broadly representative of our data so far. [These case studies have been published on our National Improvement Hub](#):
 - a. "We found that diagnostic feedback from the SNSAs allowed the primary 1 teacher to determine the progress of each pupil in her class against that of their peers, and the year group as a whole. This information helped to 'triangulate' the teacher's professional judgement on children's progress. As

the diagnostic data provided largely matched progress observed from day-to-day assessment evidence, in general terms, it boosted staff's confidence in their own professional judgement.

- b. "As part of last session's school improvement plan, there was a focus on the development of non-fiction reading. Given that some of the questions in the literacy assessment were based on non-fiction texts, for us, this will mean having a continued focus on ensuring that pupils at all stages are given opportunities to access a range of both fiction and non-fiction texts throughout the year." **Tarbolton Primary School, South Ayrshire**
- c. "The assessments ... proved useful in identifying areas of literacy and numeracy that, in certain classes, had not been learned in enough depth. Consequently, we were able to focus on these areas during the summer term. An analysis of individual learner feedback also provided next steps in learning for specific children. Overall, diagnostic feedback was mostly consistent with teacher expectations/professional judgement. Inevitably, there were a few 'outliers' – those children who did better or less well than expected. In such cases, this prompted further reflection and discussion on the progress of these individuals." **Corpus Christi Primary School, Glasgow**
- d. "One of the benefits that emerged was when children did not perform in line with teacher judgement. This led to questioning why this might have been the case. On further investigation into the circumstances, it became clear that there were other issues having an impact on the child. This really helped to reinforce the importance of being aware of all the factors that affect children's learning and staff were then in a much better position to provide the right support ... Looking forward, the Scottish National Standardised Assessments will help identify aspects of learning that may have been missed and pick up any patterns within particular cohorts of learners. They will help to redirect learning and support teachers in looking at how certain groupings might be working. They have already supported staff to challenge perceptions about learners and shine a light on areas that might have been missed." **Fettercairn Primary School, Aberdeenshire**
- e. "The data has ... helped to identify learning needs for each child and has made it very easy to create groupings of children who require support in a particular area, thereby allowing a more personalised approach to learning and teaching. An analysis of the diagnostic feedback has allowed interventions to be introduced early and for these to be reviewed to show the impact of addressing the needs of the child. This means that issues in learning do not go unnoticed and develop into a major area of difficulty for a child. This was not the same with previous assessment types, as it was not possible to see how a child had responded to individual questions.

"The data has made tracking and monitoring and professional dialogue much richer, with subsequent interventions being much more effective and tangible. As a cluster, staff have worked together to identify those areas where pupils performed less well than expected and have worked together to improve learning and teaching in these areas...Overall, the whole process has helped

to identify children's needs – not just those who are not 'on track'. Consequently, the Scottish National Standardised Assessments are helping to improve learning and teaching through the analysis and discussion of the diagnostic information they produce." **Peel Primary School, West Lothian**

26. The [case studies on Education Scotland's National Improvement Hub](#) also contain advice from the featured schools and from Education Scotland on the successful administration of the assessments. This includes ensuring that pupils are 'PC-ready', not putting a huge emphasis on the assessments, keeping the children relaxed and allowing them to stop and start the assessment at any time.

The future of assessments

27. The Deputy First Minister has announced an independent review of the approach to P1 assessments within the context of the National Improvement Framework, to report by May 2019. In my role as Chief Advisor, I was involved in advising the Deputy First Minister on the appointment of David Reedy, who will lead the review.
28. A new SNSA P1 Practitioner Forum has recently been formed, which will include ES NIF, Early Years, and literacy and numeracy officers. The main function of the practitioner forum will be to share experiences and offer advice and support, and it will evaluate and be informed by a range of evidence including; the opinions of practitioners; parents; professional associations and other key stakeholders. An important focus will be ensuring an appropriate balance is struck between assessment as part of on-going learning, within a play-based learning environment, and the need to ensure teachers are supported in making nationally consistent judgements about children's learning and progress.

Conclusion

29. Eighteen months after the introduction of SNSAs, we are seeing evidence of the value that they are bringing to schools and how practitioners are beginning to use the information to improve educational outcomes. Schools are beginning to use the information from the SNSA to support identification of children's next steps in learning.
30. While standardised assessments were previously well established as an educational tool in Scotland, creating the SNSA has allowed a national picture to be compiled. This contributes as part of a range of evidence to support teachers professional judgement of achievement of a level.

Gayle Gorman
HM Chief Inspector of Education
December 2018

TEACHERS/ TEACHING REPRESENTATIVE ORGANISATIONS**ALISON TAYLOR**

As a Support for Learning Teacher across two partner primary schools, I was asked to organise and manage the P1, P4 and P7 pupils to complete their SNSAs.

I completed 2 sessions of training before I did this task. My authority instructed schools to complete the SNSAs in May last year (2017).

Due to time constraints and other duties to perform I had to get the pupils to complete their assessments in groups out of class. They were all given a school notebook to work on. These devices have touch pads and no mouse. They are also quite small screen sizes. Headsets were available if they needed them.

In my experience the P1s found the mechanics of navigating around and through the SNSAs was quite tricky. This was due to:

- poor or underdeveloped fine motor control to use a tracker pad (no mouse available)
- the whole page could not be seen on the screen at one time, so they needed to remember and succeed in scrolling up and down to get to the NEXT button
- complications working through a text/book. They had to remember to click on the SPEAK button to listen to instructions and then select to listen to chapters/paragraphs of the text before answering questions at the end.

I found that the P4s and P7s managed to navigate through their SNSAs despite it still being a bit cumbersome due to some of the above.

In my role as a SfLT I value and use assessments of pupils' skills and knowledge to plan interventions and next steps in their teaching & learning. I am not in agreement with some of the CfE benchmarks and the Levels that some are allocated to, so this is reflected in my opinion of the content of the SNSAs. The SNSAs are based on the benchmarks which do not always tell me details about the core skills and knowledge of pupils that I need to know about with regard to learning to decode or encode. The science and evidence behind learning to read is not solely reflected in the benchmarks. In my opinion some benchmarks which are included are misguided as they are based on whole language/balanced literacy ideas.

In my experience the SNSAs were completed in our schools because we were instructed to do them by our authority and Scottish Government. Each authority could decide when they were to be completed so data cannot be compared across Scotland. At the training we were told that the data was for our schools and authority only and the SG would not use it for league tables etc.

We were not asked to provide the results from our P7s to their secondary schools. As they were done in May as primary schools we did not have time to evaluate the results so they were not used for anything. This would seem a waste of time and effort.

We have only just had time to look at last year's P1 and P4 results. We do our own assessments in literacy and numeracy as we work through the session to help us plan interventions and next steps in teaching & learning. We have not felt that we need to go to the SNSAs to give us extra details.

I am not against assessments in fact quite the opposite. However, I am not sure that the content on the SNSAs as they stand provide us with relevant and required information to support the teaching of the pupils. Snap shots at P1, P4 and P7 do not help us in the other years. Teachers need to assess pupils all through their years at school. It is part of the teaching and learning cycle. Only doing SNSAs at 4-year levels suggests to me that it will eventually be used by Scottish Government for other purposes.

I do not see how assessments done at different times in the session can be standardised. You cannot compare if they could be completed up to 11 months apart.

I do not agree with the Upstart Campaign that P1s should only play at school and not participate in any planned and explicit teaching and learning. I believe there is a place for both. None of the P1s in my experience were upset by completing the SNSAs. They enjoy being on a computer but that does not mean that due to mechanical issues that they performed to their best. I would never manage any assessment in a pressurised way or allow pupils to get anxious. They all tried their best.

4/12/18

EIS

The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), Scotland's largest teacher trade union, representing 80% of Scotland's teachers and lecturers, welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to this inquiry by the Committee on the evidence base for the recently introduced Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSAs).

The EIS has been involved in the debate and discussion around national standardised assessments since the First Minister in September 2015 made the announcement on their introduction.

The EIS is of the firm view that all assessment, both by its design and method of delivery, including the way in which feedback is given to children and young people, should support learning. Our union has been influential in shifting the initial thinking of the Scottish Government away from designing SNSAs as a summative assessment tool, with tests to be undertaken during what resembled an exam-type diet, and results of which would be published on a school by school basis; such a potentially damaging, high-stakes model of assessment, designed to serve an explicit accountability imperative, would have had the unintended consequence of worsening educational inequality.

In its stead, the current model is one which at least sought to be diagnostic in nature and was intended to be one small contribution to the professional judgement of teachers, predominantly based on a much wider, more sophisticated, formative assessment context.

Our initial evaluation of the extent to which this has proven to be the case in the first year of SNSA implementation, however, is negative. The use of the assessments has largely breached the guidelines established and moved them in practice towards the high stakes testing approach which had been rejected. (The EIS continues to monitor and evaluate the use and effectiveness of SNSAs.)

This response will focus on two areas of the inquiry, mainly: the evidence base for moving away from the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy; and what information the government's assessments can provide that contribute to improving the educational outcomes of children and young people.

The evidence base for moving away from the SSLN

In the view of the EIS, the evidence base for moving away from the SSLN has never been made clear by the Scottish Government; nor indeed has the evidence base for the re-introduction of national assessments in the interests of closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

The EIS considered the SSLN to be a useful sampling tool, serving to inform aspects of education policy, until it fell foul of the Scottish Government's rash reaction to the criticism of political opponents who sought to capitalise on what was a relatively modest – albeit concerning – dip in the SSLN Literacy results in 2015. These results were produced by the Survey at a point when the impact of austerity and its resultant poverty were weighing heavily on at least 20% of the pupils who took part, yet the political focus was less on that fact than on constructing a false narrative of failure about Scottish education. The EIS view remains that educational inequality must be tackled at its root and by investing in education. Collective political commitment in these areas leads to better outcomes for children and young people; politicking and spin around the messages of attainment data, do not.

In terms of the SSLN as a sampling tool, the EIS favours the proportionate gathering of data to provide appropriate system-wide information to inform policy making, whilst protecting the crucial

role of assessment in supporting learning, and avoiding the league table approach which featured within the previous regime of national testing, and which was removed for good reason with the introduction of CfE.

Finland concurs:

'At the national level sample-based student assessments ... that have no stakes for students, teachers, or schools are the main means to inform policy-makers and the public on how Finland's school system is performing. Teachers and principals in Finland have a strong sense of professional responsibility to teach their children well but also to judge how well children have learned what they are supposed to learn according to curriculum designed by teachers.' ([Washington Post](#), 25 March 2014)

Rather than the emergence of any evidence of an inherent flaw in the SSLN as a sampling tool, what was clearly visible was the instinct of some to seize upon data about children's and young people's learning, for ill-purpose, which apparently propelled the Scottish Government towards seeking a different set of measures of system progress towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap. No clear evidence base for SNSAs has ever been forthcoming.

Indeed, the EIS and others were truly baffled as to the suddenness and the intensity with which the Scottish Government appeared welded to the principle of national standardised assessment. Since 2015, no one in Scotland has come forward laden with evidence of the virtue of such a model and identifying themselves as the lead proponent; no academic journal or conclusive system research has been cited as the rationale for the development of SNSAs as a tool for realising greater educational equity.

On the contrary, there is a strong evidence base to suggest that large-scale standardised testing/assessment is an inhibitor of equity, and of student wellbeing which is inextricably linked to young people's ability to make good progress in their learning. Now much documented-Finland, an international champion of educational equity and excellence, almost entirely rejects standardised assessment. Andy Hargreaves- one of the Scottish Government's own International Council of Education Advisors - warns of the growing evidence of 'ill-being' caused by 'standardised testing and out-moded approaches to learning and teaching' (based on observation of standardised assessment practice in Ontario and South Korea, in particular). Much international evidence points to the inherent bias within standardised assessments in favour of more affluent learners; there is the potential, then, for the (mis-)handling of results to exacerbate existing educational inequalities related to socio-economic background.

Information SNSAs can provide that contribute to improving the educational outcomes of children and young people

The EIS is of the firm view that assessment must be for the benefit of learners in the classroom. All assessment, by content and delivery style, must align fully with what is taught to ensure its validity, and should align with the values underpinning CfE, of which commitment to social justice and equity is one.

The question of assessment validity is highly pertinent to the continuing debate around P1 SNSAs. The EIS is clear that SNSAs are misaligned with and contradictory to, the play-based pedagogy and curriculum of Early Level CfE. For this reason, we have called for them to be scrapped – not to be replaced with a different brand of standardised assessment according to the particular preference of a local authority, and not as a result of political game-playing by local councillors, but to enable the consolidation of assessment practice that is appropriate for a genuinely play-based P1 curriculum.

At all ages and stages, the EIS is clear that all assessment data gathered must be of use to teachers, and, crucially, to learners themselves. They need to understand the criteria for 'success', and assessment feedback must be accessible to them if the assessment is to have any value in supporting their future progress. Any assessment which does not possess these features will not provide information that is useful to learning and teaching in the classroom; is wasteful of valuable time for good quality learning and teaching; and worse still, can actively damage children's confidence, muddle theirs and their teacher's understanding of their learning, and slow or even reverse their progress as a result.

Currently schools and teachers use a wide range of assessment methods, involving human interaction, evaluation and observation, which gather rich data on children's individual progress – their strengths, development needs and next steps. Coined 'small data' by another of the International Council of Educational Advisers, Pasi Sahlberg, this is the information that is most useful to teachers, learners and parents as they work in partnership to progress individuals' learning. Such data may not be easily understood by those driving narrow accountability agendas either at local or national level, but this is the information on which successful learning and greater equity of outcome fundamentally depends.

Questions remain for the EIS about the assessment validity of SNSAs in terms of their content, mode of delivery, including in digital format, and ability to provide feedback that is meaningful to learners; our scepticism about the national drive for 'big data' to which SNSA results can contribute, holds firm.

Prior to and coinciding with the launch of SNSAs, speaking at various conferences and meetings of stakeholders, Scottish Government officials made clear the relatively marginal importance of SNSAs as an assessment tool. The assessments were said to cover at a maximum around one tenth of the skills and knowledge expected at each CfE level in two areas of the curriculum only- Literacy and Numeracy.

The coverage of SNSAs in terms of the knowledge and skills assessed is, by the government's own admission, quite limited, as is the assessment information elicited. In the case of the Literacy assessment pertaining to Writing, for example, it provides only minimal diagnostic or summative data (depending on how the assessments are used), on children's grasp of some technical aspects of writing – spelling, grammar and punctuation. (In this regard, the assessments do not align well with how writing is or should be taught, which calls into question the reliability and validity of the information that they provide on children's understanding of writing.) Any data produced by SNSA completion requires the much richer, broader collection of assessment evidence gathered by teachers through talking with, listening to, and observing children as they engage in learning activities; and through evaluating both the process and products of children's learning across a whole curricular area.

A further issue lies in what appears to be a lack of shared clarity around the purpose of the assessments. When first announced by the government, it was clear that the intention was that they would be a summative measure of children's attainment, applied across the country during the same window of time each year. The influence of the EIS and others persuaded the government of the value of some forms of standardised assessment for diagnostic purposes, and of the fact that if assessment is to genuinely support the learning of individual children, then whole cohorts and classes of young people should not be undertaking the assessments at the same time. SNSAs were then designed to enable their use at any point in the year, the government advising that the timing be determined by schools and teachers in consultation with the local authority.

What happened in the first year of implementation, though, was that children in 25 local authorities- the vast majority- sat the assessments at the same time, teachers having had little to no decision-making influence on the timing. The marginalisation of teacher professional judgement in determining the timing of what should be diagnostic assessments to support learning and teaching for individual and groups of children, compromises the usefulness of any information elicited.

The recent publication of teacher judgement of CfE levels obtained by pupils at P1, P4, P7 and S3 during session 2017-18 highlights an increase in the numbers of children reaching the appropriate level within the timeframe desired. Though 2017-18 was the school session in which SNSAs were introduced, the recent successes cannot be credited to national standardised assessment since most schools carried them out, as largely directed by local authorities, in the final weeks of the session, for summative purposes, when it was too late for teachers to use the information diagnostically to benefit children's learning and progress towards the appropriate CfE levels. Those successes were the result of teachers' efforts to ensure the provision of quality learning and teaching, leading to strong outcomes for our children and young people, amidst huge challenges stemming from continuing workload increase, pay erosion and teacher shortage.

A recent EIS snapshot survey of members who had been involved in Year 1 delivery of SNSAs specifically asked for comment on the extent to which data provided in SNSA learner reports had been useful in providing reliable information on children's progress, in identifying next steps in learning, and informing professional judgement on the achievement of CfE levels.

This question elicited 40 pages of comments - 33 pages contained negative comments; pages of positive or more neutral feedback totalled 7.

The majority of comments in response to the question of its utility to learning and teaching, were critical of the value of SNSA data. The reasons cited were largely the unreliability of the assessment data in the context of wider assessment – in many cases the evidence provided was not in line with the wealth of information elicited by more valid and reliable means.

Many teachers commented that the SNSAs provided little to nothing in the way of new information to inform their understanding of children's progress and next steps in learning. Some explicitly referenced them as a waste of valuable time for this reason.

Other issues experienced were in relation to the amount of information provided per pupil per assessment – far in excess of that which teachers have time to absorb in the granular detail provided. Many teachers complained that they were unable to make sense of the results, not having had access to or sight of the assessments themselves, or not having had adequate training to enable their understanding of the language within the associated 'learner report'.

Of the very few positive comments about the helpfulness of SNSA data in providing useful information about children's progress, one expressed appreciation of the ability to compare the progress of children in the school with national standards. A few respondents said that they found the data useful in identifying gaps in children's learning and determining next steps.

Some of the positive comments stated the value of the SNSAs in relation to teacher professional judgement of pupil progress. It was clear from several of such comments, though, that some teachers are viewing the SNSA results as a means of 'testing' or 'checking' their own professional judgement. Clearly there remains misunderstanding of the intention that the results of SNSAs should 'inform', not 'confirm', teacher professional judgement of children's progress. Misuse of the results in this regard will simply serve to undermine the place of teacher

professional judgement – a cornerstone principle of CfE- to the detriment of teaching and learning. The EIS welcomes the recent endeavour of ADES and Scottish Government to ensure clarity in terms of the relationship of SNSAs to teacher professional judgement.

To conclude, the EIS remains clear that efforts at national and local level should be channelled more thoroughly towards enhancing the confidence of teachers in their professional judgement by freeing up time – as in many high-performing education systems internationally- for meaningful collaboration and professional dialogue among teachers, which is focused on learning, teaching and assessment. This together with increased investment in additional support for learning provision and reductions in class sizes to allow more time for teachers to talk on an individual basis to children and young people about their learning within a formative assessment context, would go a significantly greater way towards improving educational outcomes for Scotland's children and young people than SNSAs will.

NASUWT

1. The NASUWT welcomes the opportunity to provide information to the Education and Skills Committee on the evidence base for the recently introduced Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSAs) and notes that the inquiry is specifically focusing on:

- the evidence base for moving away from the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) and introducing standardised assessments at P1, P4, P7, s3;
- international comparisons to understand similar and differing approaches used elsewhere; and
- what information the Government's assessments can provide that contribute to improving the educational outcomes of children and young people.

2. The NASUWT is the fastest growing teachers' union in Scotland, representing teachers and school leaders in all sectors of education.

GENERAL COMMENTS

3. The NASUWT does not object in principle to the use of standardised assessments, such as the SNSAs: a nationally managed and regulated system of assessment can provide a common entitlement for all learners and promote clear national expectations in relation to assessment and learning.

4. The NASUWT believes that the following broad principles should be considered in any review of assessment:

- a) assessment should support pupil engagement and empower them to take responsibility for their own learning;
- b) assessment should support a broad and balanced curriculum and should not drive or limit the curriculum offer;
- c) assessment should be reliable, valid and comparable;
- d) assessment should be fair and equitable and should recognise the impact of social and cultural assumptions;
- e) assessment practice should respect and promote the notion of teachers' professional autonomy and judgement;
- f) collaboration and cooperation should be at the heart of assessment practice;
- g) assessment practice should be efficient and effective, placing minimal workload burdens on teachers and avoiding unnecessary bureaucracy;
- h) assessment practice should be reviewed regularly for its impact and effectiveness on pupil outcomes.

5. Assessment should be used by teachers to enable them to form valid and reliable judgements of pupils' progress for the development of the curriculum. In that way, assessment is key to effective approaches to teaching and learning. The forms that assessment take, the uses to which assessment data is put, and the context within which assessment is undertaken are therefore critical aspects of educational policy and practice at national, local and school level.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS

VALIDITY

6. Firstly, it is important that the Education and Skills Committee considers the question of validity: the process of determining whether the right factors are being

assessed in the right way to deliver accurate and useful assessment results. Validity cannot be measured or determined by the outcome of a single study but should be based on evidence from a wide variety of sources and analyses of empirical evidence (e.g. reliability studies, response process studies) and some more logical studies (e.g. validation studies, aggregation model analyses). Dr Paul Newton states that, [October 2017]:

'validation argument is not clerical exercise, involving little more than box-ticking. It is a professional exercise, involving insight, judgement and understanding'. (1)

7. As Dr Newton sets out, validity can be a central value but other criteria such as acceptability, credibility, cost, and burdens on teachers and candidates are also important. Further, Dr Newton notes that validity and values are intimately entwined and that sufficient validity is an ethical judgement that requires a full range of views to be taken into account as people/groups may have different value bases. This last point is significant because it highlights the political nature of assessment and that interpretations of 'validity' are influenced by ideological starting points.

8. One method of assessing validity, as outlined by Dr Newton, is to consider the following four criterion: purpose, measurement, validity, and assessment procedure. The Education and Skills Committee may also wish to note that:

'The validity chapters from each of the six editions the North American Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (AERA, et al, 2014) have strongly influenced international thinking on sources of evidence and analysis for validation research. The current edition identifies five major sources:

1. *test content;*
2. *response processes;*
3. *internal structure;*
4. *relations to other variables; and*
5. *consequences of testing.*

For each source, the basic research question concerns the degree to which the evidence or analysis that is collated is consistent with the overarching measurement claim (that it is possible to measure the target proficiency accurately using assessment results).' (2)

9. Validity should be considered as one criterion within a multiplicity of concerns, which can be grouped under the heading 'acceptability': resource availability, legal compliance, educational alignment, policy alignment, moral reputability, and public credibility.

(1) Paul E. Newton, An Approach to understanding validation arguments (Ofqual, October 2017), P.6.

(2) Paul E. Newton, P.34.

10. Prior to consideration of the evidence base for the (SNSAs), the Education Committee must first agree the appropriate criterion against which educational assessments are being reviewed.

SCOTTISH SURVEY OF LITERACY AND NUMERACY (SSLN)

11. The SSLN was an annual sample survey which monitored national performance in literacy and numeracy in alternate years, for school pupils at P1, P4, P7 and S2, and as such must be distinguished from the current SNSAs which apply across all schools in Scotland. While findings from the SSLN were useful to inform resources for practitioners to facilitate improvements in learning, teaching and assessment at classroom level, they did not provide individual practitioners with an assessment tool to consider their own class, school or local authority context. Due to the fundamentally different nature of these two assessments, it is difficult to compare and contrast their outcomes.

12. Given the impossibility of comparing results between the SSLN and the SNSAs, it will be a few years before we are able to identify trends or comment on educational impact and indeed it will be challenging to compare any progress with the pre-SNSA data. Equally, any improvement could simply result from schools and teachers becoming more familiar with the SNSAs and getting better at rehearsing pupils for them.

13. Considering the merit and impact of the SNSA should be one facet in an overarching research and evaluation framework for Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence, as was highlighted by the report of the initial findings of the International Council of Education Advisers in July 2017:

'Identify a systematic, sequenced and selective plan for literacy and numeracy, including a research based approach to improving learning and development, that ensures they can both achieve targeted academic goals while being responsive to the unique needs of each learner'.

UK COMPARISONS

14. Schools are often driven to test and assess pupils irrespective of the educational merits of doing so. In England, where tests are still used for the purposes of high-stakes accountability, this approach to school accountability has a distorting effect on curriculum delivery in schools and has generated substantial pressures to teach to the test.

15. While concerns, particularly those related to the use of assessment in the context of high-stakes accountability regimes, have tended to focus on the situation in England, the NASUWT's experience has highlighted the fact that assessment policy and practice remains an issue of concern in other education systems in the UK. In Wales, where statutory assessment remains in place, the use of teacher assessment instead of tests has led to significant increases in teacher workload. In Northern Ireland, the use of assessments, whether externally marked or conducted by teachers, for the purposes of post-primary selection remains an issue of concern and significant debate in terms of its impact on teachers in the primary sector.

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

16. It is important that the inherent limitations of tests as a form of assessment are recognised. All assessments, tests included, are subject to limitations in terms of their validity and reliability. In short, a test cannot tell you everything about what a learner knows and can do in a subject area. Problems arise when too much weight is placed on test outcomes to reach judgements about the performance of the system as a whole, or that of local authorities and schools. The SNSA results can only ever form a small part of the evidential framework determining how the educational outcomes of children and young people have been affected.

17. Education is about much more than what an assessment can test, so the Scottish Government must be vocal in ensuring schools do not adopt strategies simply to improve test scores. Scotland's focus should remain on agreed education priorities and on ensuring that policy is consistent with and contributes to the aims, purposes and values that underpin the education system. Policy should be based on a wide and rich range of evidence, including evidence from teachers and school leaders about effective practice and the issues that impact on learning and teaching.

MOVING FORWARD

18. Schools need to be clear on what is expected of them as well as the SNSAs' relationship with accountability. It is also critical that approaches to assessment should minimise the workload and bureaucratic burdens of teachers and headteachers and should be organised in schools to enable teachers and headteachers to focus on their core responsibilities for teaching and leading teaching and learning. (Please see paragraph 4 above for greater detail).

19. There must be a clear narrative around the evidence base and the principles that inform that evidence base: what is the purpose of the assessment and is it impacting on the curriculum in practice, by narrowing the curricular content and driving school and classroom priorities? (Please see paragraphs 6-10 above).

20. Finally, and fundamentally, the Scottish Government needs to listen and respond to the views of practitioners who have been undertaking the assessments to date. As such, the Independent Review of P1 Assessments is warmly welcomed to ensure the experiences of the teaching profession are heeded and teachers' professional judgement remains paramount.

Chris Keates
General Secretary

ACADEMICS/ INDIVIDUALS**PROFESSOR LOUISE HAYWARD – UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW**

School of Education, University of Glasgow.

Executive Summary

The University of Glasgow welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Education and Skills Committee on the assessment issues under consideration. Assessment is one of the main areas of research of the University's School of Education, which has a long history of involvement in assessment policy, practice and research in Scotland and in assessment systems internationally.

Curriculum for Excellence and the values that lie behind it define what matters in the education of young people who are educated citizens in Scotland.

- Curriculum (what matters in learning),
- Pedagogy (how learning takes place) and
- Assessment (showing how much and how well learners are learning)

are inextricably linked. Within this context, assessment can be viewed from two perspectives. It can focus on the use of evidence to provide feedback to inform next steps in learning or on judging, comparing or categorising learners. To improve an education system, the focus has to be on learning.

There is a persistent myth that Scotland does not record sufficient data to support improvement. The Scottish Education system is replete with data but these data are not always well targeted, as dependable as we might wish them to be or used to best effect.

Key Points

1. The assessment system in Scotland, the National Improvement Framework, should be a means to provide key participants, including learners themselves, with dependable evidence that they can use to improve learning. Much of the system is in place but we may need to review key aspects. Crucially, we need to build assessment capacity across the system.

2. Traditionally, assessment systems serve three main purposes, to inform learning, to sum up learning over time and to hold people to account. Assessment information gathered about the past is only helpful if it informs future action that leads to improvement. Children are not data – they are not numbers. They are people with lives and futures that depend on successful learning relationships in and beyond the classroom. Learning must be our principal concern.

3. In an assessment system every action taken has consequences. Whole-cohort tests and sample surveys are simply different ways to collect evidence. Each approach has advantages, disadvantages and consequences for learners and for learning. Scotland's assessment system should promote only consequences that are positive for both.

4. Assessment policy in Scotland - the National Improvement Framework - exists in a wider social context. The context within which policy emerges will influence how assessment policy is translated into practice. We can learn from our own previous experience in Scotland with Assessment 5-14.

The University of Glasgow is a founder member of IEAN, an International Educational Assessment Network of researchers and policy makers in twelve nations/states who share their insights and experiences of assessment. Members of this international network who are tackling similar issues can contribute to our thinking and to the deliberations of this Committee.

Submission from the School of Education, University of Glasgow.

1. The assessment system in Scotland, the National Improvement Framework, should be a means to provide key participants, including learners themselves, with dependable evidence that they can use to improve learning.

In Scotland, information on progress in what matters in learning (assessment evidence) is generated at a number of levels, eg,

- *in classrooms* – to determine how individual learners are progressing, using evidence collected to inform next steps in learning and to provide information for parents/carers;
- the *department/faculty/school* to indicate how groups of learners are progressing, using evidence collected to inform better planning and classroom practice;
in a local authority/regional improvement collaborative, using evidence to inform and share better understanding and expectations about learning across schools and action to improve it
- *for the nation* to indicate how much and how well young people are learning in relation to the curriculum nationally, using evidence to identify trends, evaluate overall provision and inform action to promote better learning nationally (or for specific groups);
- *in society more widely* assessment evidence, principally from the Scottish Qualifications Authority, is used to provide access to limited resources, eg, College or University, through a process of selection that seeks to be fair and transparent;
- *internationally* -how comparative evidence from other countries can inform thinking about improving learning in Scotland, eg, through OECD's international assessment survey (PISA) or through inviting OECD to review the Scottish education system.

Evidence provides information for all of the above in our national assessment system (National Improvement Framework). This assessment evidence should serve as a major driver to ensure that Curriculum for Excellence promotes the best possible life chances for all of Scotland's citizens, ie, an education system that is more socially just. However, the collection of evidence itself does not lead to improvement. Improvements in learning come from targeted action informed by high quality evidence from assessment approaches that are fit for purpose.

Much of the framework to provide the information Scotland needs is already in place and is consistent with practice that is regarded as effective, eg, *Synergies for Better Learning* OECD (2015). There are, however, tasks to be undertaken to make sure that our current systems remain fit for purpose. For example, we may need to

- review aspects of Curriculum for Excellence in the light of recent thinking about progression in learning
- reflect on current assessment practices to ensure that all the data we gather matches a clear purpose
- ensure that our system is efficient, so that different parts of the system are not duplicating the collection of information, we are not gathering more evidence that is required for our core purposes, and we are not gathering evidence where more time is spent in collecting information than in using it.

If information gathered is not used to inform improvements in learning, it is not worth gathering. Persuading people to stop gathering data that they have traditionally collected is a very difficult task.

Future investment in assessment should pay particular attention to investing in people. If assessment is to support learning rather than superficial compliance with curriculum statements, all involved, including policy makers, practitioners, parents and young people, need to have a deep understanding of assessment purposes and practices. For example, if the whole curriculum matters, teachers' professional learning may need to focus on the design of tasks that require the knowledge, understanding and skills specified across the curriculum. Creating such tasks supported by professional learning opportunities related to monitoring pupils' progress will develop and improve teachers' professionalism. Although progress has been made in moderating teachers' professional judgement, for those judgements to play their intended central role in Scotland's assessment system, time and focus are required to ensure that professional judgement is consistently dependable. The confidence that develops from depth of understanding is a necessary part of developing the assessment culture that will consistently support the aspirations of Curriculum for Excellence.

2. Traditionally, assessment systems serve three main purposes, to inform learning, to sum up learning over time and to hold people to account. Assessment information gathered about the past is only helpful if it informs future action that leads to improvement. Children are not data – they are not numbers. They are people with lives and futures that depend on successful learning relationships. Learning must be our principal concern.

Assessment systems in education are complex and seek to serve a range of purposes. The Assessment Reform Group, an internationally recognized group of experts in educational assessment, identified three main assessment purposes in their publication *Assessment in Schools – Fit for Purpose? (Mansell, James et al, 2010) **.

- The use of assessment to help build pupils' understanding, within day-to-day lessons.
- The use of assessment to provide information on pupils' achievements to those outside the pupil teacher relationship, eg, to parents (on the basis of in-class judgments by teachers and of test and examination results), and to further and higher education institutions and employers (through test and examination results).
- The use of assessment data to hold individuals and institutions to account.

These three main purposes interact in any national assessment system. Any action taken in one area will have an impact on the other areas. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as washback.

Assessment systems provide information and influence what people do. A National Improvement Framework influences the actions of those who work within it, policy makers, practitioners and researchers. A current challenge internationally is how to make that influence positive, ie, enhance learning (Hayward, 2015). Too many current national performance frameworks have not had a positive influence (Mons, 2009); there is powerful, consistent evidence that high stakes test-based monitoring systems lead to undesirable effects. Washback effects commonly include teaching to narrowly defined tests, narrowing the curriculum, teaching test behaviours, demotivating more vulnerable pupils and reducing levels of teachers' confidence in their professional judgement and in their wider professionalism. The decision of the Scottish Government not to collect data from standardised assessment separately from evidence from teachers' professional judgement was a welcome attempt to reduce the stakes of standardised assessment in Scotland.

Any decision about how to collect evidence at a national level has to consider the potential for

washback and those responsible should seek to avoid predictable undesirable consequences and design a system where washback is positive, ie, leads to improvement in learning. Above all, it is crucial to remember that behind every number or letter or comment lies a young person. Motivation matters and assessment information should encourage learners to make progress not label or categorise them in ways that make them less likely to want to learn.

In an assessment system every action taken has potential consequences for other parts of the system. Standardised whole-cohort tests and sample surveys are simply different ways to collect evidence for particular purposes. Each approach has advantages, disadvantages and consequences for learners and for learning. Scotland's assessment system should promote consequences that are positive.

Surveys and standardised tests are two approaches that can be used to collect evidence to inform national decision making.

Standardised assessments have advantages, eg,

- They are designed by experts who have developed procedures to make them reliable.
- They allow the performance of individuals and groups on the test to be compared with the average performance of the whole population that has been used to standardise the test; and they can indicate changes in performance over time.
- The SNSA are diagnostic, in that they are linked to proposals for action based on each young person's performance.
- SNSA evidence for a group of young people may point to areas of the curriculum where the teacher needs to place future emphasis

Standardised assessments have disadvantages, eg,

- In general, the advantage that standardised tests have in respect of *reliability* often reduces their *validity* as means of assessing progress in the planned curriculum, because many aspects of this cannot be assessed through test items that match *statistical* reliability criteria
- While they can provide information on a limited number of aspects of Curriculum for Excellence, they cannot do so on all that matters; eg, it is easier to measure a child's phonic awareness than their motivation to read; yet both matter. Coverage of the curriculum is limited to those aspects that are readily measured, and by keeping tests to an acceptable length.
- The use or misuse of standardised assessment data can lead to the washback effects described in the previous section.
- There are many practical issues that prevent standardised assessment being enacted as intended – lack of access to technology, perceived pressure, alternative understandings of the nature of the assessment, perceptions that data will be used for purposes of comparison.

Learning in schools and classrooms is based on dialogue and standardised assessments based on the performance of the child do not recognise this

Sample Surveys have advantages, eg,

- They can provide dependable national level data without identifying individual schools and teachers and thus avoiding the washback effects of whole-cohort approaches.
- They can monitor national levels of performance in learning over time, providing information about the impact of *Curriculum for Excellence*.
- They can be designed to sample a wider range of aspects of the curriculum than is possible in a whole-cohort test, including aspects that are harder to measure, for example though observation of tasks and questionnaire enquiries, as was the case in a previous survey, the Scottish Survey of Achievement (SSA).
- They can over time provide evidence on different areas of the curriculum beyond English and Mathematics (the SSA provided information on Literacy and Numeracy in Science

and Social Subjects as well as in English and Mathematics).

- The survey sample can be adapted for different purposes, eg, a boosted sample can give a local authority or a regional collaborative information specific to that context or information can be generated relating to a specific population for a specific purpose – eg, boys' performance in reading.
- As surveys in Scotland were designed in partnership with teachers, involvement in the process helped to build capacity.

Surveys have disadvantages, eg,

- Commonly, they do not offer information on every pupil.
- If the survey sample is too small the evidence emerging can be compromised.
- Surveys are often poorly understood and they come under attack for not addressing purposes they were never designed to serve.

It is difficult to be certain why the decision was taken to move away from the use of the SSLN survey, but there were a number of contributory factors which led to a negative perception in Scotland of the survey method of monitoring achievement, in contrast to the very positive international view of this approach as it had been applied in Scotland. Possible factors were:

- A misinterpretation of the recommendations of the OECD report. A view emerged that the OECD had recommended the introduction of standardised assessment. The OECD report recommended an 'integrated framework for assessment'. The final paragraph on p.161 is clear:
'Currently, however, the way national assessment is constructed in Scotland does not provide sufficiently robust information at all levels of the system, including LAs or an individual school or across important domains of CfE for learners and their teachers. This problem does not mean that everyone must be tested at particular year levels in order to have this information. An alternative, for example, could involve sample testing of a range of learners within each school on rich tasks which can then be used to benchmark the achievement of other learners on the curriculum.'
- Problems that existed in the SSLN survey methodology, as opposed to that of the previous more extensive survey in Scotland - the Scottish Survey of Achievement (SSA).
- A concern to have nationally available information on the progress of every child and perhaps a lack of awareness that surveys can be designed to allow such data to be generated.
- Insufficient involvement of all key education authority stakeholders in the design of the survey.
- A strong commitment in some education authorities to other forms of data collection, principally standardised testing. (Although the understanding was that when SNSA was introduced Local Authorities would cease to use other standardised tests, this has not happened).

4. Assessment policy, in Scotland - the National Improvement Framework - exists in a wider social context. The context within which policy emerges will influence how assessment policy is translated into practice.

No matter the intention underpinning it, all policy develops within a cultural context. There are patterns of activity in assessment over time in Scotland from which it is important to learn to make sure that mistakes from the past are not repeated, now or in the future. Although current circumstances are different in some aspects, our own history offers a salutary reminder of how tricky it is to keep the focus on teachers' professional judgement when standardised assessment is part of the system.

In the early stages of Education 5-14, assessment policy emphasised the importance of teachers' professional judgement. To build a shared understanding of national standards, light touch national tests which covered limited aspects of the reading, writing and number curricula would be used to moderate teachers' professional judgement. The policy explicitly stated that if a difference emerged between a teacher's professional judgement and the national test, the teacher's judgement would be the result reported (although the school should review such cases to try to understand the reasons for the difference). What happened in practice was that teachers used the tests to discern whether or not a child had 'achieved' a level. Although the policy asked teachers to test when the child was ready, ie, when the evidence suggested that (s)he was ready to move on to the next level, practice in schools across the country was very different. Some schools had 'testing weeks' when every child took a test and children were reported as 'passing' or 'failing' the test. Some schools sent home award certificates. A few schools took all of the children into the school hall and ran national tests as if they were national examinations. Ironically, although both teachers and government stated an intention that tests should be low stakes, in practice they became high stakes for children, teachers, schools and local authorities. Teachers and schools responded to the culture within which they perceived the tests to have emerged rather than acting in ways that were consistent with stated policy.

Patterns of behaviour such as this have emerged in countries internationally (Mons, 2009). Onora O'Neill in the Reith Lectures of 2002, 'A Question of Trust' (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2002/>), reflected on international trends in accountability and argued that countries needed to pay greater attention to culture and values if they were to design more 'intelligent' accountability systems - systems that placed greater emphasis on professional judgement.

Any assessment method designed by 'assessment experts' is likely to be attributed a level of significance that will impact on the value placed on teachers' professional judgment. No assessment method is perfect and the dependability of any one is a matter of the appropriate balance between validity of curriculum coverage and reliability of the interpretations of the assessment evidence. Throughout the world people tend to overestimate the dependability of tests and examinations and underestimate the dependability of teachers' professional judgement. However, it is the use or misuse of data that leads to distortions in education systems. League tables and other ways of comparing teachers, schools, authorities or nations have left a deep scar on professionals' consciousness. Even if data are not collected and published nationally, if there is a perception that data might be used to gauge performance in classrooms, schools, local authorities or nations, distortions are likely.

It is difficult to be certain what is actually happening in schools in Scotland as they begin to incorporate national assessments into their assessment practices. Different sources of evidence are providing different pictures of the impact of the standardised assessments in schools and classrooms. The plan to investigate current practices will provide crucial evidence to help the system understand what is actually happening in schools and, most importantly, to identify factors that are driving practices.

Learning with others: international insights. In partnership with members of the Policy Division in Scottish Government, the University of Glasgow founded an international network of assessment experts, both researchers and policy makers from each nation or state. Twelve nations/states are members of the International Educational Assessment Network (IEAN): Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Norway, Iceland, Denmark, Slovenia, Switzerland, Singapore, Canada (Ontario), Australia (Queensland) and New Zealand.

Through this IEAN network we would be happy to contribute international evidence on areas of interest to the Committee.

JAMES MCENANEY

I am a current FE lecturer and former secondary school teacher. I am also a journalist specialising in Scottish education and, over the last three years, have investigated issues such as standardised testing, Teach First and the use of Pupil Equity Funding in schools. I am happy to appear in person in front of the committee.

In 2015 I produced a paper for RISE which dealt directly with the introduction of national standardised testing in Scotland. It covers much of what the committee seems to be investigating. Although I am no longer a member of this group, and some aspects of the policy have changed since publication, I am happy to make the paper itself available to committee members. It can be accessed here: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-1sOPFiJ7IVdjMwWkp6ZGs1SUE>

The evidence base for moving away from the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) and introducing standardised assessments at P1, P4, P7, S3

I believe that it is useful to break this issue down into 2 component parts:

- The evidence for the introduction of standardised testing
- The shift from the SSLN to SNSA

Evidence for the introduction of standardised testing

- When Nicola Sturgeon first announced that standardised testing would be reintroduced I submitted an FOI request to the Scottish Government. I asked them to release the 'details of the advice provided to the Scottish Government which resulted in the announcement of national standardised tests'. Given that the reintroduction of such tests represented a huge shift in Scottish education policy, it seemed reasonable to me to assume that the government would have done its homework on the issue and gathered at least some formal advice.
- In response to my request the Scottish Government eventually conceded that the written advice for this policy amounted to 4 emails. They also referenced two OECD papers (neither of which were focused on or arguing for a system of standardised testing) and a series of unminuted meetings.
- The government's responses to my FOI can be accessed here <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-sOPFiJ7IVcWV5a0lia1JMN3loZVBRWHVpcU5EQjRZeUIN> (the initial response) and here <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-1sOPFiJ7IVMU1OR3ILOThvUE12c0RtUk82MUpWRDFRTU1F> (review response).
- This story was reported by CommonSpace on 17/11/16 (<https://www.commonspace.scot/articles/2925/exclusive-the-four-emails-that-led-to-scotgov-s-controversial-standardised-testing-plan>). Particular attention should be paid to the government's admission that ***"the formal consultation period on the framework itself did not begin until after the first minister's announcement"*** that the tests were to be introduced. This, I would contend, strongly suggests that the decision to introduce the tests was made at a political level, with the educational details to be worked out later.

- As the government refused to release the content of the emails I was forced to appeal to the Scottish Information Commissioner. Eventually the SIC ruled in my favour and the contents of the emails were made available to me. I subsequently published the material. Thanks to the SIC judgement I also found out that the emails (3 of them from Sue Ellis and 1 from Louise Hayward) were **"unsolicited"**. They are, however, clearly in response to at least one meeting.
- The emails can be read here: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-1sOPFiJ7IVNnRSNXVWbmFQa1pybHJiZDJ6STYxWGxET0JN>
- The SIC judgement can be read here: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-1sOPFiJ7IVZFhUQ0VvdHMTaXVURFZ2Z1J2OVJhT3FVbDF3>
- Point 22 of the SIC judgement is particularly relevant in this context. While attempting to withhold information from me, the government argued that the tests, as part of the National Improvement Framework, would allow government ministers **"to know more, on a consistent and systematic basis, about the performance of the education system."** The Ministers also **"stated that the NIF would provide the evidence to make substantial progress in eliminating the attainment gap within a decade."** These arguments were made as part of a legal process and should, I would argue, form at least part of the basis for reviewing the government's policy and, ultimately, its relative success in achieving its goals.

The shift from SSLN to SNSA

- Put simply, the data from SNSA is incapable of replacing that which was produced by the SSLN.
- The reason for this is actually relatively simple: the two assessment systems were designed to do completely different jobs. While SNSA is designed to offer student-level information to teachers (which, at least according to government, informs planning, teaching and reporting of progress), the SSLN was designed to generate objective, national level data about overall attainment. It is not only unhelpful, but actually quite damaging, to conflate these two distinct purposes.
- It is important to understand the history of the SNSA policy to fully understand the current situation. Initially, government policy was for the full test data to be published, a point made clear by Nicola Sturgeon following the speech in which the new policy was announced. All students would also take the tests at the same time. Both of these aspects of the new policy were abandoned relatively quickly (for good, educationally-driven reasons and following pressure from, most notably, the EIS) and the government's defence of SNSA has, consequently, shifted over time.
- The government's defence of SNSA now hinges on the assertion that they are necessary in order to inform teachers' judgements about their students - they are no longer framed as a tool for providing measurement data (despite the original claims to the SIC). The real 'data shift' has in fact been from the SSLN to the Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels (ACEL), with the SNSA theoretically contributing to the latter. There are, however, numerous problems with relying on ACEL in order to measure the Scottish education system as a whole.

- The government's own publications go some way to explaining why the ACEL data is nothing like as robust as the SSLN data that it is supposed to have replaced, but the key points are:
 1. There is still, even now, no properly agreed standard for what the 'achievement' of a level looks like
 2. Councils themselves have expressed concerns about the reliability of the data submitted to the government (<https://www2.gov.scot/Resource/0054/00543891.pdf>)
 3. To fully understand points 1 and 2, it is crucial to remember that CfE levels were never, ever intended to be used as an external measure of achievement and attempts to retrofit them for this purpose are doomed to failure
 4. ACEL data, unlike the SSLN, is inevitably influenced by political pressures. In simple terms, with politicians exerting pressure on the schools system to show that the 'attainment gap' is closing, it becomes more and more likely that teachers' judgements will be affected. It is worth noting at this stage that some teachers have already privately reported coming under pressure to declare a pupil as having 'achieved a level' when they do not necessarily believe this to be the case. In reality, this is hardly surprising when the First Minister has previously said that the new system will mean that her government will "be able to take action if any particular school or if any particular area is not performing in the way we think necessary." (<https://www.thenational.scot/politics/14892973.sturgeon-pledges-detailed-data-on-schools-and-pupils-as-davidson-accuses-snp-of-backtracking>)
- So we have moved from having robust, objective, well-designed, national-level data for Scottish education to depending upon a deeply flawed alternative which cannot hope to replicate the quality of the system it replaced.
- (NB: This should **not** be taken to mean that teachers' judgement about their own pupils cannot be trusted – this would be a simplistic interpretation of the situation. The issue is not with teachers' professional abilities, but rather with the application of unreasonable expectations of what different data sources can offer us.)

Conclusion

- There was no genuine educational case for ditching the SSLN - it was a political decision to bolster the government's case for reintroducing standardised testing in Scotland.
- The information that has theoretically replaced the SSLN - the Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels - is extremely problematic (at best) and lacks the robust objectivity of the SSLN.
- There was no **need** to cancel the SSLN, even allowing for the introduction of standardised testing of all pupils and the reporting of ACEL for all schools. The two approaches, as shown above, perform separate functions - but significant problems have been caused by the conflation of the two systems.
- There may well have been a case for expanding the SSLN (it could, for example, have been adjusted to give both national and local authority level data) and indeed this idea was put to the Scottish Government in a 2012 report from the University of Glasgow entitled 'Assessment at Transition' (a report which the Scottish Government funded).
- As a consequence of the Scottish Government's decisions we have been left in a position where we have less, and less useful, data about Scottish education at precisely the time when the First Minister claims that she wishes to be judged on her record for improving education.

Additional thoughts / information

- A particularly frustrating part of this debate, and one which has caused significant problems, is the repeated assertion – most notably from the First Minister – that the ‘sample-based’ methodology of the SSLN is part of the reason that it should be replaced. The implication was that the data was either not sufficiently reliable/useful, or at least that having data on every single child would make national data more useful/reliable.
- The SSLN operated on a sample basis for good reason - sample-based approaches avoid a situation where the tests influence the teaching that takes place in schools (ie teaching to the test). As a consequence, there is a good argument for this approach actually being a more reliable method of than attempting to gather data on every single child.
- It is also worth noting that the government gathers numerous sample-based data sets without issue. In response to an FOI request asking for a list of these surveys, I was directed to this page on the government's own website: <https://www2.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/About/Surveys> .
- It is worth asking why the sample-based approach of the SSLN was viewed as a problem by the FM when her government makes extensive use of sample-based methods. One may also wish to ask why was the SSLN data reliable enough to justify a massive practical and philosophical change in Scottish education, but not reliable enough to measure the relative success of those changes?
- I have previously written about this issue for TESS Scotland and a copy of the piece can be read here: <https://jmcemedia.wordpress.com/2018/05/02/the-ssln-can-still-create-material-gain-for-teachers-tess/>
- Finally, please note that nothing in this submission should be taken as support for the assertion that SNSA are a necessary feature of schooling or that teachers require such a system to support their work. This matter is still very much disputed, but I am - as ever – inclined to listen to teachers, not politicians, when coming to a conclusion about the value of a learning and teaching ‘tool’.

PROFESSOR LINDSAY PATERSON

Further information relating to this submission is in the source cited at the end (a blog on the Reform Scotland website). That information includes some relevant technical statistical details, drawing upon information provided by Freedom of Information Requests 18-02228, 18-02327, and 18-02535.

1. Arguments in favour of the new SNSA

The new arrangements have several strengths:

1.1 They allow the tracking of individual pupils throughout their schooling. This is the most informative kind of educational data, taking account of the intrinsically longitudinal nature of learning. Longitudinal tracking is the only form of data that is truly student-centred, because it allows us to see how pupils grow. It is the only way of taking into account where pupils start from and thus the only way of assessing how they change. Surveys that take place only at one moment of time cannot do this.

1.2 The Scottish National Standardised Assessments are of a high technical quality, with levels of statistical reliability that are satisfactory by the standards of good-quality testing. Notably, the reliability is high at every relevant school stage, including at P1. (Statistical reliability in this context may be thought of as a measure of the extent to which a test consistently measures what it is intended to measure, which in this case is attainment according to the criteria in Curriculum for Excellence.) Nevertheless, some improvement is required to bring them to the even higher levels of statistical reliability that have been achieved by the National Curriculum Assessments in England.

1.3 The plans for the development of the assessments take advantage of the opportunity for longitudinal data by proposing to construct 'long scales'. These will enable each pupil to be placed on a scale that stretches from early P1 to the end of S3. The scale is based on the curriculum that covers these ages. In due course, it would be straightforward to link pupils' results on these scales to their results in SQA examinations beyond S3, and so the SNSA results will be able to make a valuable contribution to understanding how students enter higher education or the labour market.

1.4 Teachers will thus gain reliable information about each pupils' progress through the stages of the curriculum, and thus will be able to tailor their teaching to each pupil's needs. Only standardised assessments can provide this kind of educationally useful evidence. Teacher judgements are – with the best will in the world – not so reliable as standardised assessments. The reason is that teachers (at all levels, from pre-school to university) inevitably are biased towards optimism and towards the level of attainment that is officially expected of the students in their class. Evidence about the extent of this understandable bias was found by the Scottish Survey of Achievement (the predecessor to the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy). Standardised assessments provide a useful reality check, allowing teachers to calibrate their own judgements against independent criteria.

1.5 Pupils can benefit from this independent assessment, because it gives them realistic targets to aim for, and reliable evidence about how well they are doing. For pupils to benefit in this way requires that teachers use the results of the

assessments to set realistic targets for each pupil and to explain to the pupil what progress they are making.

1.6 The same comment also applies to parents, who can be better informed about their child's progress than with any other system of parental information.

1.7 The systems of assessment used by many local authorities before the advent of the SNSA suffered from two disadvantages:

(a) They were not based as closely on the Scottish curriculum as the SNSA, whose development has been monitored by the same types of committees of teachers and other educational professionals as produced the curriculum in the first place. The basis in the curriculum strengthens the validity of the SNSA.

(b) The results of these previous systems of assessment were not statistically standardised on any representative group of Scottish pupils. The standardisation of the SNSA ensures that the expectations of what pupils might achieve is realistic for pupils going through Scottish schools today.

1.8 One particular feature of basing the assessments on the curriculum is worth emphasising: the tests for P1 were closely based on the curriculum for P1, and so if the tests are not thought to be valid for P1 then the same doubt must apply to the curriculum there.

1.9 Obtaining information on almost every pupil (at the relevant stages) in each school provides the most reliable possible information to the teachers, headteacher, local authority, and school inspectors about the development of the school. Only for the senior years of secondary school (through SQA results) has similarly reliable information been available hitherto.

2. Arguments for surveys of pupils

Despite these arguments in support of the SNSA, there also are arguments in favour of dedicated surveys of pupils. The models for such surveys in Scotland are the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN, 2011-2016) and the Scottish Survey of Achievement (SSA, 2005-2009).

2.1 Good-quality surveys can be as closely based on the curriculum as the SNSA, and can use assessments that are as reliable as in the SNSA. In addition, the great strength of surveys is that they can gather a much wider range of information than the SNSA currently has access to that is relevant to understanding the development of pupils and of the school system as a whole.

2.2 The main disadvantage of the kinds of surveys that have been used in Scotland is that they do not provide the detailed information about the progress of each individual pupil that the SNSA can. That is for two reasons: the surveys do not include every pupil, and they do not track their samples over time. (See below, paragraph 3.1, for the way this problem has been successfully dealt with in England.)

2.3 The SSLN and SSA gathered evidence about pupils' own attitudes to studying, which could then be analysed in relation to the pupils' results in the assessments

which these surveys conducted. Such analysis allows, for example, an investigation into whether pupils with high attainment tend to enjoy learning more than pupils with low attainment.

2.4 Another example is that the surveys gathered a much richer set of background information about pupils' homes than the SNSA in its present form will have access to. Properly designed survey questions of this kind then allow a more reliable investigation of the effects of poverty on educational attainment than the SNSA will provide.

2.5 A further strength of the surveys was that they gathered evidence from teachers as well as pupils. However, the SSA was much stronger in this respect than the SSLN, because it allowed the survey responses of each teacher to be linked individually to the survey responses and assessment results of each pupil whom they taught. This linkage allowed subtle analysis of how the practices of teachers related to the achievements of their own pupils. Amongst the conclusions which this provided was the discrepancy between the results of pupil assessments and the teacher judgements of the same pupil, noted in paragraph 1.4 above.

2.6 A well-designed survey can also give us insight into what makes an effective school, but only if the sample size in each school is large enough to give reliable data. The SSLN did not meet that criterion, essentially because it was designed to have a small sample from almost every school rather than, as the SSA had, a large sample from a representative sample of schools. The purpose of this kind of analysis is not to monitor individual schools, but rather to investigate whether certain kinds of school policies are associated with high attainment. For example, it would then be possible to investigate what kinds of school policy on discipline or on homework are associated with the strongest attainment.

2.7 Both the SSLN and SSA gave information about the whole of the Scottish school system, notably including independent schools. The SNSA at present will give information only on publicly funded schools. That gap in the SNSA deprives the Education and Skills Committee of the capacity to understand Scottish school education as a whole. Not including independent schools is regrettable for all stages of schooling, but is particularly serious for stages beyond age 16, where, for example, probably as many as one in six pupils who enter university come from independent schools.

3. Can the advantages of the SNSA and of the surveys be combined?

3.1 The strengths of both approaches could be combined. One functioning example of doing so is the National Pupil Database (NPD) in England, which tracks every pupil in publicly funded schools from entry to formal schooling up to the end of schooling (and can also now be linked, where appropriate, to their entry to and progress in post-school education). The data on attainment is linked to data from the annual school census, allowing detailed analysis of, for example, the effects of poverty or of ethnicity on pupils' progress.

3.2. A similar system could be developed in Scotland, because the necessary legislative consent to allow the linking of relevant data has been given (subject to stringent safeguards to protect the anonymity of individual pupils): see the response from the Scottish Chief Statistician to the Education and Skills Committee on 28 November 2018).

3.3 It is to be hoped that, if Scotland were to develop a data base similar to the NPD, two kinds of improvement would be made. One would be to include all schools, not only publicly funded ones. The other would be to draw upon the experience of the SSLN and the SSA in also adding questions to teachers and headteachers about school policies and practices. The resulting data base would give an invaluable source of insights into how pupil progress might benefit from school policies, from the ways in which school resources are used, or from policies affecting the wider community. A data base of this kind could also record, as well as the results of standardised assessments, other relevant outcomes of education, such as children's emotional well-being, their levels of physical fitness, and their engagement in activities that are not included in the formal assessments.

Further information

For further discussion of several of the points made in this submission, see

<https://reformscotland.com/2018/11/scottish-national-standardised-assessments-professor-lindsay-paterson/>

ROYAL SOCIETY OF EDINBURGH

SCOTTISH NATIONAL STANDARDISED ASSESSMENTS: A RESPONSE TO THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT'S EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

1. The RSE Education Committee welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee's call for evidence on the Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSAs).⁹ The Parliament's review is timely since it allows the education system to reflect on the first year of the SNSAs following their introduction in schools from August 2017. The RSE is supportive of developments in Scottish education that support the provision of more reliable data to underpin education policy. We do not have any principled objection to the use of standardised assessments in Scotland. Rather, our comments focus on the rationale for their introduction, the way they have been implemented and the usefulness of the data generated. The RSE would be pleased to discuss our comments with the Education and Skills Committee should members consider this helpful.

The evidence base for moving away from the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy and introducing standardised assessments

2. When the Scottish Government consulted on the National Improvement Framework in 2015, it recognised that while almost all local authorities used some form of standardised assessment, they used different approaches which made it difficult to share, collect and analyse consistent and comparable data and information, thereby limiting the ability to develop a national level picture.¹⁰ The need to address this seemed to be the primary basis for the introduction of the SNSAs.
3. Notwithstanding these observations, when they were proposed there seemed to be a lack of clarity over the primary purpose of the SNSAs, particularly whether they were meant to evaluate the performance of the school education system or if they were to provide a diagnostic assessment at the level of the individual child, or perhaps even a combination of these two potential aims.¹¹ We return to this point in the next section.
4. While the Scottish Government stated that the SNSAs should replace the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN), the rationale underpinning this decision is unclear. The SNSAs and the SSLN are very different so the SNSA cannot and should not be considered a direct replacement for the SSLN. Whereas the SNSAs provide individual level data on learners' attainment that can be tracked over time, the SSLN was a sample survey of both learners and teachers which gathered a wider range of information than that generated by the SSNA, and which was able to provide a system level analysis of attainment. The SSLN collected a wider range of information related to attainment, including information about a learner's home background. This provided scope to investigate the effects of poverty on educational attainment, for example. The introduction of the SNSAs need not have come at the expense of the SSLN. The respective strengths of both means that they could co-exist and complement one another very well, particularly

⁹ Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee call for evidence:

<http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/110246.aspx>

¹⁰ A draft National Improvement Framework for Scottish Education, Scottish Government, 2015

<https://www2.gov.scot/Resource/0048/00484452.pdf>

¹¹ See, for example, the report of a roundtable discussion on the National Improvement Framework which the RSE hosted in November 2015: https://www.rse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/AP15_25.pdf

with a view to enabling a more detailed analysis of the effects of poverty on learners' progress.

What information the Government's assessments can provide that contribute to improving the educational outcomes of children and young people

1. As they have been introduced, the Scottish Government has clarified that the primary purpose of the SNSAs is to provide 'real time' diagnostic information to support teachers' professional judgement. For learners to benefit in this way requires that teachers use the results of the assessments to set realistic targets for each pupil and to explain to the pupil what progress they are making.
2. It also requires there to be a clear and consistent understanding of the role of assessment among teachers, schools and local authorities to avoid the SNSAs being used in ways that distort learning and teaching practices, for example 'teaching to the test' and/or being viewed and used as an accountability mechanism. However, the role of the SNSAs in helping to inform teacher professional judgement and, in turn, the connection to the annual publication of the extent to which learners are achieving the expected CfE levels in literacy and numeracy for their relevant stage, may mean that the SNSAs are perceived by teachers and schools as an accountability measure rather than as a learning and development tool.
3. This suggests that there is not yet a collective understanding of how the SNSAs should be used to support the learning and development process. Teachers also need to be able to access training and support in how to use the data generated by the SNSAs to inform their teaching practice. Consideration needs to be given to the initial and continuing professional learning and development requirements of teachers so that they can be equipped to support improvement.
4. SNSAs cover only literacy and numeracy and there is a risk that too much emphasis on assessing literacy and numeracy creates a dynamic which values these areas disproportionately compared to, for instance, higher order cognitive skills that young people are expected to develop.
5. Given that the SNSAs are intended to provide a diagnostic, formative approach to assessment, there is a question as to whether comparable assessments need to be undertaken more frequently than the current three-year cycle (P1, P4, P7 and S3) to provide more reliable diagnostic data for supporting learner performance. To be clear, the RSE is not advocating more frequent assessment but it raises the question in the context of the SNSAs as a diagnostic tool for teachers.
6. At present, the SNSAs collect data from learners at publicly funded schools only. This is in contrast to the SSLN which provided information about the whole school system, including independent schools. This matters if there is to be a proper understanding of the 'attainment gap'. For example, entry to university cannot properly be analysed without data from the whole cohort of pupils, including those in independent schools.
7. The Scottish Government does not have access to the data generated by the SNSAs as this resides with schools and local authorities. Scottish Government has access only to the national level data generated by the assessments. However, clarity about the range

of SNSA data that Scottish Government would access came relatively late during the introduction of the assessments, indicating that Scottish Government was for some time unclear on how it intended to access and use the data.¹² This may have contributed to the lack of consensus on the purpose of the SNSAs.

8. The Scottish Government uses teacher judgement data on the achievement of CfE levels to show performance in literacy and numeracy in the Broad General Education. However, there are large discrepancies between teachers' subjective judgements and attainment measured by standardised assessments, with evidence showing that teachers are too optimistic about their own pupils' attainment. An important methodological task is to understand the extent to which teacher judgements diverge from the SNSAs, and why. Research of this kind can contribute to development of teachers' capacity to make accurate judgements. Without consistent data, there is a risk that the National Improvement Framework will become implausible and, even worse, it will be impossible for anyone to know whether it is working.
9. We recognise that the Scottish Government plans to commission an independent review of P1 assessments. An important component of this will be to consider the extent to which the SNSAs are compatible with the play-based approach to learning encountered in P1.
10. As far as we are aware, the data from the SNSAs are not made available to independent researchers so they cannot be used for more sophisticated analyses to address policy relevant issues in education, including the attainment gap. It is desirable that independent researchers should have access to the data from the SNSAs. These data can be suitably anonymised. Consideration also needs to be given to how the Scottish Government's Education Research Strategy¹³ can be used to support and inform developments in this area.

Additional Information

This Advice Paper has been signed off by the RSE General Secretary.

The Royal Society of Edinburgh, Scotland's National Academy, is Scottish Charity No. SC000470

¹² See, for example, Scottish Government response (9 August 2017) to FOI request 17/01652
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/foi-17-01652/>

¹³ A research strategy for Scottish education, Scottish Government, April 2017
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/research-strategy-scottish-education/>

REPRESENTATIVE ORGANISATIONS

CHILDREN IN SCOTLAND

Introduction

Giving all children in Scotland an equal chance to flourish is at the heart of everything we do. By bringing together a network of people working with and for children, alongside children and young people themselves, we offer a broad, balanced and independent voice. We create solutions, provide support and develop positive change across all areas affecting children in Scotland. We do this by listening, gathering evidence, and applying and sharing our learning, while always working to uphold children's rights. Our range of knowledge and expertise means we can provide trusted support on issues as diverse as the people we work with and the varied lives of children and families in Scotland.

Children in Scotland is pleased to be able to contribute to the Education and Skills Committee's call for evidence on Standardised Assessment. We conduct a range of policy and project work on children and young people's education and provide learning opportunities to practitioners in this area. We are a member of the Play not Tests campaign and have a strong evidence base to support our arguments against implementing more standardized assessments, particularly for P1s.

We identified many concerns with the introduction of new National Standardised Assessments during the development of the National Improvement Framework in 2015. Our response was informed by evidence papers provided to Children in Scotland by Carolyn Hutchison, Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the University of Glasgow. We will rely heavily on this evidence in this response.

As we articulated in our response to the 2015 Scottish Government consultation on the National Improvement Framework, Children in Scotland understands the key role that assessment has in teaching and learning. It provides a barometer to measure progress and to identify areas for improvement. However, we are concerned with the focus on standardised assessment, particularly in P1. We have serious concerns with the reliability of the data the new standardised assessments provide and are unclear about the benefit they would have for children and young people's learning.

Q1. The evidence base for moving away from the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) and introducing standardised assessments at P1, P4, P7, S3;

Children in Scotland appreciates the need to gather appropriate and relevant data to tackle educational inequalities and to improve the learning outcomes of all children and young people in Scotland.

When the draft of the National Improvement Framework was proposed, the Scottish Government argued that policy makers needed to "know much more, on a consistent and systematic basis, about the performance of our education system"¹. However, we do not believe that the introduction of new standardised assessments is the best mechanism to achieve this goal.

Children in Scotland does not believe an adequate case was or has been made to justify the introduction of new standardised assessments in P1, P4, P7 and S3 and move away

from the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN). As such our position remains as it was in 2015 in response to the consultation on the National Improvement Framework.

We believe evidence from SSLN and National Qualifications provided enough evidence to highlight and track attainment and the attainment gap at a **national** level to inform policy making. We recognise that at a **local authority level** SSLN data may have less usability, because of lower participation numbers, but do not believe the solution is introducing new standardised assessments.

The 2014 Audit Scotland report on school education recognised that existing measures (including SSLN) did not full capture a pupil's performance throughout their time at school, but concluded that the solution was to focus on standardised **performance** measures for schools and local authorities, and more gathering of evidence on pupil's **wider achievements**. It did not argue for introducing new standardised assessments (14).

Our main objections to the introduction of new standardised assessments are because of questions about their validity and reliability (particularly for those in P1 and P4), and whether the investment in time and resource will provide data that is likely to help improve educational attainment for pupils. We do not believe they provide evidence to demonstrate the quality of the education within a specific school or local authority, or that they give a rounded picture of pupil achievement, a criticism equally levied at the SSLN.

We will discuss this in greater detail in response to Q3 where we will discuss the type of information that the assessments can provide and the lack of impact we think this will have.

Q2. international comparisons to understand similar and differing approaches used elsewhere; and

As we identified in 2015 in our response to the consultation on the National Improvement Framework, there is a clear evidence from UK and international examples that implementing high stakes testing can narrow the curriculum that is offered to children and young people, as schools are increasingly motivated to “teach to test”⁴⁵⁶⁷⁸. We are aware the Scottish Government has rhetorically identified its opposition to ‘high stakes’ testing, however we have concerns about this in the longer term.

We would also point the committee in the direction of Finnish education expert Patsi Salhberg who has argued that the avoidance of high stakes testing in Finland has helped create an environment that supports the positive educational outcomes achieved by Finnish children and young people⁹. The new standardised assessments appear to present a pathway to ‘high stakes’ testing that away from the broad educational ambitions of Curriculum for Excellence and the Getting it Right for Every Child approach. We are particularly concerned what the impact of standardised assessments may have on schools with high proportions of children with additional support needs, for example, English as an additional language, for whom standardised assessment results would not be an appropriate indicator of learning potential.

Children in Scotland is a member of the Play not Tests campaign and firmly believes that play-based learning rather than a focus on assessment in the earliest stages of school is the most appropriate form of education for children at this stage. There is a range of evidence to support the benefits of play in promoting the social, emotional and cognitive development of young children and how this supports learning as children mature (10).

We encourage the Committee and the Scottish Government to learn from this example and pursue this model if the aim is excellence and equity for Scotland's children.

Q3. what information the Government's assessments can provide that contribute to improving the educational outcomes of children and young people.

Children in Scotland believes that the information provided by the new standardised assessments will not significantly contribute to improving the educational outcomes of children and young people.

Debates around standardised testing generally focus on whether they can provide valid and reliable evaluations of student learning for their declared purpose; and the ways in which the tests are used (high-stakes or low-stakes).

With regard to technical quality, we recognise that there is no such thing as a perfectly valid and reliable test of student knowledge and skill acquisition, and that performance data can never reflect what pupils know or can do with complete accuracy. Many testing experts therefore caution against using a single standardised test score as a measure of educational performance, since both the tests and data reporting are inevitably subject to some error and bias. Tests for young children (P1, P4) may be especially prone to error and bias, given their limited attention spans and lack of experience of testing and/or computer-based activities, especially those from more deprived backgrounds (2).

There is a wealth of evidence from child psychology that shows children experience rapid developmental growth around the time they are likely to be taking the assessments¹³. A period of social, emotional or cognitive developmental growth may rapidly leave the assessment data out of date.

Scores obtained through standardised assessment, captured once every three years will therefore only represent where pupils were on the day they took the assessment. This may give an unrealistic account of their progress over that timeframe or indeed their need for additional support.

Children in Scotland believe ongoing assessment based on teacher judgement is a more effective way of measuring the progress and needs of children, particularly those in P1. It also provides more opportunity to look at individual strengths and achievements outside of literacy and numeracy, across the whole curriculum and beyond. Ongoing assessments by a teacher who knows the pupil are likely therefore to provide a far clearer of assessment of the needs of the child as it will be informed by a rounder understanding of the child, their strengths and difficulties. In this way they are better able to make informed decisions about a child's learning needs based on their progress over a period of time.

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UPSTART SCOTLAND

The adverse effects of national standardised assessments on the primary school curriculum, pedagogical practices and children's educational potential

- 1) The move from SSLN to SNSA means that all Scottish children will be assessed annually in literacy/numeracy at P1, P4, P7 and S3, as opposed to national sampling. The introduction of SNSA is part of a raft of measures devised by the National Improvement Framework with the primary aim of closing the poverty-related attainment gap between children and young people from the least and most disadvantaged communities. In this submission we shall argue that – in the long run – it will have the opposite effect.
- 2) There is considerable international evidence that national standardised assessment of literacy/numeracy leads to 'unintended consequences and perverse incentives' in educational practice, e.g.
 - narrowing of the curriculum (the areas to be tested become educationally 'salient' and time/attention are devoted to them at the expense of other curricular areas)
 - in order to help their pupils, achieve as high a standard as possible, teachers 'teach to the test', which leads them to over-focus on measurable (and often superficial) aspects of curricular content
 - increasing anxiety about 'test performance' among pupils, teachers and parents.
 (See also [Exam Factories](#), NUT 2015)

High and low stakes assessment

- 3) The Scottish Government claims that the SNSA will not result in these behaviours because it is not a 'high-stakes' assessment (e.g. children's responses to the tablet-based task are not marked right/wrong and their scores will not be published). Yet the First Minister's call to be judged on her record in education means that SNSA is recognised by the public and media as a key factor of a **high-stakes policy**. As such, it puts considerable pressure on local authorities, schools and teachers to maximise children's performance.
- 4) International evidence (e.g. [Goldstein](#), 2004), shows that the linking of assessments to performance targets also raises the stakes significantly for schools and teachers. In Scotland, aspirational 'benchmarks' for children's educational performance were published to accompany the SNSAs. These are, not surprisingly, interpreted as targets, along with advice to teachers that 'there is no need to provide curriculum level judgements in all curriculum areas – stick to literacy and numeracy', the benchmarks will exacerbate the 'salience effect' and 'teaching to the test'.
- 5) The SNSA is task-based (i.e. based on children's responses to literacy/numeracy tasks presented on a tablet) so the types of behaviour required for success can be easily identified. As well as narrowing teacher's perceptions of the behaviours underpinning success in literacy/numeracy, the SNSA tasks are already informing commercial organisations which produce materials/services aimed at helping parents improve their children's performance.
- 6) Despite assurances to the contrary, the SNSA therefore has all the hallmarks of a 'tests-and-targets' regime in which literacy and numeracy are salient.
- 7) In Australia, NAPLAN (the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy) was similarly labelled 'low-stakes' when introduced ten years ago. It is now acknowledged to

encourage all the ‘unintended consequences and perverse incentives’ associated with the high-stakes tests-and-targets regimes in England and USA.

Poverty, well-being and attainment

- 8) The pressures associated with a ‘tests-and-targets’ regime are increasingly being linked to the explosion of mental health problems among children and young people (e.g. [New Statesman](#), Sept 2018).
- 9) There is a [well-established link](#) between mental health problems and growing up in poverty. There is also a significant [poverty-related attainment gap](#) in language and problem-solving when children are five years old, which persists throughout their educational lives. Pressure on low-achieving children from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve standardised performance targets in literacy and numeracy (from Primary 1) is likely to exacerbate mental health problems, which is unlikely to improve educational performance. It is therefore improbable that the introduction of SNSA will help to close the poverty-related attainment gap – indeed it is more likely to widen it.
- 10) This certainly appears to be the case in England and the USA, where the poverty gap has widened considerably over the last 20 years. In Australia, the introduction of NAPLAN has coincided with a steady decline in both educational achievement and educational equity in the OECD’s PISA charts and in November 2018 the [poverty-related attainment gap in Sydney](#) was shown to have widened.
- 11) Upstart Scotland is particularly concerned about the long-term effects of beginning a ‘SNSA-and benchmarks’ regime in P1, when children are only four or five. We are therefore submitting evidence to the Independent Review of the P1 SNSA showing that – for children who are not developmentally ready for instruction in the three Rs -- an early focus on literacy and numeracy skills creates ‘self-fulfilling prophecies’, thus widening the attainment gap. We would be happy to make this evidence available to the Education Committee.

Curriculum for Excellence, SNSA and international trends in assessment

- 12) A fast-growing body of international research points to the significance of childhood well-being for long term physical and mental health. Scotland’s *Curriculum for Excellence* therefore showed great prescience in identifying health and wellbeing as one of three important curricular strands that underpin children’s educational success (the other two being literacy and numeracy). Unfortunately, the introduction of SNSA in literacy and numeracy and guidance on the related benchmarks quoted in (4) above have now effectively downgraded the educational importance of health and well-being.
- 13) CfE also introduced an Early Level (straddling Nursery and P1 – i.e. three to six years) to bring Scotland into line with well-established early years practice in most of the world (see UNESCO definition) where formal schooling does not begin until children are six or seven (this includes the whole of mainland Europe). Introducing a SNSA for literacy and numeracy skills in P1, when children are four or five, is entirely inconsistent with high-quality early years pedagogy. As we explain in our submission to the Independent Review of the P1 SNSA, it is likely to be damaging for all children, but especially for disadvantaged children who are especially likely to suffer from developmental delay.
- 14) In response to the research mentioned in (12) above, educationally successful nations are moving away from high-pressure educational regimes, especially in early childhood. [Singapore](#) (school starting age: six) will next year make significant adaptations to its

famously rigorous system of assessment, including the abandonment of all national testing of children under eight years old. Similarly, the Education Minister in [China](#) (school starting age: seven) recently ruled that kindergarten children should be learning through play, there must be no early attention to academic skills and no testing.

Little to gain and much to lose

- 15) 'Tests-and-targets' regimes in other English-speaking countries have not improved overall performance in international educational comparisons. However, the pressures associated with this type of educational approach appear to be associated with an escalation of mental health problems among children and young people.
- 16) The Scottish Government claims that the SNSA will provide useful diagnostic information for teachers in tackling children's literacy and numeracy difficulties. However, these difficulties are likely to be exacerbated by the 'unintended consequences and pernicious incentives' associated with national standardised assessment, especially since the SNSA begins in P1. Indeed, we argue in our submission to the Independent Review of the P1 SNSA that it is likely to *create* literacy and numeracy difficulties, particularly for disadvantaged children.
- 17) In the light of all the international evidence quoted above, it is difficult to understand the Scottish Government's decision to move from SSLN to SNSA at this time (particularly as sampling techniques have previously proved effective in monitoring national performance in the three Rs).
- 18) Upstart Scotland therefore recommends that the Scottish Government revert to the SSLN system of monitoring national trends in literacy/numeracy performance. If, by any chance, it can be proved that the diagnostic information provided by SNSA at P4, P7 and S1 cancels out the adverse effects of 'unintended consequences and perverse incentives', we still recommend that the P1SNSA be dropped. Not only does its very existence compromise the future mental health and educational chances of very young children but, according to the [British Educational Research Association](#) (2018), tablet-based standardised assessment of this age group is 'likely to produce results with little predictive power and dubious validity'.

PARENT REPRESENTATIVE ORGANISATIONS

CONNECT

December 2018

Connect background

Connect is a long-standing independent parents' group and a registered charity which provides support to parents and carers all over Scotland. We provide membership services to individual Parent Councils and PTAs, as well as offering advice and information to individual parents who have concerns about any aspect of the education of their child, or the wider education system. We support education professionals in developing their skills and understanding around effective partnership working with families and the wider community.

Connect position

Connect has consistently opposed the introduction of standardised assessments for P1 – S3 in our schools.

We are not opposed to assessment in schools: it is a normal and necessary part of the teacher's range of techniques which should inform decisions about teaching and learning, additional support and lead to quality conversations between teachers, children and families.

Our objection to SNSAs is based on the following key issues:

1. The decision to introduce standardised assessments into the Scottish system is directly linked to the local authorities' refusal to share data from their assessments with national Government: Government wants this data to gauge the health of the education system. In Scotland, SNSA data is subsumed into Teacher Judgement scores, which means that Government remains without the data it wanted at the outset.
2. There is widespread concern about basing assessment of the health of the system around what is often misleading and spurious information provided by standardised test data, instead of looking at the more complex factors that are constantly at play, eg poverty, adverse childhood experiences and parental education. (See www.reclaimingschools.org for perspectives on this and associated issues).
3. A standardised test, or assessment, is one that is administered and scored in a consistent manner. They are designed so that questions, conditions for administration, scoring and interpretations are consistent. However, the scheme as it has been introduced into Scotland is not standardised in any way. Indeed, Government has declared that tests should be administered when the teacher feels the time is right, though we know that in many local authority areas the approach has been 'standardised' so that all the cohort are tested in a specific time window. The assessment also adapts to the aptitude of the learner, which on one hand means the child is not left to

struggle against a task beyond their ability, however it also means the assessment cannot be described as standardised.

4. The Scottish scheme has nothing to do with providing individual teachers and families with high quality data to inform decision making. Assessment should inform quality conversations between teachers, children and families, however parents tell us they often do not know about the tests, nor are they given any feedback on the outcomes. Yet the message from Government is that this is the purpose of the SNSAs. Some parents believe the SNSAs to be diagnostic (e.g. for identifying a learning difficulty) but this is not the case either.
5. The scheme tests some elements of literacy and numeracy: they do not tell the whole story of the child, nor can they. Indeed, the P1 tests are administered in a stage where learning through play is the declared focus of our education system: to introduce tests at this stage is to act completely counter to the purpose of this approach and will inevitably lead to schools focussing on the tests as an end in themselves, moving away from the principles of Curriculum for Excellence. In short, the tests do not reflect the taught curriculum.
6. Narrowing of the curriculum and a focus on teaching to the test is something that is of widespread concern, particularly in a system where curriculum choices for young people are already being narrowed because of budget cuts and staff shortages. Curriculum for Excellence sets out the objectives of our children's education: a young person's educational experience should help the development of the whole individual.
7. Many of the Scottish Government's own panel of educational advisors have pointed out the dangers of a narrow focus on standardised assessment data, as a measure of system performance. The evidence across the globe is that when they are used to measure or assess teachers, schools or systems, their impact is highly negative to the system, but most importantly to learners.
8. China and Singapore along with Finland are all high performing education systems and have smaller equity gaps than Scotland, yet these countries have committed to test-free, play-based, early years education and childcare. This is a radical change in approach for China and Singapore - becoming more like Scotland's system at a time when we are reversing our direction.

Eileen Prior
Executive Director
21 December 2018

NATIONAL PARENT FORUM OF SCOTLAND

We welcome the Scottish Parliament's inquiry into the Scottish National Standardised Assessments and would like to outline some points that, while being outside the focus of the inquiry, we feel it would be useful for the committee to hear.

As an independent volunteer body of parents, the members of the National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFS) do our best to voice the wide range of parent views to Government and have reflected both the concerned and the supportive voices on SNSAs. NPFS were represented on the National Improvement Framework (NIF) Board which discussed all aspects of the assessments before their introduction. At these national policy discussions, we continually raised our concerns that parents were not being provided with information about the assessments. Parents were not receiving the clear, balanced information they needed to understand why the new assessments were being introduced, why the national aspect was important, whether assessment was right for their child and why the information gathered was helpful to the class teacher.

We acknowledge, but still dispute, Scottish Government's reason for not highlighting the SNSA rollout to parents: they believed it would result in unnecessary profile raising; but, as NPFS made clear at the time and we then saw earlier this year, when there is a vacuum of information it allows fear and anxiety to spread. This issue is wider than the standardised assessments, it is about a repeated lack of good, direct communication from schools, local authorities and Scottish Government to parents. Major initiatives, both local and national, are undermined; entire policies tarnished, often before they have the opportunity to get off the ground. We are now in a situation with SNSAs that is entirely unacceptable: our children's education is being used to score political points.

A relatively small number of parents contacted us with concerns and the majority of these were not parents of P1s, they were parents of older children. The issues were down to schools not adhering to the guidance on how the tests should be administered. Parents have told us of very negative experiences that could have been avoided. This included parents: worrying about an entire primary one class having to walk to their nearest high school to use IT equipment; saddened that their primary seven child was mistakenly accused of cheating; and, upset that their child was terrified they would fail an assessment that cannot be failed.

We are concerned that since the restructure of groups at the Scottish Government level, the Scottish Education Council now oversees the SNSAs. While on paper it is right that this highest policy level oversees everything, what we are finding in practice is that they are rarely discussed as there is a wealth of other items to be covered. We feel that the NIF Board is missed as an opportunity to discuss these issues in depth.

The information available to teachers from the SNSAs is exceptional. It provides details of a child's specific skills, knowledge and understanding, which enhances the teacher's judgement when identifying strengths, as well as areas that might require more focus. Yet we are disappointed that somewhere in the education chain, this thorough summary and the teacher's wide knowledge of each child is diluted to report cards that parents frequently tell us are almost meaningless. Report cards don't inform parents of these strengths, or the areas needing work, or how they can support their child at home. But the SNSA report does and this makes it a valuable tool to reinforce the class teacher's judgement.

When parents are involved in their children's learning, it benefits children, families and schools: children do better. We need to keep parents at the heart of their child's learning. The NPFS will

continue to strive for a political and legislative environment which champions the voice of parents. We would be happy to discuss this further with the Committee at any opportunity.

Best Wishes,
Joanna Murphy

STANDARDISED ASSESSMENTS PROVIDERS

GL ASSESSMENTS

Introduction

GL Assessment is the leading provider of formative assessments to UK schools, as well as providing assessments for overseas ministries and British, bilingual and international schools in over 100 countries worldwide. We specialise in literacy, numeracy, reasoning, SEN and attitudinal assessments, and have relationships with over a third of primary and two thirds of secondary schools in the UK.

We have a distinct philosophy of good assessment practice based on a ‘whole pupil’ approach, examining an individual’s attitude, ability and attainment to provide a complete understanding of their needs.

Our assessment model therefore identifies a pupil’s ability to show what they are capable of; measures attainment to see where they are and how they are progressing; compares their ability against their attainment to identify the factors for underachievement; and highlights potential barriers to learning that inform intervention at the earliest opportunity.

Principles of Assessment

When examining the importance of assessment, it is essential to ensure that schools are clear on what they want to know, how to use the data to best effect, and how to act on the results for the benefit of both the teachers and the pupils. These should always be at the heart of any assessment programme introduced by the Scottish Government, and when changes are being considered, Ministers should ensure that these principles are still at the core of policy development.

Comprehensive and consistent programmes of formative assessment provide a means through which teachers can highlight factors which prevent stumbling blocks, and target interventions to improve educational attainment. There can be a mistrust of data that is published at a national level, often as a result of misunderstanding its purpose or a concern that the data will be used in multiple ways. For this to be avoided, communication needs to be clear, and the benefits for pupils, their parents, and their teachers needs to be highlighted. Schools must also be given the tools to be able to interpret the data they have and then be able to highlight to pupils what the results show and how it can be used to help them progress.

Schools should be encouraged to institute programmes of regular formative assessment to help their most disadvantaged pupils. Indeed, the 2014 Joseph Rowntree Foundation report into bridging the attainment gap in Scottish education specifically highlights the value of “evidence-based approaches [to] reduce the attainment gap.....based on timely, relevant data.”

Formative assessments such as ours are standardised; they provide national benchmarks to provide a robust measure of comparison and hold schools to account. A number of our assessments are diagnostic, too, enabling schools to target interventions in the direction which will have the greatest positive impact on a pupil.

We focus on effective baselining, helping schools set appropriate targets based on pupils' strengths and areas for development. Our subject assessments provide detailed data to help schools benchmark pupils against different classes, and schools. This data can help measure progress towards Literacy and Numeracy targets with the Attainment Challenge in Scotland.

We also have a range of assessments to help uncover barriers to learning: whether that means engagement and confidence in learning or learning difficulties like dyslexia or working memory. The lack of formative and diagnostic elements in the Government's tests highlight their weaknesses and without these elements, their usefulness when it comes to supporting pupils' next stage of learning is limited. Our assessments are used at teacher level to assist them identify pupils' areas of need and then to support implementation of support programmes as appropriate.

In order for assessment to be successful it should only be used for one purpose at any one time. This approach also means that schools do not require much assessment to identify any anomalies. In his paper 'Clarifying the purposes of educational assessment'¹⁴, Dr Paul Newton outlined how assessment can be used for 22 different, distinct purposes – ranging from formative and diagnostic assessments, to assessments that enabled various types of monitoring and accounting. His conclusion was that you should only use one kind of assessment for one thing; the moment you try to do more than that, it will not work.

There are many ways to implement assessment programmes into schools. While a top down approach can be logistically difficult to implement, assessment models that enable assessment to be used positively to identify strengths and weaknesses, enable effective intervention, address problems and highlight where to focus attention, receive a warmer welcome. Whichever model is used; however, the success will be based on ensuring that the fundamentals of assessment are adhered to so schools need to be clear on what they want to achieve, use all the data available and act on the results.

Use of Data

Regular assessment is of enormous help when teachers know how to use the data garnered to best effect. Teachers often cite assessments as a contributor to excessive workload, but at the same time know how useful it can be. Therefore, the use of 'smart data' must be encouraged.

Children only need to be assessed more formally a few times during the course of the year. Used correctly, the information from these assessments will support and aid teaching staff to give pupils the best guidance, and where necessary interventions. Recent research shows that 41% of teachers believe that 3 to 4 tests per year for each class is sufficient to allow them to do their job well. Almost all of those questioned (95%) believed that data has a place in the classroom so to marry that with the concerns over workload, data has to be used well and efficiently¹⁵.

With 75% of teachers stating that assessment has helped to identify unknown pupil issues such as dyslexia, we believe that it is essential that teachers are supported in a way to make the use of assessment and their data beneficial for all. Assessments are critical in helping to uncover the 'hard to spot' children – confidence and engagement are

¹⁴ Paul Newton: Clarifying the purposes of educational assessment 2007

¹⁵ GL Assessment Smart Data Report 2016

intrinsically linked to educational attainment. The right data can make a huge difference to a pupil's progress and the use of smart data can be hugely beneficial to teachers.

As Heather Fuller, Head Teacher at The High School of Glasgow Junior School explains: "We have found the assessments to be invaluable in adding to the range of evidence which informs professional dialogue in our monitoring and tracking meetings and helps identify next steps for our pupils. The large amount of detailed data relating to each child helps us to pinpoint specific areas for development for the individual, and informs our areas for improvement as a whole school, helping us to constantly achieve academic excellence."

Example of best practice: Student wellbeing

No-one would disagree that student wellbeing is as important as academic progression. In the past the former has not been given sufficient support or resources and there was an expectation that teachers would pick up on anomalies. However, pupils often do not display the obvious signs which indicate poor mental health, and therefore teachers need assistance to pin point why a student is under-performing, disengaged or simply not progressing as expected.

Our report, [Children's Wellbeing: Pupil Attitudes to Self and School 2018](#), is based on an analysis of data from over 30,000 students aged 7 – 14 years in Scotland, and 850,000 children across the UK as a whole. The key findings are that almost one in five children exhibits tendencies that could lead to wellbeing or mental health issues later in life with one in twenty at severe risk.¹⁶

As one of our contributors writes, while pupil voice has become increasingly emphasised, it is not necessarily the pupil whose voice is always heard who is the pupil who *actually* needs to be heard. We believe this study shows that far too many children remain at risk and that we have to work smarter in measuring the health and wellbeing of all young people, and in identifying those who seem fine on the surface but have hidden barriers to learning.

Our psychometric assessment, Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS), formed the basis of the study. It is a tool that helps schools uncover and identify attitudes that, if left unaddressed, can undermine student wellbeing as well as their academic success. The nine standardised factors PASS identifies have strong links to both the four Curriculum for Excellence capacities and the eight SHANARRI wellbeing indicators. It is therefore an ideal health and wellbeing screener for schools, and results from the measure can be used to help demonstrate progress made, and specific plans for improvement, as you can see from the examples featured in our report.

An example of a school that uses PASS to support hidden pupils is Gabalfa Primary School in Cardiff. They report that their success stories are many: "An example includes a well-behaved, cheerful 10-year-old girl who was slightly underachieving but not to the point of being a major concern. Following the completion of PASS, analysis highlighted her as a possible vulnerable pupil with low self-regard as a learner and a poor attitude towards school. Armed with a greater understanding of this pupil's feelings, support could be offered to build her self-esteem and develop a more positive attitude towards school. This pupil achieved her ambitious targets at the end of primary and entered

¹⁶ GL Assessment's Children's Wellbeing Report 2018

secondary school with increased confidence, receiving an attendance award in her first year.”¹⁷

Example of best practice: reading interventions

It is also hard to argue against the need for children to be able to read and write fluently. These are basic life skills, and schools and parents have a responsibility to ensure that children have these tools. Stephen Tierney, CEO of the BEBCMAT and author of *Liminal Leadership*, argues it is about more than the ability to know the letters and how they form words but for pupils to have a wider understanding of what they are reading and how their knowledge of other subjects such as humanities can enhance what they take away from reading a chapter in a book. It follows that an accountability system that concentrates on granular outcomes will not aid a child to broaden their knowledge – they and their teachers need to look beyond the narrow ability to read and delve into their comprehension skills.

Tierney recently blogged, “A focus on reading isn’t an event, rather a staged, well thought through and well implemented multi-year development for any school.” In Tierney’s case, this includes the use of our New Group Reading Test (NGRT) to help school leaders judge whether their reading programme is having the required impact.

The insights generated from assessments such as NGRT often uncover issues with specific aspects of reading. For example, our report, ‘Lost Girls: The overlooked children struggling to understand the written word’, found that more than one in ten girls have problems with reading comprehension.¹⁸ The research suggests that an over-reliance on phonics is obscuring deeper problems with reading in primary schools with children reading words but not understanding them. Without identifying the lack of understanding thought such assessments as NGRT, these girls will continue to fall under the radar. NGRT helps to identify those who read but do not understand and thus allowing the teachers to implement appropriate strategies.

Brian Tracey, DHT, St Vincent’s Primary, School, Glasgow believes that NGRT provides an excellent breakdown of data in the report section which gave the school’s teachers a clear indication of areas that needed reinforcing. This type of detailed tracking is a crucial part of a teacher’s toolkit to start closing the attainment gap.

Suggestions:

- Assessments should be introduced for one specific purpose at any one time. Trying to use assessments for multiple reasons nullifies their effectiveness.
- Ultimately, for schools’ assessment programmes to be successful, they must always have the benefits for the pupil at their heart, be clear on their aims and use the data for necessary interventions to help pupils succeed in their academic endeavours.
- Formative and diagnostic assessments enable schools and governors to measure the success of interventions and to highlight the interventions that work best. When looking at strategies to bridge the attainment gap, standardised assessments provide a national

¹⁷ GL Assessment Children’s Wellbeing report 2018 p13

¹⁸ GL Assessment: Lost Girls: The overlooked children struggling to understand the written word 2016

benchmark that can provide an easy comparison of progress between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.

- Schools should be encouraged to do more at the start of an educational intervention. Using an appropriate assessment, schools need to establish the root cause of the problem whether that is low attainment or an unusual attitude to school and to one's self. Once this has been identified, the most appropriate intervention/s can be implemented.
- The ability of schools to handle assessment data varies widely. High schools are often strong here but an average primary school struggles to manage and use data. Initial teacher training and ongoing CPD should feature effective use of data. Teachers need to be trained in standardised assessment data as well as teacher assessment and national performance data.