



**Advice to the Minister for Education  
on Curriculum and Assessment  
at Key Stage 3**

**March 2003**

## 1 Issues relating to the 2002 consultation

In its earlier consultation in 2000, CCEA had proposed a curriculum consisting of :

- a revised aim,
- three clear objectives,
- the same number of subjects as present (with some slimming of content and highlighting of generic skills), and in addition;
- the areas of Citizenship, Personal Development and Employability.

Time allocations were suggested to ensure balance and breadth. However respondents felt that this framework would produce a potentially overloaded curriculum.

On reflection, the Council felt that such a curriculum sat uncomfortably between its proposed primary phase curriculum, in which subjects are integrated into curriculum areas, and the Key Stage 4 curriculum which, it is suggesting, should focus on key skills and personal development. Only the Key Stage 3 curriculum would be packaged in a large number of discrete subjects. The Council decided that such a prescription would emphasize too greatly the boundaries between subjects and give insufficient emphasis to the connections among them.

In the consultation last year, the Council decided to present proposals for a framework at Key Stage 3 in terms of curriculum areas similar, but not identical to those in Key Stages 1 and 2. It was suggested that statutory requirements within these areas should be limited to specifying the minimum to which all pupils should be entitled. In this case, schools would have much greater flexibility than at present to decide how best to use the time in Key Stage 3 for different groups of pupils. It was also thought that such an approach would allow those schools who wished to do so, ease the change from a primary to post-primary pattern of teaching and learning.

The Council has also proposed that the Key Stage 3 curriculum, like that in primary schools, should give greater emphasis to the development of skills and competences. The current statutory curriculum is more biased towards accumulation of subject knowledge. In both the first and the most recent consultation there was strong support for such a change of balance, although some respondents cautioned that the pendulum should not swing too far too suddenly.

One of the challenges faced by post-primary schools, where pupils are drawn from a range of feeder primary schools, is the extent to which (despite the existing statutory curriculum) pupils start Year 8 with wide differences in experiences. This is cited by schools as a reason for what many pupils see as the de-motivating repetition of earlier work that they experience. The solution to this problem is not greater uniformity of experience across different primary

schools (the Council's proposals will create more flexibility for primary schools, not less) but to increase the level of contact across the primary / post-primary divide and so improve the passage of information across it.

The Council is also concerned with the balance between the statutory and advisory curriculum. Some schools regard the retention of subject identities as crucial. Others welcome the blurring of subject divisions in order to develop more coherence in learning. Some schools wish to retain the traditional form of school and timetable organisation. Others see many of the changes that are now in train (including the technological) as opportunities to move on from that pattern. In the Council's view the curriculum ought to be sufficiently limited in its degree of prescription as to allow for both varieties of school, but it would wish to work with those schools who want to embrace the opportunity for change in order to create route maps that others might then be influenced to follow.

## **2 Outcomes of the 2002 consultation**

The Curriculum Proposals for Key Stage 3, setting out the curriculum within areas, as opposed to subjects, received a mixed response (45% for, 55% against). Respondents made the Council aware that they had not been provided with enough information on which to base an informed judgment. There is overwhelming support for taking change slowly and for trialling and piloting ideas before implementation. There is also fairly strong support (over 70%) for a more minimalist statutory curriculum comprising statements of entitlement, as distinct from the current detailed Programmes of Study, with even greater approval, nearly 83%, for these to be accompanied by learning outcomes.

There is only 45% support, however, for the proposal that the curriculum should be defined in areas as opposed to subjects and only about 54% support for the Areas suggested. The idea that assessment should be linked to areas of study was particularly strongly opposed. This reflects the strong subject identification of the majority of teachers. There was very little support, just under a quarter, for the proposal that a significant proportion of pupils should be able to complete Key Stage 3 in two years, although there was a generally positive reaction to the idea that schools should be able to make use of additional flexibility, though not necessarily in the ways suggested. The qualitative comments accompanying these responses revealed that respondents were concerned about the emergence of a two-tier system which might stigmatise further those perceived to be taking a slower path.

On the basis of the 2000 and 2002 consultations, the Council believes that there is substantial support both from within the education service and beyond, for a greater emphasis on skill development in the curriculum and for the inclusion of areas related to "life and work".

The Council has reflected on these outcomes and has held further informal consultation with a range of practitioners. On the basis of this feedback, the current advice sets out a programme of future development based on proposals for the broad framework of the Key Stage 3 curriculum, its assessment arrangements and the support that would be required.

### **3 Framework for the Key Stage 3 Curriculum**

The aim of the curriculum should be to address the needs of the pupil as:

- An individual
- A member of society
- A contributor to the economy and the environment.

This means that it is necessary to achieve a balance between what might be described as education with intrinsic value and education with utilitarian focus– not that the two can be rigidly demarcated. The Council believes that the present curriculum places rather too little emphasis on the latter and, therefore, needs to be changed. This change will increase the relevance of what is learned through subjects to real life issues that pupils will have to address now and in the future.

The Council is, therefore, proposing that the Key Stage 3 curriculum should include a specific entitlement called Learning for Life and Work which would comprise :

- Citizenship
- World of work (including career planning)
- Personal development
- Generic skills, including :
  - communication
  - application of number
  - ICT
  - Learning to work with others
  - Learning self-management
  - Learning to think and to use information effectively.

All subjects can contribute to Learning for Life and Work (and in setting out the statements of entitlement for Key Stage 3 we intend to make very clear the specific contribution that can be made by all subjects), but, there are distinctive elements of Learning for Life and Work that require discrete provision. It is not intended that education related to a particular

vocation or occupation be included at Key Stage 3, although we do consider that it has a place in Key Stage 4.

As mentioned earlier, the 2002 consultation did not produce a favourable reaction to the idea of using curriculum areas rather than subjects. In part the low approval rating arose from the lack of detail given and, in part, about worries around assessment. It also derived from the challenge to curriculum organisation and the staffing structure in schools. We have considered carefully the views that have been put forward and now propose a framework that is essentially subject-based, but which links groups of related subjects together. We suggest that the following would be appropriate:

- *The Arts*
- *English*
- *Environment and Society*
- *Learning for Life and Work*
- *Mathematics*
- *Modern Language*
- *Physical Education*
- *Science and Technology*
- *Religious Education*

Within *The Arts*, *Environment and Society* and *Science and Technology*, the current subjects from which these are formed would be made clearly visible.

It is worth stressing the particular contribution to Life and Work of English and Mathematics because of the basic entitlement of all young people to read, write and use numbers. If these competences are not sufficiently developed in primary school in the cases of some children, every effort must be made to make good that deficiency in Key Stage 3. It would be our hope that the changes to the Primary curriculum that we have already recommended will reduce the need for such remediation.

### ***In Summary***

*The **statutory** curriculum is the entitlement of every child.*

*At Key Stage 3, Education for Life and Work is at the centre of it for all pupils at whatever type of school.*

*The contribution of general education to the statutory curriculum consists mostly of the area of overlap with Life and Work.*

*This means that the statutory requirement for English should be focused on **competence** in communication through reading, writing, talking and listening.*

*And that the statutory requirement for mathematics should be focused on **competence** in the use of mathematics in real life and work situations.*

*And that the statutory requirement for science and technology, for example, should focus on what **all** young people need to understand in order to be effective as individuals and citizens in a modern technological society.*

## 4 Assessment

There was significant support in the 2002 consultation for the replacement of end-of key stage assessment by standardised annual reporting and the Council intends to develop more detailed advice on that basis. There was less positive response to some of the suggestions, including the use of the 8-level scale. We intend to consult with more detailed proposals later this year alongside the more detailed proposals for the curriculum.

At this stage we wish to draw attention to the principles which will guide that work.

There are at least four different audiences who benefit from the process of assessment:

- pupils and their teachers
- parents
- school managements
- government agencies.

A tension has always existed in trying to satisfy this variety of audiences with a single assessment system. The current Key Stage assessment system has not succeeded in relation to the first two of these and has had only limited success with the latter two. The Council is therefore proposing quite radical changes.

Recent research has confirmed that pupils benefit most from assessment when:

- they have clear learning objectives;
- feedback is qualitative and relates to those learning objectives
- next steps are clearly linked to the assessment outcomes.

Assessment in this form is part of the everyday discourse in classrooms. The Council recommends that it is strengthened through additional training and advice for teachers and through new forms of computer-based support. From such day-to-day assessment in classrooms, information about the progress of pupils will be accumulated over time, again with the help of ICT.

The information accumulated in this way will provide the basis on which annual reports are prepared for parents. Annual reports are already statutory; the Council is proposing that their contents should be more clearly defined. It believes that such reports would make additional assessment at the end of key stages redundant, provided information is also produced that addresses the needs of the other two audiences.

In annual reports to parents, schools normally provide qualitative comments about the progress pupils are making as well as quantitative evidence in the form of a mark or grade,

or, frequently, both. One of the main reasons for providing marks and grades is to give parents an indication as to how their child's attainment relates to that of the remainder of the class. Such marks or grades are specific to the school concerned and may even reflect the practice of individual teachers. They therefore give parents no information about how the child is progressing in the wider context of other children of the same age. They are also of little value in addressing the needs of school managements or of government agencies.

School managements increasingly make use of benchmarking data in order to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their work. To do so, such information needs to be widely available in a format that is common across schools and, as far as possible, across years. Likewise, government agencies need a common basis for the collection of information from all schools that gives a collective picture as to how the entire education service, or parts of it are succeeding.

The Council believes, therefore, that there is a need for a commonly accepted set of performance indicators relating to each of the aspects of the curriculum against which pupil attainment can be described. In the context of a curriculum which is specified only in terms of minimum entitlement, with the express purpose of giving schools more discretion over curriculum content, it is not possible to set common assessment tasks for all pupils. To do so would remove that flexibility. It is only possible to provide a bank of useful assessment material from which teachers can draw in a way that reflects the curriculum that their pupils have experienced.

Assessment in the area of Life and Work should focus entirely on the competences that children have developed. It will be based on observation, project work etc. and may draw upon external recognition of such competences already available through schemes like Young Enterprise and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme.

The performance indicators would be based on the development of skills and competences and would not be greatly dependent on specific content. The closest we have so far got to such performance indicators are in some of the level descriptors used in the current assessment system. The Council intends to pursue this approach, in the context of standardised annual reports, in the consultation now planned later this year.

Feedback from our cohort study research as well as from schools parents and pupils indicates that, while the current Key Stage 3 tests in English, Mathematics and science do not carry any great weight in themselves, nevertheless the challenge attached to high profile assessment and accreditation does motivate many pupils.

Recognising this, the Council is intending to explore with schools and others both inside and outside the education service an appropriate form of accreditation at Key Stage 3 that would

provide this motivational impact. It would **not** be restricted to the traditional subjects, but would also emphasise the Learning for Life and Work dimension of the curriculum. A model already in existence is the ICT Accreditation Scheme offered by the Council and now taken up by 85% of schools.

It is anticipated that this accreditation of KS3 attainment would initially be voluntary, but strongly linked to the emerging Progress File, shortly to replace the National Record of Achievement.

## **5 Programme of work**

The Council intends to make available more detailed proposals, along the lines set out above, by August and to consult on them until November. Advice based on the outcomes of that consultation will be available around the end of the year.

In the material on which we consulted in 2002, reference was made to innovative approaches to the organisation of curricular programmes in schools, including timetabling. We would intend to explore these further in the consultation later this year. The intention would be to offer schools advice on a range of strategies that could be adopted for the organisation of Key Stage 3. It would not be our intention to recommend to government that schools be required to adopt any one or other of these strategies, but rather that they would be available for schools to make use of if they wished to do so. While we believe that the new approach to the key Stage 3 curriculum is likely to lead to changes in the way schools organise their curricular programmes, we believe that such changes should emerge from the school's own self-evaluation processes, rather than through coercion from outside.

It would also be our intention to ensure that there is the largest possible range of support and advice for schools in implementing change. The creation and dissemination of that support and advice will require the closest possible working relationships among the partners in the education service and we are encouraged by the way in which these relationships are developing.

Included in that support will be all that will be coming about as the result of the enhanced ICT provision available to schools through C2K, including the local and wide-area networks. We see the impact of ICT on teaching, learning and assessment as being the area of most rapid development accompanying the changes to the curriculum and assessment arrangements. One of the most critical aspects of partnership among the agencies, therefore, will be ensuring that the two streams of change are complementing each other and appear to do so from the point of view of teachers. If they are seen as separate and competing, the success of both will be endangered.

In the advice that we submitted recently on curriculum and assessment in primary schools, we recommended that changes be introduced over a period of at least 5 years beginning in September 2004. In the Key Stage 3 context, the earliest that change could begin would be September 2005 and we would again suggest a minimum of 5 years to effect all of the changes. Allowing for such an extended timetable will mean a longer timescale over which resources have to be found and will also mean more flexibility for schools to manage change in a way that reflects the priorities that emerge from the process of self-evaluation.