



The Curriculum Assessment Review, November 2024

Below, we publish some answers in response to the Department for Education (DfE) [Call for Evidence](#).

This is not the finished article; this is to serve you to navigate the survey and share your expertise and reflections about Music in education. We are in many conversations about the Curriculum and Assessment review, and we publish this knowing that we form an important part of the picture alongside other creative subjects.

We urge you to complete the [online survey](#) by the 22nd November 2024 to strengthen the position of Music as an essential component of school life, for all.

These are the 18 questions we consider a contribution from the music sector and music educators to be important.

Section 1: Qs 10,11, 12, 13, 14 | What is working well? Needs improvement? Barriers?

Section 2: Q16 | English and Maths

Section 3: Qs 22, 23, 25, 27 | Curriculum content

Section 4: Qs 28, 29, 31 | Broad & Balanced, pathways, qualifications (Q 31 is specifically asking about creative skills and creative subjects)

Section 5: Qs 32, 42 | Data, trends, pupil progress and outcomes at KS3; how can we improve?

Section 6: Q44 | Accountability; (e.g. Ofsted) Does it affect decision-making?

Section 7: Q53 | Future use of technology

Section 1 Qs 10,11, 12, 13, 14

What is working well? Needs improvement? Barriers?

Section 1 Q10:

What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways are working well to support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?

Music shares the space of a 'creative arts subject' which offer richness in the curriculum subject itself but also as part of a school culture.

We want to reaffirm that where music is part of the school, not seen as enrichment or extra-curricular, but as an integral part of curriculum children and young people have the education they are entitled to and can thrive. There are settings where music teaching is confidently led and delivered, senior leaders advocate for and support the value of music, and the subject is protected with time, resource and budget. For some Music teachers defending their subject (or their department if they are combined with other creative arts subjects e.g. visual art, dance or drama), can be a regular battle.

Section 1 Q11:

What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways should be targeted for improvements to better support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?

Also see answer to Q12 regarding access.

Curriculum

We would like to see music made a statutory subject.

Primary phase:

Music provision in primary schools is highly variable and many teachers reported lacking confidence in teaching music (Ofsted, 20231). Where there is pressure on timetables creative subjects (particularly music) is often squeezed out. This is reported to Music Mark from music hubs, but there is not currently robust data for this.

Music tends to be highly dependent on a single teacher (or HLTA) and a supportive headteacher. The loss of that person or a change of headteacher can and does precipitate an almost instant total loss of music teaching and extra-curricular activity. The same is largely true for other creative subjects except that teachers are not as diffident about teaching, for example, art.

Secondary phase:

Children arrive in KS3 with enormous variation in their musical experience and many KS3 Music teachers start with an assumption that learners know essentially nothing, which is frustrating for those children who have had good music education in KS2 or learn outside school.

Improvement at Secondary is not the expertise of the teacher (unlike at primary phase); it is a combination of stronger transition from feeder primaries, and a commitment to protected hours of delivery. At GCSE level students are ill prepared unless they have had additional tuition (see Q12).

Summary

There are education settings at both phases that do not deliver any music and there is no accountability for this. To improve the curriculum for music clearer expectations should be set for every age and stage of learning; the foundations and fundamentals need to be built upon to enable progress into qualifications.

Pressure on evidencing the learning of skills and knowledge mean that dance, drama and music are taught separately rather than interdisciplinary.

Assessment

Assessment in music (as in other creative subjects), is unique to other subjects, which makes it challenging for senior leaders to apply whole school policies.

If teachers do not have the confidence in music teaching, they are most likely to be reliant on bought programmes (e.g. charanga, kapow, music express) and external agencies (music services) to assess the learning, and therefore the cycle of assessment for learning is broken.

Good practice in music education is 'sound before symbol' and lessons should primarily be based on making and hearing music. Assessment of musical learning may better be evidenced with sound and audio recordings but these are not usually accommodated or integrated in whole-school assessment schemes.

Qualification pathways

In music, as with any subject, the route to a qualification needs incremental building blocks. Starting with EYFS using music to support auditory processing. GCSEs in other subjects are either part of a clear pathway for subjects which have previously been taught progressively (usually since EYFS/KS1), or they are more specialised but develop logically out of core subjects (Economics, Law).

To give an example:

- Use & understand staff and other musical notation: While the current KS2 programmes of study say that staff notation should be taught, in practice many primary teachers are not able to teach it, which undermines learners' opportunities at A level, which may be a unique disadvantage across the whole curriculum.

A level music requires students to be able to read staff notation, but GCSE does not, so it is not a suitable preparation for A level. Despite this, GCSE Music is often regarded by providers as a pre-requisite for A level, which for most effectively means students have to have been learning outside the classrooms: in order to achieve a Music qualification at KS4 it is highly dependent on family circumstance.

If we could better define the explicit academic purpose of GCSE and fit it more successfully into the journey from the broad study up to KS3 and then onto A level and tertiary study, the expectations at KS3, KS2, KS1 and even back into Early Years education would become clearer and easier for schools to respond to.

Financial regulation '[the charges for music tuition \(England\) regulations 2007](#)' states that tuition must be free if it is an essential part of the National Curriculum. A school providing instrumental teaching, alongside GCSE and A level may not charge must also provide the means to access this. Without financial support school budgets may see a reduction in offer to children and young people.

Section 1 Q12:

In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation (class ceilings) for learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage?

Specifically thinking about Music (although there are parallels in Dance, Drama and possibly sports), to make personal progress the subject is highly dependent on families' ability to pay for instrumental/vocal lessons, provide instruments and materials and pay for private assessments (grade exams). Families also need to be able to provide the space and discipline for sustained personal study and be able to take children to extra-curricular activities (rehearsals, performances).

Some of this can be, and usually is, provided in school, although lack of choice can be a limiting factor: family circumstances are nevertheless always vital. Schools can facilitate the provision but taking advantage of the opportunity still requires the commitment of the student and support from the family. Without the necessary family circumstances in place to a greater or lesser extent, success at GCSE is curtailed and the knowledge to access A Level is less likely to be acquired.

Section 1 Q13:

In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation which may disproportionately impact pupils based on other characteristics (e.g. disability, sexual orientation, gender, race, religion or belief etc.)?

The creative subjects, of which music is fundamental, are unique across the curriculum to enable self-expression and creativity, therefore the most significant barrier is access to these subjects. Creative subjects give scope to see yourself, and others, reflected in the curriculum.

By and large, music teachers and music services (Hubs) are working hard to lower these barriers and there is plenty of advice from different agencies, charities, instrument and software developers and consultants, and increasing opportunities for peer support.

(See below for further notes on disability within SEND)

Section 1 Q14:

In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers in continuing to improve attainment, progress, access or participation for learners with SEND?

Barriers can include lack of bespoke learning opportunities. Music can be learnt through voice and many different instruments; these may be tailored well for the individual, but the teacher may not have the expertise for that instrument. This also includes learning styles such as visual (staff notation) versus aural learning or following graphic notation on a digital format i.e. you tube.

In the current system young people with SEND are often disadvantaged by intervention for English and Maths taking priority over access to creative subjects.

The capital grant to Music Hubs will help in terms of accessible instruments for children and young people with SEND and music services are increasingly working with special schools and with mainstream schools to support teaching of learners with SEND. As this support is both strategic and responsive, the sector is already making progress in this area.

Section 2 Q 16

English and Maths

Section 2 Q16:

To what extent does the content of the national curriculum at primary level (key stages 1 and 2) enable pupils to gain an excellent foundation in a) English and b) maths? Are there ways in which the content could change to better support this aim? Please note, we invite views specifically on transitions between key stages in section 9.

It is unhelpful to dissect English and Maths out of the whole view of curriculum. Excellent foundations come from well sequenced curriculums, which will include listening skills that come through music, singing, call and response, hearing sounds and music. Phase 1 in Letters and Sounds promotes listening skills; these could come from well-planned music activities, rather than in a phonics specific session.

Speaking and listening are fundamental to writing (as is oracy), and these do not happen without a rich and diverse curriculum starting at the very foundations of KS1 and even before that.

Section 3 Qs 22, 23, 25, 27

Curriculum content

Section 3 Q22:

Are there particular curriculum or qualifications subjects where:

- a. there is too much content; not enough content, or content is missing;
- b. the content is out-of-date;
- c. the content is unhelpfully sequenced (for example to support good curriculum design or pedagogy);
- d. there is a need for greater flexibility (for example to provide the space for teachers to develop and adapt content)? Please provide detail on specific key stages where appropriate.

Schools need to create curriculums that interconnect learning between subjects, for example Music and cultural history, music and sociology. Schools need to be able to sequence understanding of periods in History to be able to show different literature, music and art and, for older learners, the political and wider contextual implications of that period in time. A piece of music from a particular period can be studied in isolation but when paired with greater context learners are more likely to have a greater understanding of the world at that time.

The [Model Music Curriculum](#) was published as non-statutory guidance by the DfE in 2021. While some of the sequencing of learning has been criticised by music educators, it has been widely welcomed by educators.

Section 3 Q23:

Are there particular changes that could be made to ensure the curriculum (including qualification content) is more diverse and representative of society?

Equality, Diversity, Inclusion (EDI) should be reflected through every aspect of the curriculum planning. In terms of music, this should draw on musical identities across global majority ethnicity, and gender minoritised composers, throughout history and contemporary music. Music is a part of many cultures and moments in our lives, and has played crucial parts in many civil rights movements. It belongs to us all, and any curriculum should be reflective of that.

It is the role of education to expose young people to new experiences. We need to consider how music is encountered through digital, e.g. gaming, as young people will first encounter pieces in this medium but have no musical and cultural frame of reference.

Appendix 2 (the chronology of music) of the model music curriculum caused debate in its creation. To remain representative of society and ensure the curriculum is diverse, the repertoire list should be dynamic, regularly revisited and kept up to date, as well as encouraged to be used as a scaffold, but not prescriptively.

Section 3 Q25:

In which ways does the current primary curriculum support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for life and further study and what could we change to better support this?

We welcome the current government's approach to recognising Music for its intrinsic value as an academic study. There is a wealth of evidence for the effect of music education on brain and emotional development and positive correlation between musical learning, positive behaviours and achievement in different subject areas. These have tended to be the arguments used to justify Music's place in the curriculum in recent decades but we are more convinced of the value of supporting Music as intrinsic to a broad and balanced curriculum.

Section 3 Q27:

In which ways do the current qualification pathways and content at 16-19 support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work and what could we change to better support this?

We are concerned, as stated above, by the disjunct between GCSE and A level Music, although we would argue that aligning GCSE to A level is the answer, rather than the other way around. Inasmuch as A level continues to be rigorously taught and assessed, we feel that the problem is increasingly in its availability, with whole towns and boroughs having no state-funded A level Music provider.

To have the option to specialise in music at KS5 the provision at key stages 3 and 4 need to be stable and well resourced.

Section 4 Qs 28, 29, 31

Broad & Balanced, pathways, qualifications (Q 31 is specifically asking about creative skills and creative subjects)

Section 4 Q28:

To what extent does the current primary curriculum support pupils to study a broad and balanced curriculum? Should anything change to better support this?

Refer to Q11.

The inspection regime places little or no explicit value on Music or creative subjects (see Q44); school leaders and teachers in primary schools know that there is little risk of Music being inspected directly and its presence in the curriculum map (and at some after-school clubs) is unlikely to be tested deeply, if at all.

What should change? Rigour should be used when looking at subjects that are not Maths, Phonics, Reading and Writing. Reporting regarding music should be informative.

Schools will be supported to create music development plans alongside their Music hub but who is giving an external lens to the actions and progress being made, if not Ofsted?

Section 4 Q29:

To what extent do the current secondary curriculum and qualifications pathways support pupils to study a broad and balanced curriculum? Should anything change to better support this?

Continued breadth at KS3 is important: moving into KS4 should be about specialising rather than narrowing. Changing accountability measures will support and align to the ambition for music's part within a broad and balanced curriculum.

The data tells us:

- From 2015/16 to 2023/24, the total reduction in GCSE music is a decrease of about 22.4%.
- Only 5.09% of Year 11 pupils took GCSE music in 2024.
- The number of qualifications taken at KS4 would be better supported with improved infrastructure to consistently deliver GCSE music this in every setting.

Section 4 Q31:

To what extent do the current curriculum (at primary and secondary) and qualifications pathways (at secondary and 16-19) ensure that pupils and learners are able to develop creative skills and have access to creative subjects?

Music is a creative subject where creative skills thrive.

For young people to access music within the current curriculum and qualifications pathways we refer to our answer to Q11 regarding teacher confidence, the vulnerability of Music particularly to changes in staff in primary schools and the frequency with which Music gets squeezed off the timetable by

other subjects. In addition, in answer to Q44 we state the affect that the inspection and accountability regime has on music being provided in education settings in England.

In answer to Q14 we stressed the impact of learners (many with SEND but not exclusively so) being removed from creative lessons for English and Maths interventions. Children who require additional intervention are being denied the opportunity to excel in creative subjects where they may also develop personal progression and self-confidence.

Access to Music at Secondary

There is anecdotal evidence, but widespread, that the way schools structure their option blocks for KS4 can mean that creative subjects are pitched against one-another. This prevents access to learning music and access to a music qualification (such as GCSE). Falling numbers threaten the viability of GCSE courses, which means teachers with Music expertise will not be retained and there will be less opportunity for future students.

We are aware that schools offer other qualifications in KS4, not least BTEC, and we advocate for an assessed/examined Music qualification to be offered in every school, recognising that GCSE may not always be the most appropriate.

Section 5 Qs 32, 42

Data, trends, pupil progress and outcomes at KS3; how can we improve?

Section 5 Q32:

Do you have any explanations for the trends outlined in the analysis and/or suggestions to address any that might be of concern?

We do recognise the timetable pressures and also the intense pressures on schools from Ofsted, media and parental scrutiny. The need is not to lay blame with schools but to change the culture in relation to creative subjects. Recognising their intrinsic value – rather than always justifying them in terms of positive effects in other subjects and areas of development.

Section 5 Q42:

Are there ways in which we could support improvement in pupil progress and outcomes at key stage 3?

As previously noted, KS3 Music is complicated by the wide range of musical experiences children receive at primary school and many secondary music teachers start by assuming no knowledge, or at least very little common knowledge.

Where Heads of Music have strong links with their feeder primaries (or primary Music Leads take the initiative to communicate the musical experiences of their rising Y6s) they are able to plan more but in itself, this does not address the problem. While it has its problems, the Model Music Curriculum, combined with the programmes of study, give an indication of what children should be learning and achieving. More consistent progress towards these expectations, with pupil achievements communicated formally to secondary schools, would help KS3 leaders to plan more effective learning. A clearer understanding of the purpose and audience of GCSE Music and more appropriate assessment (i.e. specifically musical assessment) would improve the focus of KS3 teaching.

Section 6 Q 44

Accountability; (e.g. Ofsted) Does it affect decision-making?

Section 6 Q44:

To what extent, and in what ways, does the accountability system influence curriculum and assessment decisions in schools and colleges?

It is hugely influential.

Schools know that their accountability is largely around a small kernel of key subjects, in particular English and Maths. They also know that creative subjects are unlikely to figure highly in Ofsted reports and are certainly not going to be determinative of Ofsted's judgements. While we of course recognise the importance of these subjects, we argue against taking children out of creative subjects in which they could excel (or at experience satisfaction achievement lacking in the rest of their studies) for more of the subjects they struggle with.

Progress 8 and the EBacc implicitly devalue creative subjects, even though they can be part of the mix. If at least one creative subject were required, their value would be enhanced. While it is not robust to equate the decline in numbers taking Music GCSE with Progress 8, it is equally not possible to prove that they are unrelated.

Our research has shown that curriculum music is rarely mentioned in Ofsted reports (also true of other creative subjects and the arts) and its influence on final judgements is at best not evident. It is rarely, if ever, missing from schools' published curricula so if not observed during an inspection, the true implementation and impact are under the radar, to the extent that children could receive effectively no music education at primary school with no accountability. This problem links very clearly with the small amount of music in primary ITT (typically 6h in total) and the little time allowed for in-service training in music – again, it tends to be squeezed out by subjects that schools know they will be judged on.

The importance of the music curriculum in primary schools is barely at all supported by the inspection regime and the subject suffers in school timetables, ITT and teacher CPD accordingly. Even if schools are aware that the new National Plan for Music Education calls for an hour a week of Music, they know it is non-statutory (and further undermined by the note on the webpage that it was published by a previous government) and it is widely disregarded.

Section 7 Q 53

How could technology be used to improve how we deliver the curriculum, assessment and qualifications in England?

Music learners should, of course, have access to music technology (recording, mixing, sampling, notation software, music production software, electronic instruments). However, it is important to teach the underlying musical knowledge skills (including playing acoustic instruments and singing) and to teach technology as an enabler to those skills. It is possible to produce tracks using software and that may be satisfying, at least initially, but if the principles by which the software harmonises and assigns instruments are not understood, this limits learners' future creativity.

Technology is a great enabler in Special education, with electronic instruments being developed all the time to enable learners to express themselves who are unable to manipulate an acoustic instrument. Again, these technologies should be used to enable access and expression, with the underlying techniques and principles taught to the maximum capabilities of the individual.

In all music education, independent music-making is the goal.

Recording technology has a clear role in evidencing progress, particularly in a sound medium. As a tool for assessing Music, it is relevant, succinct and robust.