

**Date: 21<sup>st</sup> November 2024**

### **ADCS submission curriculum and assessment review**

The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd. (ADCS) is the national leadership organisation in England for directors of children's services (DCSs) under the provisions of the Children Act (2004). The DCS acts as a single point of leadership and accountability for services for children and young people in a local area, including children's social care and education. ADCS welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department for Education's (DfE) call for evidence 'on potential improvements to the curriculum and assessment system.'

In October 2024, ADCS held an extraordinary meeting of our national Education Policy Committee, which focused on the call for evidence in respect of curriculum and assessment. This resulted in over 60 ADCS members directly feeding into this draft and process.

Members of ADCS highlighted the importance of ensuring that the curriculum is inclusive and responsive to the needs of all children and young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special educational needs.

ADCS members advocate for a curriculum that not only promotes academic excellence but also fosters creativity, critical thinking, and life skills essential for personal and professional success. They also emphasised the need for manageable workloads for education staff, which would ultimately benefit students through more dedicated focus and support.

Concerns have been raised about the current assessment frameworks, with calls for a reduction in the assessment burden to allow for a more holistic approach to student evaluation over time rather than being overly reliant on exams. Many members stressed the importance of considering how curriculum changes interact with accountability measures, ensuring that these changes do not inadvertently hinder the professional expertise of educators.

Additionally, ADCS members supported the review's evidence and data-driven approach, toward meaningful change rather than abrupt shifts. They also suggest that looking beyond alternative provisions for innovative practices could enrich the educational landscape and inform effective strategies for curriculum development.

Overall, ADCS members are committed to creating a curriculum that not only serves academic purposes but also prepares young people for the realities of life in a rapidly changing world.

#### **Item 1: General views on the current curriculum, qualifications pathways, and assessment system across key stages 1 to 4 and 16-19 education.**

ADCS members believe that the current curriculum remains broadly relevant to the majority of learners and recognise that progress has been made in teaching children to acquire and retain long-term memory. They also agree that many children and families have a clear understanding of the curriculum expectations and how these relate to assessments, further education, and employment opportunities.

However, the curriculum does not work for all learners. ADCS members are strongly in favour of emphasising life skills and personal development alongside academic achievement for learners of all ages and stages. They advocate for flexibility in educational pathways and the inclusion of more high-quality vocational opportunities to benefit all children and young people. Additionally, there is a

need better recognise the practical skills valued by further and higher education institutions and employers.

While ADCS members see potential for improvement in the existing curriculum, they note inconsistencies in the implementation of evidence-based teaching. They highlight difficulties in tracking student progress from early years through to the end of key stage three, as well as the need for clearer guidance for teachers and senior leaders to promote inclusivity.

There is a significant need for smoother transitions for all students, particularly for those who are from disadvantaged backgrounds or have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Educational professionals have shared insights about the challenges in ensuring continuity of learning for disadvantaged children and young people, especially when they have to change provisions mid-year.

### **Item 2: Social justice and inclusion**

We need to reimagine a truly inclusive education system that enables the majority of children to be educated in mainstream schools alongside their peers. Achieving this will require courage and a significant shift; the government must bring together parents and carers, schools, and all stakeholders on this journey.

ADCS members are clear that current assessment and accountability measures act as a barrier to inclusion. Members advocate for a proactive approach to designing assessments that enable all children and young people to demonstrate their learning. They suggest that the current single assessment model does not adequately capture the knowledge and abilities of every student. Use of a variety of assessment methods over time is both essential and necessary to ensure that all students can showcase their full range of learning and to promote more positive outcomes for young people aged 16 to 19 years old.

ADCS members emphasise the need for careful consideration of all available assessment methods, as some may inadvertently affect children based on gender. For example, “for GCSE specifications with coursework, female students generally outperform their male peers; conversely, in specifications without coursework, the reverse is true” ([Ofqual, 2020](#)).

### **Item 3: A broad and balanced curriculum**

A broad and balanced curriculum is essential for enhancing opportunities and outcomes for all children and young people and fostering a holistic educational experience that nurtures diverse talents and interests is vital. By incorporating various subjects—ranging from arts and sciences to physical education and humanities—children can explore different pathways, discovering their strengths and passions. This approach not only promotes cognitive development but also cultivates critical thinking, creativity, and social skills, preparing students for a rapidly changing world.

Moreover, a well-rounded curriculum supports inclusivity, ensuring that every child, regardless of their background or abilities, can engage meaningfully with their education. Ultimately, investing in a diverse curriculum equips children with the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive both academically and personally, paving the way for their future success. Softer skills built in the arts and sports, such as communication and teamwork, are highly valued by employers.

Several critical issues have been raised by ADCS members that not only hinder educational progress but also overshadow the vital role that inclusivity plays in shaping the future of our children.

One of the most pressing concerns is the mismatch between academic and vocational pathways. This disconnect leaves many students feeling unengaged and unmotivated in a system that ought to cater to diverse talents and interests. While high academic achievers might thrive under pressure, those who do not can find themselves sidelined and disheartened by a system that fails to recognise their strengths or potential.

Compounding this issue is the limited recognition of life skills within the curriculum. Skills that are essential for real-world success—such as communication, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence—often take a backseat. Instead of preparing all children and young people for life beyond school, the curriculum remains narrowly focused on high-stakes assessments, which prioritise rote memorisation over holistic understanding. This approach not only stifles creativity but also undermines the broader educational experience.

Furthermore, the complex, costly and increasingly outdated assessment systems in place exacerbate frustrations. They not only drain resources but also create barriers, making it challenging for educators to implement responsive teaching methods. This rigidity often prevents schools from adapting to the diverse and changing cohorts of students in their care, leaving many children without the support they need to thrive. The lack of flexibility further discourages innovation and the personalisation of learning experiences, which are vital in a rapidly evolving world. Allowing all learners to complete exams on computers, for example, would support inclusion efforts and reflect the modern realities of higher study and work.

The inadequacy of early speech and language intervention also poses significant challenges. Effective communication is foundational to learning and social interaction, yet many children do not receive the necessary support early on. This lack of attention can lead to long-term adverse effects on their educational journey, perpetuating inequities that should be addressed at the outset.

Lastly, defining and measuring inclusion presents a further layer of complexity. Without clear metrics and guidelines, efforts to foster an inclusive environment can feel aimless. The challenge lies not merely in including children with diverse needs but in truly understanding and measuring their progress within the system.

In light of these frustrations, it becomes increasingly clear that a broad and balanced curriculum is paramount. Such a framework not only promotes inclusivity but also ensures positive outcomes for all children, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities. It empowers educators to create engaging, relevant, and supportive learning environments that celebrate diversity and nurture every child's unique strengths.

Ultimately, the vision for an educational system should transcend academic achievements alone. It should encompass a holistic approach to inclusion and student development, enabling children to become well-rounded individuals ready for further education, employment, training and equipped to navigate the complexities of life. By addressing the existing frustrations and advocating for a more inclusive curriculum, that can pave the way for a brighter, more equitable future for all children.

#### **Item 4: Assessment and accountability**

ADCS members believe that the system, which is designed to measure student performance, often falls short in truly representing the diverse strengths and backgrounds of learners.

The overwhelming volume of assessments that students face was raised as a serious concern by ADCS members. The relentless cycle of testing can create a high-pressure environment, leaving young people feeling anxious and, at times, defeated, examples of GCSE students contending

with 30 separate assessments under exam conditions in a short space of time were shared in these discussions. This constant emphasis on assessments can hinder their learning journey, forcing them to prioritise test preparation over genuine understanding. As a result, the holistic development of skills that truly matter for their future—such as critical thinking, creativity, and emotional resilience - are effectively deprioritised.

Additionally, the current curriculum and assessment practices have become inextricably linked to school accountability and performance measures. Schools often find themselves caught in a cycle where teaching is driven by the need to meet specific benchmarks, skewing the curriculum towards a narrow range of subjects. This can create a situation where teachers feel compelled to “teach to the test,” leading to a reduction in creativity in lesson planning and a lack of space for inquiry-based learning. Consequently, students miss out on the richness of a well-rounded education that encourages exploration and adaptation.

Moreover, the high burden of assessments significantly impacts the wellbeing of students. The stress associated with high-stakes testing can lead to increased anxiety, diminished self-esteem, and disengagement from learning altogether. When students are preoccupied with the next assessment or exam, their ability to explore subjects deeply or engage critically with the material diminishes. They may see education merely as a series of hurdles to overcome rather than as a transformative experience. This detrimental effect can hinder their progress to the next educational stage, eventually affecting their choices and opportunities in life. NHS data shows that mental health concerns amongst young people are rapidly rising ([NHSE, 2023](#)) and international surveys and research continues to show that UK learners have low levels of life satisfaction than their counterparts.

True educational accountability should not rest solely on test scores or metrics. ADCS members felt strongly it should encompass a broader understanding of student achievement and progress, one that recognises varied talents and competencies. By aligning assessments with a more inclusive and comprehensive curriculum, we set the stage for young people to excel in ways that truly reflect their abilities.

With the right approach, assessment can become a valuable tool for growth rather than a source of stress. Emphasising formative assessments, which guide learning and provide ongoing feedback, rather than purely summative assessments, could help foster an environment where students feel supported and encouraged to take risks in their learning.

Ultimately, addressing these frustrations requires a collective commitment to re-evaluating how we measure success in education. By linking assessment types to a broad and balanced curriculum while prioritising the wellbeing of students, we can create pathways for all young people to feel prepared and able to achieve their potential. The narrative around the attainment of children in care underscored this point. While this cohort may not perform as well as their peers, there is a strong body of evidence that they do better than the more comparable cohort of children in need of help and protection. Simplistic comparisons that do not take into account the impact of earlier childhood abuses and trauma are not helpful. In doing so, we will not only enhance their academic outcomes but nurture confident, capable individuals ready to contribute meaningfully to society.

### **Item 5: Transitions and technology**

Transitioning between key stages in education is a crucial event that can significantly influence a student's academic journey and overall development. ADCS members considered how these

transitions can be better supported, ensuring continuous learning and enhanced attainment for all students.

One of the primary challenges identified is the lack of coordination, and consistency of practice, between primary and secondary school. This disconnect can leave students feeling unprepared and uncertain as they transition to a new environment and approach to learning.

Furthermore, it is important to address the transition to post-16 education where study is much more self-directed. A variety of activities, strategies, and processes must come together to create a supportive learning environment that encourages Entry/Level 1 students to achieve and progress. There is frequently a lack of progression for pupils working at entry level and Level 1; they too frequently repeat courses or engage in the same content without advancing their skills and preparations for adulthood. To address this, fostering collaboration between schools and settings is essential. Regular meetings between educators across key stages can lead to shared best practices and a better understanding of students' needs. Such collaboration not only streamlines communication but also helps build a supportive community focused on the students' holistic development.

Additionally, technology can enhance communication between schools, parents, and students. Interactive platforms that keep families informed about curriculum changes, assessment criteria, and progress updates can foster a richer support network, making the transition less daunting for everyone involved. This level of engagement ensures that no child feels left behind, regardless of their background or learning needs.

Moreover, technology is playing an increasingly large role in how the curriculum is delivered. By utilising digital platforms, educators can create a more cohesive and connected educational experience. For instance, online learning environments can facilitate smoother transitions by providing resources and support tailored to incoming students. Digital portfolios can showcase student work, allowing secondary schools to better understand the strengths and challenges of each learner before they arrive. It is also not yet being well utilised in assessments. Allowing students to type exam responses could support inclusion, for example.

To truly prepare children for adulthood, all students—regardless of whether they have SEND - must be included in programs aimed at development. Here, technology can assist in identifying individual strengths and areas for growth through adaptive learning tools and personalised assessments. These innovations allow for tailored learning pathways that respect each child or young person's unique journey and prepare them to thrive in the future.

In summary, ADCS members advocate for a more integrated approach to education transitions, emphasising the importance of collaboration and the innovative use of technology. By harnessing these strategies, we can create a seamless educational experience that supports all learners in reaching their fullest potential, ultimately fostering the skills they need for successful adulthood. Through these concerted efforts, we pave the way for an education system that is not only responsive but also resilient, ensuring every student is equipped to thrive.

## **Item 6: Ensuring an excellent foundation in maths and English**

ADCS members share a common vision and one of the key recommendations is to strengthen early intervention strategies to support children in achieving expected benchmarks at primary school. ADCS members emphasised the importance of recognising that foundation skills in literacy and numeracy are critical not only for academic success but also for lifelong learning. Enhanced training for teachers in primary settings would help identify and address gaps in students'

understanding early on. This approach would involve tailored support mechanisms for struggling students, alongside engaging enrichment activities that foster a love of learning in all pupils.

At the key stage 4 level, there is a consensus that the curriculum needs to be more adaptable and relevant to the diverse needs of learners. Many ADCS members advocated for the integration of functional skills directly into the core subjects of the curriculum and a focus on usable knowledge and skills, such as understanding interest rates and budgeting. This move would help bridge the gap between traditional academic criteria and the practical skills that students will need in real-world scenarios—whether they are pursuing higher education or entering the workforce.

Finally, ADCS members underscored the importance of providing equitable funding as well as additional support to underfunded schools and communities. This would include access to tutoring, technology, and engaging learning materials that cater to diverse learning styles. By ensuring that every child, regardless of their background, has access to high-quality educational opportunities, we can foster an environment where all students have the potential to excel in maths and English.

In conclusion, the dialogue among ADCS members reflects a strong commitment to reimagining the education system to prioritise foundation skills in maths and English for all learners. By advocating for early support, an adaptable curriculum, innovative assessment methods, collaboration, and equitable resources, we can pave the way for more pupils to not only meet but exceed expectations by the time they reach 19 years old. This paradigm shift could ultimately empower young individuals, preparing them for success in both higher education and the workforce, ensuring a brighter future for all.

To discuss any of the issues raised in this response with members of ADCS, please contact the relevant policy officer, Madeline Jackson, in the first instance via [madeline.jackson@adcs.org.uk](mailto:madeline.jackson@adcs.org.uk).