

CST DISCUSSION PAPER

# Who decides?

Exploring a process to guide the development of high-level national curriculum expectations by government

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**Confederation**  
of School Trusts

**The voice of school trusts**

# Who decides? Exploring a process to guide the development of high-level national curriculum expectations by government

## Introduction

‘Who decides?’ is a perennial curriculum question. But there are two reasons why now, in particular, it is worth revisiting it:

1. There have been calls from some in the education sector for the establishment of a curriculum body with the purpose of setting a national curriculum independently of government.
2. Labour has stated its programme of government would include a review of the curriculum in schools.

In any case it is fruitful to consider how government determines the national curriculum.

## About this discussion paper

This paper is a part of CST’s policy making process. It does not set out settled policy but is intended to act as a spark to promote discussion and help us explore the views of the school trust sector.

# What is the national curriculum, and what is it not?

The term "National Curriculum" in England refers to a set of educational standards and guidelines rather than a specific curriculum. It sets out the programmes of study and attainment targets for different subjects and age groups. In some senses, the word 'curriculum' is misleading as it is in fact a high-level framework. It does not set out schemes of work, provide lesson plans, or suggest particular resources.

As such, different schools might 'follow' the national curriculum and yet the detail and experience of the curriculum in each school might look different. This is a strength of the national curriculum. It gives schools flexibility in how they deliver the curriculum, allowing them to select content and sequencing to reflect their students' needs and contexts. Therefore, the National Curriculum in England provides a broad structure and framework, rather than a prescriptive curriculum with detailed lessons or specific teaching methods.

Academy schools do not have to teach the national curriculum. It is important to understand this in the context of the point made above: even schools that must follow the national curriculum in its entirety (such as local authority maintained schools) can offer very different curricula to children. Thus, removing this freedom is unlikely to ensure a precisely aligned experience for children in any case. Nor should it. Teachers and leaders must be given the professional trust and agency to shape curriculum for the pupils they serve. The key priority for policy makers should be less about tightly defined central control and more about supporting teachers to make effective and well considered curriculum choices. This speaks to the need for professional development more than prescription.

It is also worth keeping in mind that Ofsted's inspection framework requires academies to teach curriculum that at least matches the national curriculum in its breadth and ambition. This is a mitigation against the theoretical risk of academy freedoms resulting in impoverished curricula. The outcomes of academy inspections indicate that academy freedoms are not resulting in poor quality or narrow curricula.

## Principles for discussion

- Government should maintain existing academy curriculum freedoms.
- The national curriculum is a useful reference point that supports system-level 'curriculum coherence' (Schmidt & Prawat) between curricula, assessments, resources and so on.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, it should be maintained, even though academies are not required to teach it.
- Calls to establish a standing 'curriculum body' with the responsibility to set the national curriculum are problematic, because:
  - Such a body could be unaccountable.
  - It is important to maintain a line of accountability for elected politicians, who have a legitimate interest in what is taught in state-funded schools and should be held accountable to the electorate on that basis. Doing otherwise risks creating a democratic deficit.

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<sup>1</sup> Schmidt, WH & Prawat, S (2006) *Curriculum coherence and national control of education: issue or non-issue?*, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 38:6, 641-658, DOI: 10.1080/00220270600682804

- There must be some stability over time in the national curriculum. Accordingly, a review of it should be relatively infrequent. A standing body would be disproportionate and could undermine stability.
- This would be a risk to teachers' workload and could divert scarce resources and capacity away from schools.
- The establishment of such a body would run counter to the relocation of curriculum agency that has taken place over the past 10-20 years, described as a school-led system and, increasingly, a trust-led system.
- Reform should instead focus on the establishment of a trusted and consistent *process* for reviewing and setting the national curriculum, rather than a *body*. This process should be built around three key principles:
  1. Transparency
  2. Governance
  3. Engagement with teachers and disciplinary communities

Below we set out what a possible model to illustrate what a process to review the national curriculum might look like. A more detailed rationale for this is then provided.

## High-level curriculum development process - model for discussion



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## Explanatory notes

- The governance panel need not be constituted as a bureaucratic or large body. Indeed, given its role is one of governance it may be a relatively small group of people. Membership of the panel should, though, be time limited and subject to the public appointments process.
- It is consistent with our wider democratic system for the individuals on the curriculum governance panel to be appointed by government, and while it is recognised that some may therefore question the impartiality of such appointment decisions, an alternative where these decisions fall beyond democratic oversight and accountability is equally problematic. Arguably, the focus on scrutiny and accountability around appointment decisions and the work of the panel is a compelling counterweight to concerns about political interference.
- The panel, therefore, fulfils an important part of the process because it provides an additional and transparent layer of insulation between government and the work of curriculum creation. It does not, however, do the subject specific 'heavy lifting' of the review. This is done by the expert groups they establish.
- The process allows for ministerial oversight because the remit only extends to recommendations, which are not binding. However, the remit, final recommendations and government response are all published and thus subject to appropriate public and parliamentary scrutiny.
- The process requires the publication of a clear rationale for the approach and membership of the expert curriculum group(s) and how its members map against this. This is not significantly different from existing government practice but is intended to go further and be more explicit.
- The expert groups should not be permanent and should be attuned to the particular requirements of the remit in question. They could, however, include common elements, such as a specified number of places allocated for members of the relevant disciplinary community/ies.
- A public call for evidence/consultation ensures that a wider range of stakeholders have an opportunity to feed into the process.
- There could be a requirement for an EEF commissioned literature review to form part of the evidence the expert group considers.
- The governance panel may have regard for the totality of curriculum requirements embodied in the national curriculum, helping to ensure that the breadth and depth of the national curriculum is appropriate and deliverable within schools.
- While the curriculum governance panel would be reporting back to government in line with the remit it is issued, the process potentially provides scope for wider observations made during its work, which could inform future curriculum foci. This establishes a public feedback loop for government.

## Rationale

The state holds an interest in the curriculum taught in state-funded schools. This is expressed in a number of ways, including the requirement on local authority maintained schools to teach the national curriculum. While academies are not required to teach the national curriculum, its existence is nonetheless of note for all schools because it plays a role in shaping other facets of the system, such as training, resources and exam specifications.

Schmidt and Prawat's work identifies that 'curriculum coherence' is a significant factor in supporting education systems to achieve high outcomes. Curriculum coherence can be defined as the alignment between policy instruments such as curriculum, assessment and resources, and that these are appropriately sequenced in line with disciplinary concepts.

However, Schmidt and Prawat argue that while 'central' control of such instruments by the state can support curriculum coherence, it is not necessarily the case. Indeed, they argue that curriculum coherence at classroom level emerges from decisions made at a range of levels, including national, school level and department level. There is little in their work which indicates England would have much to gain by removing academy curriculum freedoms. Indeed, their findings provide a compelling rationale for maintaining the current status of the national curriculum in England: a set of high-level objectives created at national level so as to support a general alignment of system-level policy levers, but with the scope for school trusts to diverge as they need to in order to make a curriculum that is more coherent for the pupils in their context.

Accordingly, this paper does not suggest there should be any changes to the relationship between academies and the national curriculum.

However, there is a separate question about how the national curriculum is reviewed and set. This paper seeks to explore this issue and provides an alternative to calls made for the establishment of a curriculum body to set the national curriculum.

## Making the case for a high-level curriculum process, not a curriculum body

There have been calls from some to establish a curriculum body in England with the responsibility to set the national curriculum. The common factor cited is to provide independent oversight such that the curriculum is less affected by political pressures. In short, the call is made to 'take the curriculum out of the political cycle', so that where there are changes to the national curriculum, or government's exemplifications of it, these are less likely to be shaped by political persons and considerations. However, doing so is not straight forward.

Such a body could take a variety of forms and the notion of a 'curriculum body' might mean well mean different things to different people, potentially producing a gap between expectation and reality. It is, therefore, important to be precise about the nature of such proposals. At one level this could be a formal curriculum body of the sort that have existed previously in the system, such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA).

However, we maintain that, given the movement of the school system in the past decade or so towards a school-led system, and the relocation of curriculum agency towards school trusts, the establishment of a non-governmental organisation with the responsibility to set national curriculum frameworks would be a retrograde step. Furthermore, given the financial challenges in the sector, it is questionable whether establishing a body to set national curriculum expectations (of the sort previously seen in the system) would represent the best allocation of resources.

It is plausible that from time to time there may be need for government to evaluate existing national curriculum specifications and exemplifications, but we do not believe the establishment of a curriculum body is the best way to undertake this work. It may be more helpful for government to consider the process through which it enacts such work.

For these reasons, this paper focuses on high-level curriculum setting as a process, rather than the establishment of a 'curriculum body'. We highlight three aspects which, we think, point towards the establishment of a process – initiated by government – rather than a curriculum body. These are:

1. Transparency
2. Governance
3. Engagement with teachers and disciplinary communities

## Transparency

Dissatisfaction with the curriculum often feels wide-ranging and long-standing, featuring regularly in the press and political discourse. Indeed, debates over what should and should not be in a curriculum are an inherent part of curriculum making and it is perhaps inevitable that the process of selecting and recontextualising knowledge will create clusters of advocates who feel the curriculum does not meet their expectation. As a result, defining any high-level curriculum is unlikely to make all stakeholders happy, even if carried out by apparently independent persons or a notionally independent body.

Additionally, the suggestion that there should be an independent curriculum body with the responsibility to set the national curriculum, and thus remove interference by politicians, is more problematic than is sometimes assumed. Given the significance of this work for the education of millions of children, overall responsibility for the curriculum should fall to elected politicians, who are democratically accountable to the electorate. Reforms that remove this agency from the electorate would need to be explicit about the mechanisms through which democratic accountability would be upheld, or else make the case for why it is not needed. This seems problematic.

Aside from asserting who should not be involved in determining curriculum, there remains a more fundamental question of who should be involved. Decisions made about the people & organisations involved are themselves imbued with meaning about who/what is valued.

However, while it is important to accept that 'neutrality' is to some degree an elusive concept when it comes to curriculum design (most people have views), it should be possible for a curriculum process to be made as transparently as possible, thus lending itself to greater scrutiny and accountability. Of course, transparency does not inoculate public processes against risks of bias or



over/under-representation, but it is an integral part of how the nation manages such risks, as captured in Nolan's principles of openness and accountability.

To achieve this, a curriculum setting process can make explicit the basis of the selection of people/organisations involved. This goes beyond sharing CVs of personnel and speaks to a more fundamental need: an explicit theory/framing of the principles that give rise to an individual having involvement in the process.

Such things may matter more or less depending on the nature of the particular curriculum work in question, but arguably a clearer public rationale for such decisions would support greater transparency and accountability.

A risk of not being clear enough about the underlying rationale for who is involved in curriculum processes is that the explanatory gap can be filled, rightly or wrongly, with assumptions that what has played out is merely political or ideological, reinforcing the concern outlined above about overt political interference in the curriculum.

One way that government could assuage people of this concern, and to assist appropriate scrutiny, is to be more explicit about the rationale for the aims and selection of those involved in high-level curriculum processes.

## Governance

A second step would be to think more explicitly about the principle of governance in relation to the development of the national curriculum.

While government officials and ministers might develop expertise relating to curriculum, this is unlikely to be at the same level as curriculum experts working in the field. Accordingly, while it might be democratically appropriate for ministers to set broad parameters for curriculum work to be undertaken, responding to elected mandates and so on, oversight of the strategic aspect of such work might be better done by experts in curriculum.

So, rather than establishing a 'curriculum body', a well constituted curriculum process could include a layer of curriculum governance, with carefully appointed people overseeing the detailed curriculum work, working to a broad remit issued by ministers, and establishing the membership of the groups to undertake the work.

This could include publication of a subject-level rationale for the selection of the curriculum work/advisory group undertaking the work, supporting the principle of transparency, and also provide an additional layer of insulation between individual ministers' views on curriculum and its enactment in high-level curriculum expectations.

It is envisaged that a governance panel would not be given the power to set the high-level curriculum directly, but it would make public recommendations to government, for elected ministers and their officials to decide on and enact. By making this exchange public, transparency and scrutiny would be enhanced without diminishing the democratic agency of the electorate or the government's accountability to them.

The specifics of what such a panel should look like are not discussed here in depth. However, the panel need not be a constituted bureaucratic or large. Indeed, given its role is one of governance it may be just a few people. Membership of the panel should, though, be time limited and subject to the public appointments process.

It is consistent with our wider democratic system for the individuals on the curriculum governance panel to be appointed by government, and while it is recognised that some may therefore question the impartiality of such appointment decisions, an alternative where these decisions fall beyond democratic oversight and accountability is equally problematic. Arguably, the focus on scrutiny and accountability around appointment decisions and the work of the panel is a compelling counterweight to concerns about political interference.

A governance panel, therefore, fulfils an important part of the process because it provides an additional and transparent layer of insulation between government and the work of curriculum creation.

## Engagement with teachers and disciplinary communities

The governance panel's role is not to undertake the detailed work of curriculum review and setting, but a key role is to appoint the people who would do so – which we might refer to as an 'expert group'. The notion of expert groups is by no means new. Such groups are regularly assembled by ministers to support the review and development of high-level curriculum policies.

The apportionment of a curriculum expert group should take account of the complexity concealed within the term 'curriculum', perhaps most importantly that of subject difference. Within subjects there are processes and concepts that connect knowledge and knowers together in ways that imbued with meaning. Curriculum setting needs to take account of this so that meaning is not lost. A key means of doing so is to ensure that curriculum work is properly situated in the appropriate disciplinary community.

This can be supported by including members of the relevant disciplinary community on expert groups. In addition, to support wider engagement with the range of stakeholders, high-level curriculum setting work could include an open consultative element, such as a call for evidence. The results from this could then be considered by the group undertaking the curriculum work.

## Conclusion

This paper makes the case that determining high-level curriculum expectations is not straight forward, but nor is it a process from which government can or should be entirely removed. However, there are steps that could be taken to make the setting of top-level curriculum policy more effective and open to scrutiny through a greater focus on **transparency, governance and engagement**.

Policy makers should see the task of national curriculum review as contingent upon the establishment of a proper *process* (of the sort set out above) rather than the establishment of a curriculum *body*. The latter carries significant risks, not least of which are to teachers' workload and potentially the creation of a democratic deficit.

We hope the discussion points in this paper make a constructive contribution to debates about the process of setting of high-level national curriculum expectations.

For each area below, please indicate whether or not you agree with the statement. Please also give examples of what is working well, and how you feel performance might be improved.



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