

## Briefing for the Petitions Committee

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 9 Gorffennaf 2019

Petitions Committee | 9 July 2019

### Research Briefing: National Reading and Numeracy Tests for children from as young as age 6 need to be discontinued with immediate effect

Petition number: [P-05-891](#)

Petition title: **National Reading and Numeracy Tests for children from as young as age 6 need to be discontinued with immediate effect**

#### Text of petition:

National Numeracy and Reading Tests for children as young as 6 are not fit for purpose and should be discontinued as soon as possible. Young children who have been encouraged to learn through play are not best assessed through sitting for up to 40 minutes to complete a test.

Although Welsh Government recommends that no preparation is required, schools inevitably take time out of normal learning to familiarise children with the format of the tests and frequently children struggle to understand what is expected of them. This results in loss of confidence and enjoyment of learning at such a young age which could be detrimental to their ongoing learning.

The Donaldson Review (Successful Futures, 2015) recommended that any assessments should be 'as light-touch as possible', 'avoid unnecessary bureaucracy', include 'holistic assessments of achievement' and use 'both self-assessment and peer assessment' to 'encourage children and young people to take greater responsibility for their own learning'. Four years have passed since this review and still these tests are ongoing, as a result the current format of structured assessment needs to be discontinued with immediate effect.

## 1. Policy context to the introduction of the tests

National Reading and Numeracy Tests are taken by pupils in Year 2 (age 6 at start of year) to Year 9 (age 13 at start of year). They were introduced in 2013 as part of the Welsh Government's prioritisation of literacy and numeracy within a ['twenty point plan'](#) to respond

to Wales disappointing results in the Programme of Student Assessment (PISA) 2009. For some historical background, see the Research Service's 2013 publication, [Literacy and Numeracy in Wales](#).

Estyn's Chief Inspector at the time, Ann Keane, had previously highlighted (see for example the [Foreword to her 2011–12 annual report](#)), the importance of having a more coherent set of data for schools to use to compare their pupils' reading and numeracy levels with those from other schools. Before the introduction of the national tests in 2013, local authorities used different reading tests at different stages meaning that, while Estyn collected those results separately from local authorities, the data was not comparable. HM Chief Inspector Ann Keane reported:

It is therefore difficult to draw overall conclusions other than that it would have been useful if they had been able to use the same tests. ([Section 1 of 2011–12 annual report: Priorities and Provision](#), p4)

There have also been long-standing reservations about the reliability of teacher assessment within a high stakes accountability system, whereby teacher assessment outcomes are used to externally measure the performance of a school. [Estyn reported back in 2013/14](#) that teacher assessments are 'not always robust or reliable enough', with there often being a 'mismatch between the National Curriculum levels awarded by staff and the quality of the pupils' work'.

## 2. Data collection

There are currently three types of national tests taken by pupils in Years 2 to 9 – Reading, Numeracy (Procedural) and Numeracy (Reasoning). These make up the National Reading and Numeracy Tests, which are the subject of this petition.

The Welsh Government publishes [data regarding the National Reading and Numeracy Test results](#), each August. Whilst this data provides a national picture of the levels of pupils' reading and numeracy skills at each age group for a given year, it does not enable comparisons to be made between years as scores are independently standardised each year.

Moreover, the Welsh Government has emphasised (as the letter from the Minister for Education dated 3 June 2019 states) that the purpose of the tests is not to compare pupils' abilities between schools, or between local authorities. Instead, their intended principal purpose is to inform the future teaching and learning of the pupil being assessed, as the following section explains.

## 3. 'Assessment for learning not accountability'

Assessment for learning means that teachers' assessments of pupils should primarily be formative rather than summative, i.e. they inform the ongoing teaching and learning associated with that pupil rather than measuring the outcome of a period of learning against a standard or benchmark. Assessment for learning techniques are therefore used throughout a programme of study rather than simply at its conclusion.

The use of assessment for learning rather than accountability purposes has been advocated by both the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (see its [2014 Review](#) and 2017 [Rapid Policy Assessment](#)) and Professor Graham Donaldson (*Successful Futures*, 2015 and *A Learning Inspectorate*, 2018).

The Welsh Government says that the primary purpose of the National Reading and Numeracy Tests is to inform teaching and learning. i.e. by identifying a pupil's standing in reading and numeracy, and therefore their strengths and weaknesses, in order to complement efforts to support their ongoing learning. As the Minister for Education said in her [Plenary statement of 8 January 2019](#):

... teachers will have much richer information and will be able to gear lessons more specifically to help learners improve.

#### 4. Personalised Assessments

As the Minister's letter outlines, the Welsh Government is phasing the introduction of online, adaptive Personalised Assessments to replace the current paper-based National Reading and Numeracy tests. Numeracy (Procedural) was the first to move to a personalised online version in 2018/19. Reading will follow in 2019/20 and then Numeracy (Reasoning) in 2020/21. The Minister said in a [statement on 24 May 2017](#):

The new assessments will adapt the difficulty of the questions to match the response of the learner, adjusting to provide appropriate challenge for each individual. This means that all learners will be presented with questions that match and challenge their individual skills in reading and numeracy. Schools will receive high-quality, tailored information about each learner's skills that they can use as additional evidence to plan the next steps for teaching and learning. The tests will be self-marking and compatible with schools' information management systems. Teachers and learners will have high-quality, immediate and specific feedback, giving them a better picture of how they can address each learner's strengths and weaknesses.

Kirsty Williams AM gave further information about personalised assessments in her [statement in Plenary on 8 January 2019](#).

The Research Service has previously published blog articles on the issues of assessment for learning and the move to personalised assessments ([January 2019](#) and [May 2017](#)).

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.