

All Party Parliamentary Group for Schools, Learning, and Assessment

Curriculum and Assessment

Meeting Minutes

Tuesday 25 February 2025 – 10:00am to 11:00am – Committee Room 18, Palace of Westminster

Parliamentarians in attendance

Peter Swallow MP, Sam Carling MP, Lord Hampton, Lord Knight of Weymouth, Lord Aberdare, Baroness Keeley, John Slinger MP, Lord Watson of Invergowrie, Baroness Barran, Baroness O’Neill of Bexley (remotely).

Guest speakers

Professor Becky Francis, Chair of the Curriculum and Assessment Review and Sarah Kilpatrick, President of the National Education Union (NEU).

Agenda

Time	Details
10:00 – 10:05	Welcome to meeting and introductions (chair Peter Swallow MP)
10:05 – 10:10	Opening remarks from Sarah Kilpatrick, President of the National Education Union
10:10 – 10:20	Remarks from Professor Becky Francis CBE, Chair of the Curriculum and Assessment Review
10:20 – 10:50	Discussion and Q&A (All)
10:50 – 11:00	Discussion about any follow up actions (Peter Swallow MP)
11:00	Close of meeting

1. Welcome and introductions

The Chair welcomed attendees and explained that at the last APPG meeting on Teacher Workload, Recruitment, and Retention, much of the discussion focused on how pressures associated with curriculum and assessment interact with the recruitment and retention crisis.

The Chair noted that this meeting builds on that discussion and focuses on the independent Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR), which examines the curriculum and statutory assessment system for 5- to 19-year-olds to ensure they meet the needs of every child and young person.

2. Opening remarks – Sarah Kilpatrick, President of the NEU

Current context

- Sarah explained that the CAR is taking place at an important and challenging time for the sector with 14 years of underfunding and a punitive accountability system affecting the curriculum offer that schools can provide.

- She referred to the recently launched Arts and Minds campaign and polling that shows that one in four school leaders say they do not have enough funding or facilities to offer the full range of creative subjects at GCSE level.
- Sarah also added that the funding crisis means there are more children being taught the curriculum in unsafe buildings, growing numbers of children are coming to school hungry and cold due to rising poverty levels, and there is a growing mental health crisis amongst young people that is contributing to high levels of absence. Therefore, the CAR's outcome must both provide a solution to these challenges and consider their importance when implementing any reforms.

NEU's submission to the CAR

- The NEU's evidence to the CAR highlighted that the curriculum has become overcrowded and suggested that content needed to be removed, and flexibility reintroduced.
- In a recent survey, more than half of NEU members (57%) reported too much content in their subjects across KS4.
- Sarah explained that this is an issue across other Key Stages too - more than a quarter of KS3 and more than a third of KS5 teachers reported more content than was possible to get through.
- She added that at primary level the burden of SATs has squeezed space for other subjects in the curriculum and is contributing to the growing mental health crisis.
- Sarah also stated that accountability measures such as Progress 8 and the EBacc in the secondary phase contribute to a culture of competition that constrains curriculum choices, noting the Education Secretary's commitment to ending competition between school in the education sector. Entries in non-EBacc subjects, including the arts and technical subjects, have decreased by over a third since its introduction in 2016.

Implementation of the CAR

- Sarah concluded by stating that any failure to involve teachers in curriculum and assessment decisions would be a threat to teacher retention and that it is essential that the profession is engaged in curriculum reform on an ongoing basis, to ensure its continued relevance.

3. Remarks from Professor Becky Francis CBE, Chair of the Curriculum and Assessment Review

Terms of reference

- Becky began by explaining that the principles of the CAR – as outlined in the terms of reference - are to ensure the curriculum is broad and balanced, delivering a solid foundation in core subjects as well as arts and creative subjects.
- She added that the CAR will also seek to deliver an assessment system that captures the strengths of every student while also considering performance measures making it crucial to engage with Ofsted.
- Becky sees the overall goal of the CAR as supporting young people while maintaining high standards for all.

- She acknowledged that navigating the terms of reference is complicated terrain and capacity issues in terms of implementing any recommendations in the CAR is something that she is very aware of.

Approach

- Becky stated that the CAR follow a process of evolution, not revolution. She sees there as being challenges in the system but also aspects that are working well.
- The CAR will apply a social justice lens, working to remove barriers for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special educational needs.

Progress to date and timeline

- In terms of progress, Becky noted that a call for evidence was launched in September, receiving over 7,000 responses, alongside roadshows across the country. She mentioned that the Review has also commissioned their own research using large data sets.
- The interim report is expected to be published in a few weeks, and while it won't include recommendations, it will serve as an appraisal of the key issues identified. The final report will be published in the autumn.

4. Discussion and Q&A

Teacher wellbeing

Lord Hampton: Having taught for 10 years but it's now much more unenjoyable – how will the CAR make teaching better and more fun?

Becky Francis: There has been a mixed response to this in the CAR call to evidence, this is not something that everyone agrees with, and some teachers have found recent changes very empowering and feel happier teaching.

Scope of the CAR

Dame Alison Peacock: To address key issues in the education system we will need big changes. We can't ensure equity without big changes.

Becky Francis: Perhaps addressing some of these profound issues may in the long term be beyond the scope of the report but we are absolutely doing our best.

Gemma Moss, UCL: What will the review do for the missing third?

Becky Francis: We are at the beginning of our work – not the end – but we are determined to be able to make improvements to support that group of young people.

Access to the arts and creative subjects

Baroness Keeley: Will the review address the decline in entries to GCSE Music?

Becky Francis: We're very much aware of the crisis in the arts as people say, but we think it's more nuanced than that and art and design remains a very popular subject.

John Slinger MP: Creative subjects are vitally important – there is as a misconception that they are soft subjects; they can foster strong hard skills too

Peter Swallow MP and the Classics association also asked if the review would ensure that smaller subjects like classics are protected.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Design and Technology is an important subject that needs to be protected. PSHE also needs to be better defined as a subject as it is often the dumping ground for the latest fad or hot topic.

Becky Francis: there are resource issues we need to consider and the impact that making Design and Technology mandatory might have on schools.

Assessment

Jill Robinson, More Than a Score: How accurate is the recent Sunday Times report which said that the Secretary of State would face down unions and opponents of SATs and keep them as part of the review?

Becky Francis: We need to consider why there is such strength of feeling about SATs and try to alleviate concerns around statutory tests, but I am a supporter of statutory testing and not convinced that we have overly assessed young people. The assessments however do influence decisions and priorities further downstream, and the reasons for this are important to consider.

Lord Watson of Invergowrie: Will the review advocate for continuous assessment rather than the current system which is loaded with exams at the end of a course?

Becky Francis: We are looking at continuous assessment, but nationally assessed exams are fairer than other forms of assessment, as was shown during the pandemic.

Dennis Sherwood: Will the review look into exam grade reliability?

Becky Francis: I'm not an assessment specialist but our assessment system is very well trusted. I am aware of different trade-offs in terms of volume vs reliability and one of the things we have heard is that the volume of assessment does make us an international outlier.

5. Conclusion

Sarah Kilpatrick delivered closing remarks, thanking Professor Francis for taking the time to speak and acknowledging the challenges ahead. She observed that many issues raised by colleagues in the room seem beyond the scope of the review and argued for revolution rather than evolution. She also noted that while data may indicate pupils receive the same number of hours for arts education, many are pulled from these lessons for additional core subjects due to Progress 8 and Ofsted accountability pressures. She also noted that as a mother and a teacher, she has seen firsthand the effect that assessments like the phonics screening check have on children's enjoyment of school.

6. AOB

The Chair thanked all for their attendance and asked how attendees can engage with Becky and the CAR going forward. Becky advised that the best way to get in touch is via email at curriculum-assessment.review@education.gov.uk.