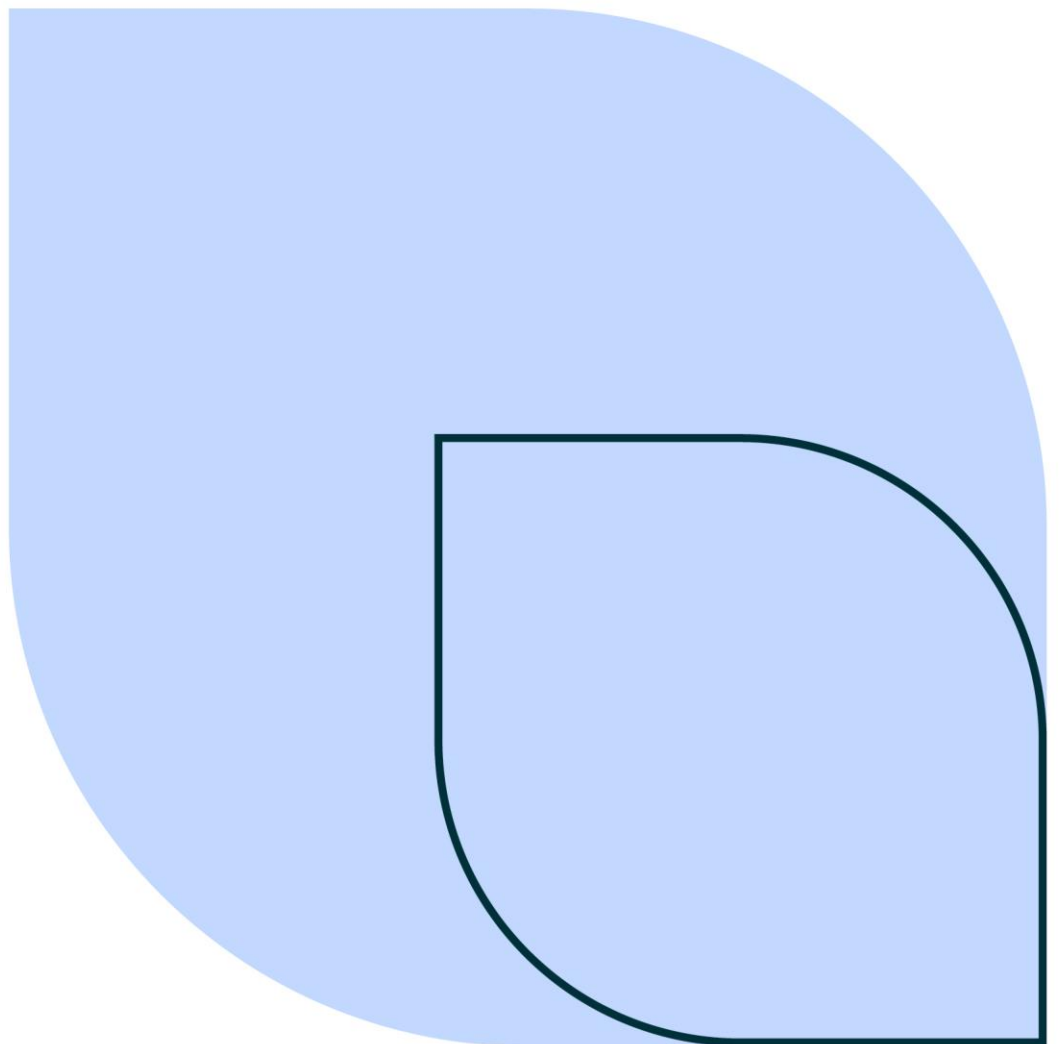


Curriculum and Assessment Review

National Society for Education Response:
Executive Summary – November 2024





1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Church of England was the first national provider of free education across England, founding the National Society for Education in 1811. Our schools serve the whole community, with pupils of all faiths and none. The Church is effectively the biggest provider of education in the country, operating as a partner with government, educating around a million children. It provides a quarter of all primaries and is the biggest sponsor of academies in England. Our schools offer a distinct education enabling children to live life in all its fullness, offering wisdom, hope, community and dignity.
- 1.2 We celebrate with schools who have worked tirelessly, over many years, often in circumstances of increasingly restricted resources and narrowing assessment methodologies, to enable the flourishing of their pupils through well-designed curriculum and assessment pathways. Many such schools can be found in the dioceses and multi-academy trusts of the Church of England, and we are proud to collaborate with many more schools across the blended ecology of the education system.
- 1.3 Within Church schools, SIAMS Section 48 inspections (Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools) evaluate the extent to which a school's curriculum vision and design enables the flourishing of all, with particular concern for the flourishing of vulnerable children. Church schools are also subject to all other accountability measures applicable to maintained schools, including Ofsted.
- 1.4 While there is secure evidence that many Church schools excel in current performance measures in comparison to national averages, we welcome this opportunity for review and reform of curriculum and assessment to enable the system to keep getting better. We recognise that any changes made will require careful consideration of resourcing and workload implications for a teaching workforce already experiencing significant challenge, but nonetheless agree that some foundational and long-term changes are now needed to enable all schools to become places where all children and adults can flourish.
- 1.5 In our 2023 paper, '[Our Hope for a Flourishing Schools System](#)', we write:

'Flourishing children enjoy education; they learn and grow in a wide variety of well-designed curriculum experiences, across a broad range of subject disciplines, not simply those that are publicly assessed. Children flourish at different times and speeds. All children deserve to love their childhood, finding space for play, exploration, imagination and creativity.'

This vision is then supported by key policy recommendations including:

- 1.2 To implement **curriculum models which blend the academic, technical and vocational**, ensuring children have the opportunity to flourish in a wide range of learning contexts (not simply those that are externally measured), **enabling them to have a transformational impact on the world as adults**.
- 1.4 To lead and resource learning experiences for all children which relentlessly and intentionally **celebrate equity, diversity, belonging, inclusion and justice** at every opportunity.
- 3.6 To develop broader curriculum models that balance academic, technical and vocational pathways to **enable children to develop as global citizens**, who understand the **vital role that religious literacy plays in the world**.



- 1.6 Moving together towards these recommendations illustrated necessitates some change. We ground the call for change in a deep-rooted respect for the hard work and commitment of our dioceses, trusts and schools in creating curriculum and assessment models to serve the common good of their communities. This work represents many years of sustained, research-informed design, training, implementation and refinement. We would be loath to see it all lost in a 'revolution', as opposed to a measured and thoughtful evolution of the curriculum and assessment landscape.
- 1.7 However, we are calling for five key things in the Curriculum and Assessment Review, the full response to which can be read on our website.
- Curriculum and Assessment reform that takes a long-term view – the Class of 2040
 - Wisely blending technical, vocational and academic pathways
 - RE: Enabling parity through consistency
 - Prioritising Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Justice
 - Resourcing structures and systems that enable the flourishing of all children and adults



2. Taking a long-term view – the Class of 2040

- 2.1 In our 2024 document '[Flourishing Together](#)', written with the Confederation of School Trusts and the Catholic Education Service, we ask together

'What could only happen in the long-term, by taking a collectively long-term view now?'

In the paper we imagine the students who will be completing secondary education in 2040, and how our curriculum and assessment decisions taken now will massively affect those students – because they are already alive in our schools system now:

“Were we to think of a reasonable long-term timeframe for this re-building around the unifying concept of flourishing, 2040 might not be bad starting point.

*It is sufficiently far in the future to enable genuine social change and ambitious reform at appropriate scale. Imagine Lena, who will graduate from Year 13 as an 18-year-old in 2040. Who can say what they will study, how they will be assessed, where they will progress after school. It feels a long time away. However, Lena, who will be part of the Class of 2040 **is already in the education system – currently in early years.**”*

- 2.2 When we consider curriculum and assessment, we feel it is timely to reimagine the purpose and function of curriculum and assessment more broadly. However, this must be done in the context of a broader and longer-term vision for education that outlasts political cycles, taking a broader and more capacious concept around which to build the system – namely **flourishing of children and adults**.
- 2.3 We need to create a system where the incentive of teaching a subject well and consistently is not tied to the statutory (or non-statutory) nature of its assessment, nor to the focus of the accountability framework of the day. Rather, it should be tied to a long-term coherent vision of pupil progress and pathways, from cradle to career, and a clear understanding of the role of that subject within that pupil's journey and the opportunities that studying it will afford them - be they academic, technical, vocational, creative, pastoral or simply for the sheer joy of learning.
- 2.4 This also means that our journey to reform (while likely to be focused on children's experiences and learning) must take into account the impact on adults in the profession. This means, for example, taking longer term views on teacher recruitment in shortage subjects, and recognising that the implementation journey of a new curriculum approach will take a number of years, in a sector that is already in deep crisis of retention of its best staff. For where there are few flourishing adults, there will be few flourishing children.
- 2.5 In addition, the broadening of curriculum for the long-term needs to be appropriately resourced. The enforced narrowing of the secondary curriculum since 2014 has, for example, already led to physical and human resource changes in many schools, where subjects have been cut, and facilities re-purposed. The link between numbers of students studying the arts or technology at KS4 and 5 and secondary teacher recruitment shortages in those subjects should not be a surprise to anyone.
- 2.6 This is why the language of 'evolution not revolution' is welcomed and supported, and the lens of the longer term Class of 2040 might be helpful – it does not delay the journey (in many ways it makes it more urgent given those students are already in our schools), but leads us collectively to a more sustainable journey grounded in a broader and deeper vision for the kind of education system we all want to see.



3. Wisely blending technical, vocational, and academic pathways

3.1 As outlined above, our 2023 paper , [‘Our Hope for a Flourishing Schools System’](#) advocates for:

‘curriculum models that blend the academic, technical, and vocational, ensuring children have the opportunity to thrive in a wide range of learning contexts (not just those externally measured), enabling them to have a transformational impact on the world as adults.’

Budget constraints, teacher recruitment issues, and the expansion of the EBacc are currently hindering schools' ability to offer technical or vocational GCSE subjects like design technology or business studies. These measures have also removed a huge number of vocational qualification opportunities (including, but not limited to, BTEC courses) from secondary schools, limiting choice and pushing all children into a very narrow conception of educational outcomes at 16.

3.2 This narrowing of the subjects available has been further exacerbated by changes to assessment methodologies which have tended to focus sharply on knowledge recall in increased terminal examinations at KS4 and 5. In reviewing how assessment drives curriculum implementation, we need to consider carefully the place of this approach in a context where skills, behaviours and technological developments (such as AI) may see employers needing their staff of the future to have had a broader educational experience to enable Britain to flourish globally.

3.3 It is not yet a universal opportunity for KS4 pupils to access applied technical and vocational courses at local colleges. We call for funding (including transport and support staff) of pre-16, cross-institutional collaborative vocational and technical pathways, to better facilitate transitions at KS5, clarify KS5 pathways, raise awareness of FE options, and reduce the number of learners not in education, employment, or training at 18.

3.4 Improved technical and vocational pathways would increase equity for pupils not meeting ‘Good Level of Development ‘ at EYFS or ‘expected’ in SATs (who are not on track for the GCSE route), while also offering strong options for higher-attaining students through T levels and apprenticeships.

3.5 There are successful examples in our schools of pupils taking applied and vocational qualifications alongside academic GCSEs, and we hope to see this as standard practice for all pupils, creating a more level playing field. Effective delivery of technical and vocational pathways requires specialist staff and facilities, especially for TVET to be taught with authenticity, including industry links and relevant work experience opportunities. When done well, this work exemplifies inclusive practice, increases learner motivation, improves self-efficacy, and clarifies post-16 pathways into further training or employment.

3.6 Blending these pathways wisely would mean avoiding at all costs the creation of false hierarchies (where students of higher prior attainment undertake academic programmes and those with lower prior attainment undertake vocational programmes). This stereotype is deeply unhelpful and would represent a huge step backwards both for our schools and for our economy. A vision of curriculum that blends these experiences, which is open to and encouraged for all students, would be one in which everyone can flourish. There are, of course, plenty of international examples of curriculum thinking where this wise blend has been achieved and embedded, particularly in a European context.

3.7 Blending technical, vocational and academic pathways may naturally draw us towards secondary provision. However, there are also great implications and exciting opportunities for primary curriculum design and implementation, where the groundwork to this could be laid, and context set for a more holistic approach in which all children can flourish.



4. RE: Enabling parity through consistency

- 4.1 We believe firmly in the entitlement of every child in England, to high quality RE. This must remain the case for pupils in all types of schools, not just those in schools with a religious character.
- 4.2 High quality RE teaching has been shown to lead to stronger-than-average outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, and many minoritised groups place high value on the study of RE. High quality RE is a rigorous academic subject, which trains pupils to acquire substantive knowledge about the world in which they live and disciplinary knowledge which has benefits right across the curriculum. Furthermore, the development of personal knowledge improves self-reflection and supports students to engage with, be knowledgeable about and respect others.
- 4.3 When RE is taught effectively, it leads to better student progression through to RE study in KS5 and higher education, as well as fostering pupils' broader social, moral, spiritual, and cultural development. Successful outcomes stem from a strong RE curriculum, diverse resources, clear sequencing, and effective assessment, supported by high-quality local syllabi (ideally based on the National Content Standard) and peer collaboration. Competent, well-trained specialist staff also contribute to these positive outcomes.
- 4.4 Despite RE's core status in the basic curriculum, its provision is inconsistent, leading to a fragmented pupil experience. This inconsistency is especially inequitable for pupils experiencing higher transience, such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children, refugee children, forces children and looked after children (many of whom are experiencing multiple, intersectional forms of educational disadvantage).
- 4.5 The timetabling of RE varies greatly across different types of schools (church schools, academies, free schools and maintained schools), and its compulsory status is often undervalued. This inconsistency is exacerbated by a lack of accountability, particularly from Ofsted, which has stated it lacks the capacity to monitor RE compliance.
- 4.6 There are over 100 different locally agreed syllabi, along with the curricula from MATs and free schools, suffering from the lack of a statutory national benchmark, leading to inconsistent teaching, expectations, and pupil outcomes. Previous government agreed that the subject had fallen into a cycle of decline as a result of its exclusion from the EBacc. There is confusion and unclear accountability around the status of non-GCSE ('core') RE at KS4. While the National Content Standard (NCS) for RE is a step forward, its lack of legislative backing limits its ability to address these disparities.
- 4.7 The co-creation of a National Content Standard for RE by the Religious Education Council has demonstrated a consensus behind - and desire for - high quality RE teaching on a level not seen before in the English context. This consensus is formed of not just faith groups, but representatives across religious and non-religious worldviews.
- 4.8 We propose:
 - 4.8.1 Embedding the National Content Standard for RE into legislation, so that it becomes a shared language and set of expectations for every school, whilst preserving the essential space for local context, and faith foundation (where it exists) to feed into the provision of high quality, pluralistic, up-to-date RE for all.
 - 4.8.2 Subsequent training for Ofsted, SIAMS, and CSI inspectors to understand and enact their responsibilities in the accountability landscape, to ensure strong implementation of the National Content Standard in all settings.



- 4.8.3 A reimagined GCSE syllabus, utilising the consistency provided by the national implementation of the National Content Standard, to create a relevant and engaging course, reflecting the reality of the religious (and non-religious) landscape, representing worldviews, platforming diversity across traditions, and further developing pupil skill in deploying disciplinary lenses. We ask for consideration of the role of oracy in GCSE assessment, especially due to the focus within RE on debate and discussion, and suggest it may form a more inclusive, reliable and valid form of assessing some of the skills at play in RE.
- 4.8.4 The creation of a KS4 core (non-GCSE) RE offer based in oracy practices, with a focus on worldviews approaches and disciplinary lenses. We would prefer for this to be delivered by subject specialists and where that is not possible, we call for explicit funding for training for staff to deliver this content with the sensitivity and pedagogical knowledge required. We have capacity and credibility in developing and delivering such training at scale and would hope to offer this to the whole sector as part of our vision to serve the common good.
- 4.8.5 The creation of a KS5 'Skills For Life' course (across both FE and sixth form settings) including elements of RE (worldviews), citizenship, politics, financial education, PSHE and RSE, supporting pupils to become engaged citizens of modern Britain.



5. Prioritising Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Justice.

5.1 In our 2016 [Church of England Vision for Education](#), we outline:

“Human dignity, the ultimate worth of each person, is central to good education. The basic principle of respect for the value of each person involves continual discernment, deliberation and action”.

This was further built upon in our 2020 publication, **‘Called, Connected, Committed’** in which we write:

“Leaders should not seek diversity and inclusion just because it is the correct thing to do, we should pursue it and chase it down because it is inherently better. Diverse teams do not simply tick boxes or fulfil targets. We think, lead, teach and learn better because of our diversity.

While leaders embrace opportunities to celebrate living and learning together, they recognise that the chequered history of faith-based inclusion usually requires particular attention to ethos, pedagogy, curriculum, appointments and use of resources in order to counter stereotypes of judgement, unjust discrimination, and often unconscious bias in relation to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and relations among faith groups. The dignity and integrity of each must be respected, and good practices can form generations to come, helping to re-define community, replace division, foster reconciliation, and shape ways of living better together.”

5.2 Our work with the Church of England Racial Justice Unit, with colleagues at UK Trauma Council and the Anna Freud Centre on trauma-informed practices, and with stakeholders across the SEND system on inclusive practices has further fanned our passion to see the ‘ultimate worth of each person’ upheld through equitable, inclusive curriculum and assessment practice.

5.3 Furthermore, the significant representation of small rural and urban schools, and schools in areas of rural, coastal and hinterland isolation within our dioceses has given us a particular interest in the equity of experience of pupils within these contexts.

We call for compassionate and genuinely inclusive curriculum models and assessment practice which support all learners, where aspirational high expectations are matched with excellent multi-agency support, ensuring every child meets their potential.

We outline this prioritisation in relation to 5 key areas – racial justice, trauma-informed practice, SEND, socio-economic disadvantage, and rural/coastal/small schools contexts:

Racial Justice

5.4 Concepts feeding into the design of curricula and exam syllabi across all subjects such as ‘the best that has been thought and said’ have led in some cases to a Eurocentric, male-dominated line up of authors, historical figures and texts chosen for study. This is not an accurate representation of modern Britain, nor of the best that has been thought and said.

5.5 We call for better representation of historical figures, authors and texts representing the diversity of modern Britain within curricula and exam syllabi.



- 5.6 The underrepresentation of diverse voices, cultures, and histories in the curriculum negatively affects engagement and learning outcomes for pupils from historically marginalised groups. The current portrayal of non-European histories in textbooks perpetuates stereotypes and often marginalises the achievements of individuals and communities of the global majority.
- 5.7 We signpost our own project 'Christianity as Global World Faith' RE resource (2024) as an excellent example of improved representation whilst avoiding tokenism or virtue-signalling approaches. We are committed to continuing to play our part in this work, working in increasing partnership with other sector bodies to enable these changes.
- 5.8 It is important that we interrogate any proposed changes to assessment through a lens of equity, diversity, inclusion and justice. For example, research shows that teacher assessment can actually be *more* biased (especially against GMH pupils, boys and disadvantaged pupils) than statutory assessment due to bias (unconscious or otherwise)
- 5.9 We also call upon exam boards to ensure that their questions are being set by colleagues representing a range of lived experience including (but not limited to) socioeconomic background, ethnicity, gender and heritage. We hope that this would reduce the occurrence of questions drawing on a hidden curriculum with its roots in a monocultural lived experience.

Trauma-informed practice

- 5.10 An overly-full curriculum can negatively affect students who have experienced trauma, as they may be pushed through material without achieving understanding, which can lead to poor outcomes and limit future opportunities.
- 5.11 The current curriculum leaves little space for fostering relationships or emotional regulation, which experts say is crucial for vulnerable pupils to succeed. The packed curriculum can contribute to feelings of overwhelm and alienation and undermine a sense of belonging. There is insufficient focus on crucial areas for looked after children, such as financial education, digital skills, and SMSC, which are essential for preparing all students for life, but particularly for care experienced pupils.^{5.12} Effective teaching and relationship-building with all students (and vulnerable students in particular) are essential, and teacher skill, self-efficacy, and autonomy are critical in this process and should be supported through ongoing CPD.
- 5.13 Some local authorities are creating provisions that bridge the gap between mainstream and specialist education. These provisions, based on a psychological model, aim to reintegrate students who have been out of school, offering a relationship-based, family-centred approach. We call upon government to explore funding further pilots.

SEND

- 5.14 It is essential in considering the intersection of SEND and curriculum that we remember that pupils with SEND are all individuals with unique areas of strength and weakness. Whilst there are many pupils with SEND facing challenges in the area of cognition and learning, there are also many pupils with SEND who are high prior attainers, whose profile of need is no less pressing or urgent just because their primary needs may be physical, sensory, or social/communicative in nature.

It therefore becomes important in answering this question to ask ourselves some challenging questions: What is the purpose of the curriculum for learners (including those with SEND)? Is it 'just' to prepare them



for the workforce? Where do we situate the joy of learning for learning's sake? Of belonging to and being part of a learning community?

- 5.15 [Our 'Hope for a Flourishing Schools System'](#) sets out a vision for school communities where all learners (including those with SEND) flourish:

"Flourishing children learn that no-one really flourishes unless we flourish together.

They thrive in school cultures in which collaboration, support and celebration of the other is prioritised over competition and comparison. Flourishing children need a system in which their schools are well supported by a wide range of high-capacity integrated professional services to attend to complex individual needs.

They require a system that takes a long-term view of their development, and invests proactively... Without significant and urgent reform to the funding and implementation of support systems, a generation of children will continue to move through the education system hindered by barriers to their potential."

- 5.16 We therefore call attention to the fact that without urgent investment in the 'high-capacity integrated professional services' referenced above, SEND pupils, their neuro- and physically typical peers and staff will struggle. We call for compassionate rigour in supporting all learners, and especially those with SEND, where high expectations are matched with high multi-disciplinary support, ensuring every child meets their potential.
- 5.17 The rising number of pupils requiring Education Healthcare Plans (EHCP) and the backlog for their award highlight issues of equity, especially as families often need (paid for) legal support to secure provisions. Schools face a vicious cycle, where, due to budget pressure, resources needed for SEND support often take resource away from technical and vocational subjects like design technology. These subjects could provide low-attaining SEND pupils opportunities to succeed and build self-efficacy.
- 5.18 In primary schools, the narrow curriculum in KS2 building toward SATs can be further narrowed for pupils with SEND due to additional interventions, reducing access to a broad curriculum and the opportunities it provides for pupils to feel successful or spend time on a subject they enjoy.
- 5.19 Progress 8 pressures can lead to pupils being 'off-rolled' from subjects where they may struggle with assessments, raising questions about whether assessment is the sole purpose of studying a subject, particularly given recent Ofsted reviews on subject knowledge.
- 5.20 If schools were encouraged to create a system where the incentive of teaching a subject well and consistently is not tied to the statutory (or non-statutory) nature of its assessment, nor to the focus of the accountability framework of the day, then there would in turn be greater scope for the inclusion of pupils with SEND. We advocate for a long-term, coherent vision of pupil progress and pathways, from cradle to career, as well as a clear understanding of the role that subject can play within a pupil's journey. We need to be clear about the opportunities that studying those subjects will afford them - be they academic, creative, pastoral, or simply for the sheer joy of learning.
- 5.21 Literacy and numeracy are critical for social justice. Budget constraints mean few schools can run small nurture-sized groups in these subjects for SEND learners, yet such groups promote belonging, relational teaching, and better outcomes.



- 5.22 Many pupils failing GCSE English and Maths are stuck in FE resit cohorts, with 78% not achieving the qualifications. A contextually appropriate English and Maths curriculum should allow pupils to study these alongside Level 3 qualifications, including apprenticeships, reducing NEET numbers.
- 5.23 Every child, regardless of pathway, should access skills for life, including financial education, PSHE, RSE, citizenship, and politics. SEND pupils may require additional life skills, such as cooking and personal hygiene, tailored to their needs.

Socioeconomic Disadvantage

- 5.24 Our commitment to a curriculum in which all children can flourish extends to every pupil in education, and especially those who are vulnerable and/or experiencing disadvantage. Our SIAMS Section 48 framework asks explicitly how the school's vision drives support for vulnerable learners. Disadvantage is not a reason to lower aspirations or expectations for learners in our care.
- 5.25 Success in gaining academic qualifications remains an excellent lever for social mobility and/or a broadening of opportunities later in life. However, it is a false binary to consider academic outcomes separately from pupil inclusion, belonging, and access to the curriculum in its broadest terms.
- 5.26 In more affluent areas, parents are able to facilitate additional enrichment opportunities for pupils within and beyond the curriculum, either through directly financing these experiences or through leveraging social networks and professional connections. It is impossible for schools in more disadvantaged areas to try and match this 'extra' offer, which is both discouraging for staff and pupils, and perpetuates the disadvantage gap.
- 5.27 Inequity in curriculum provision particularly affects the experience of pupils experiencing higher transience, such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children, refugee children, forces children and looked after children (many of whom are experiencing multiple, intersectional forms of educational disadvantage).
- 5.28 Despite the system's best efforts to reduce gaps in curriculum and assessment outcomes for pupils experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, this has not been achieved across the board and in some subjects, there are still considerable gaps between disadvantaged learners and their more affluent peers (e.g. in languages)
- 5.29 A narrowed curriculum because of primary statutory assessment, EBacc or budget concerns, results in greater disadvantage to those who cannot 'backfill' learning experiences at home due to cost, such as music, dance or sports. This also results in an 'access gap' to the proven mental health and wellbeing benefits of these subjects, particularly in the context of high and rising mental health needs amongst pupils.
- 5.30 This narrowed curriculum affects the pupil pipeline through to vocational, technical and academic subjects alike; resulting in an over-representation of disadvantaged learners in FE settings (when with opportunity and good teaching some of them would thrive in a more academic KS5 context) and an under-representation of more affluent learners in FE (due to parental/pupil lack of knowledge and understanding of the validity and career options available through more technical and vocational routes such as T levels and apprenticeships)
- 5.31 Narrowing the curriculum in turn can affect pupil motivation, concepts of self-efficacy and belonging within the school community. Furthermore, restricted subject choice can detrimentally affect pupil



outcomes; if pupils don't have access to some of the subjects in which they may achieve more highly, they can only attain a much lower standard which in turn affects their life chances.

- 5.32 Disadvantaged communities saw the largest increase in sedentary and inactive children as a result of the pandemic. Access to high-quality PE and sports opportunities is therefore a pressing social justice issue for schools, particularly as the cost-of-living crisis affects family ability to self-fund out-of-school sports opportunities for their children - leading to an ongoing impact on the future health and wellbeing of young people.

Rural / Coastal / Small Schools Contexts

- 5.33 All schools have felt the pressure on budgets in recent years, but for small and rural schools, fuel costs and the impact of the national funding formula have led to many of these settings falling victim to necessary budget cuts. School trips, welcoming visitors to schools and extra-curricular enrichment activities can form a means of establishing pupil motivation for subjects/topics, building cultural capital, and broadening pupil horizons and perspectives. This in turn manifests as a hidden inequity in pupils' access to a broad and enriching curriculum, in its most expansive sense. We call for an urgent review of how scarcity is handled within the National Funding Formula in line with any curriculum expectations established as a result of this review.
- 5.34 Similarly, the number and range of subjects a school is able to offer at GCSE or A level is increasingly becoming determined by class size and financial viability of the timetable as a whole. This can disproportionately affect non-EBacc practical subjects, such as textiles, design technology, food technology and drama, where smaller class sizes combine with specific practical requirements for space and support staff. This can especially be to the detriment of pupils hoping to pursue a more mixed set of academic, technical and vocational options at 14, and is particularly acute in small and rural secondary schools.
- 5.35 We are hopeful that, in due course, technology may provide ways to offer a broader range of subjects in isolated schools, building on distance learning pedagogies started during COVID. However, this hope is positioned against a current backdrop where many of our most isolated schools cannot access fast enough Wi-Fi for their learners to use learning software hosted online.
- 5.36 Mixed-age classes in the context of a knowledge-rich curriculum, sequenced according to principles of cognitive science can leave teachers (especially early career teachers) confused and overwhelmed by how to choose and sequence content across the year groups represented within their class.
- 5.37 Teacher perceptions of Ofsted accountability expectations (e.g. 'subject deep dives') can worsen this sense of confusion and overwhelm. Some of this has been mitigated with excellence, where strong trust/federation structures support subject leadership and planning, but not all small/mixed schools are in such structures.
- 5.38 Primary assessments pose unique challenges in small and rural schools; mixed age classes mean that the assessments have a knock-on effect on a far greater proportion of the school community. Smaller staff teams can affect the logistics of providing necessary support for SEND pupils to access assessment, whilst still providing high quality teaching and learning to the broader school community.
- 5.39 In small and rural settings, one pupil can be worth 15-10% of a total result. This means that accountability measures vary more wildly year-on-year and are therefore less fit for analytical purpose. Indeed, they can detrimentally affect staff wellbeing. We long to see an accountability system that doesn't expect a 'one



size fits all' approach, but one that recognises and celebrates aspirational, co-created and rigorous curricula for the context a school serves.

- 5.40 Rural/coastal isolation can be seen as deviating from a 'middle England' norm, for which the accountability system may have been designed. We call upon Ofsted to build further upon existing liaison with small and rural schools serving these contexts to co-create a framework in which they are represented from the beginning.



6. Resourcing structures and systems that enable flourishing of all children and adults

6.1 In our 2023 paper, Our Hope for a Flourishing Schools System, we outline:

*“Repeated systemic cuts to a wide range of public services have **often left schools acting as the backstop of society**, supporting the provision of the most basic needs (frequently now including food for the hungry), and the attempted replacement of social work, counselling, educational psychology and a range of other key requirements of a flourishing system.*

Schools desperately need to be appropriately supported by those services, because disproportionate leadership resources are being spent on addressing those needs and drawing leaders away from the core business of academic excellence and school improvement.”

6.2 In line with our belief that schools are lynchpin institutions for the communities they serve, it follows that cohered, collaborative systems across schools and education institutions within communities are fundamental to the delivery of an effective, joined up, ‘cradle to career’ pathway for learners.

6.3 Effective family engagement in the EYFS and primary spaces, well-funded, up-to-date careers advice throughout education - particularly ahead of key transition points - and appropriately resourced collaborations between colleges, specialist provision and schools are all elements of a coherent and supportive approach offering truly broad, inclusive and balanced academic, technical and vocational pathways to learners.

6.4 Transitions are key points of vulnerability - particularly for pupils experiencing disadvantage, high transience, trauma or who have SEND. Effectively planning for and cohering transitions can mitigate these vulnerabilities and mitigate learning loss. We have asked for government to facilitate a conversation about KS2 SATs, their impact on pupil and staff wellbeing, and their utility in supporting a successful transition into Secondary. Taster days in colleges during KS4 can facilitate smoother transitions to FE for pupils entering KS5.

6.5 We believe that dioceses, trusts, and local authorities, with their deeply-rooted community relationships and knowledge of place, are perfectly positioned to support this community coherence, brokering collaborations, supporting key transition points, and monitoring implementation.

6.6 Most of the assessment pupils experience will be small-step, formative assessment deployed by the teacher leading their class. This assessment will be situated within a lesson planned or adapted by the same teacher. It is impossible to understate the impact of the quality of teaching and learning upon the enactment of the curriculum.

6.7 This understanding of teaching, learning and effective curriculum design has developed at pace in recent years. We are keen for ‘evolution not revolution’ in order to preserve much of the good practice established through the golden thread of ITT-ECF-NPQ programmes.

However, in our 2024 paper, ‘Flourishing Together’ we outline:

“To be an educator is a sacred privilege and an awesome responsibility and we hold our teachers and all who work in our schools in high esteem. We collectively recognise the hugely positive impact of the evidence-informed professional qualifications that have been developed with the Education Endowment Foundation over the last few years.



And we are also committed to developing the 'Flourishing Leadership Framework' built around the five realms of flourishing and drawing on a wide range of educational research partners both nationally and internationally. This evidence-rich framework will provide the grounding for leadership development programmes and networks, complementary to early career teacher development and national professional qualifications, but adding further breadth and depth to leadership development.

This approach will deliberately include those not in teaching roles, ensuring a focus on the flourishing of all adults in the system, including paid staff, and those responsible for governance. This is inextricably linked to the deep need to avert the crisis of recruitment and retention facing so many schools and school trusts."

- 6.8 Changes to curriculum and assessment will require investment in CPD to support teacher confidence and self-efficacy. In our proposals around RE for example, areas that would require training could include - support for non-specialist teachers to deliver high quality RE and the KS5 'Skills for Life' course we reference, and training for SIAMS, CSI and Ofsted inspectors in accountability expectations around RE.
- 6.9 The introduction of ITAP and minimum teaching hours in ITT has seen a reduction in time assigned to subject input on many ITT routes. We would welcome further subject knowledge development pathways for early career teachers, either through the reinstatement of funded SKEs in all subjects, or through new early career options which give teachers the skills and knowledge they need to confidently teach the broad curriculum our learners stand to benefit so much from. Increased teacher confidence and self-efficacy in role may also have a positive impact on teacher retention.



Conclusion

7.1 On a recent visit to a secondary school, one of our senior leaders was introduced to a Year 12 student who had achieved the highest GCSE scores in the school in the Summer. The headteacher proudly introduced the student, who shook hands confidently and sat down to discuss what it was like to be at this school. The senior leader naturally congratulated the student saying how proud they must be. The student answered:

“I’m really pleased with the results – but I’m just lucky that they test the thing I’m good at – remembering information in exams in these kinds of subjects. There’s no way I would have got all 9s if they tested other things, other subjects, in other ways.”

(Year 12 student who received their GCSE results in Summer 2024)

7.2 It was a simple but profound illustration of the complexity caused by any system that builds on inherent competition. Inevitably some win, some lose – it is not possible for everyone to be above average on a normal distribution curve. Our belief in the inherent dignity and worth of every learner means that we condemn any system leading to pupils ‘losing’. Better cohered, aspirational and well-funded opportunities for learners ‘below average’ on a distribution curve are essential for building an inclusive, equitable and just society. Whatever the outcome of the curriculum and assessment review, it must be based on a broader, long-term, definable and ambitious vision for the whole education system, within which curriculum and assessment can then be designed to enact that vision.

7.3 This enactment will of course have to consider which subjects are taught, how they are assessed, what each subject is made up of, how we recruit enough teachers to teach these subjects. In this submission, we have sought to identify a range of key issues – breadth and blend of pathways, particular focus on RE, equity/diversity/inclusion/justice, consideration of structures and systems, workload issues and the flourishing of adults within any major changes proposed.

7.4 Yet at the heart of the submission, and indeed the review, needs to be a clear, expansive, ambitious and transformational vision for the education system as a whole. To ‘achieve and thrive’ are a great start. The political understanding of the importance of belonging is enhancing this already.

7.5 However, without deeper thinking and vision, both concepts remain susceptible to significant misinterpretation and/or watering down. To achieve in what? To achieve compared to whom? They are visionary words that can take us towards competition not collaboration, towards the achieving and thriving of some, but not the flourishing of all.

7.6 Our shared vision for the education system, which we have collectively outlined with our partners at Catholic Education Service and Confederation of School Trusts in our 2024 paper ‘Flourishing Together’, argues that:

“There are of course many narratives which already permeate and characterise our system – sometimes demanded in justifiable response to events (such as the culture-shifting impact of COVID or the ongoing climate crisis), but often overly defined by short-term changes of policy or procedure, frequently done to, rather than developed by and with, the school system.

Some of these narratives can be positive – success in international academic excellence comparisons, raising standards in core measurements, structural integration of schools into school trusts working in deep and purposeful collaboration in a single legal entity. Others can be deeply problematic – chronic de-prioritisation of resources for the most vulnerable, comparative judgement accountability, fear and anxiety, workload challenges through the demand to do ‘more with less’, competition over systemic collaboration.



Our education system needs a clear and compelling narrative around which to build over the coming years and decades.

A collective purpose, a shared vision and a uniting concept towards which we focus our time, resources, leadership, energy, expertise and wisdom.

A generous, hospitable table to which all are invited and at which everyone feels welcome.

A shared vision which begins with a core belief in the inherent worth of every child and adult in the system.

We believe our political leaders, schools and school leaders have a foundational question in common – how do children and young people, and those who educate them in our schools flourish? We believe flourishing is both our optimal continuing development, and living well as a human being.”

The Confederation of School Trusts, Church of England and Catholic Education Service have come together to set out a collective and hope-filled vision - that the best unifying concept around which to build the education system for the coming decades is that of flourishing – flourishing children and flourishing adults in flourishing schools.”

- 7.7 This is not just semantics of ‘flourishing’ over ‘thriving’, but a deeper vision that is grounded in thousands of years of thinking, teaching, reflection and research drawing, of course, from both non-religious Aristotelian thinking, and deepened by teachings from all world faiths, including, but not limited to, our own.
- 7.8 This longer-term, deeper vision will expand our schools’ ability to make a life-changing contribution to the nation, not just for the coming years, but for the coming decades, in a divided and polarised world that is crying out for an alternative compelling and hospitable vision of flourishing of all.