INTRODUCTION

This is an initial submission by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) to the review of the Key Stage 3 National Curriculum for England. The submission also contains the NUT's proposals on National Curriculum assessment at Key Stage 3.

The National Union of Teachers’ approach to curriculum reform is set out in its Education Statement, ‘Bringing Down the Barriers’.

Currently, the National Curriculum is overloaded. The prescribed detail of the National Curriculum does not encourage depth of learning. By its very prescription, the National Curriculum restricts access to new areas of knowledge and the capacity to construct imaginatively areas of teaching and learning which cross traditional subject barriers. It fails also to encourage an entitlement to education experiences outside school, including the benefit of residential experiences. The National Curriculum must provide a framework for describing in broad terms young people’s entitlement to learning.

There should be an independent review of the 5-14 curriculum, which should focus on restructuring the National Curriculum as a statutory framework. The present distinctions between the Core and Foundation subjects should be replaced by a framework curriculum which would describe a common curriculum entitlement, the purpose of which would be to support young people’s learning. A framework curriculum would also provide a ‘scaffolding’ for the development of teachers’ creativity and enthusiasm for their own learning. Integral to the review, must be an examination of how a new framework can encourage the tackling of discrimination and the promotion of equality.

While reform of the National Curriculum at Key Stage 3 is long overdue, imposed reform would be immensely damaging. The disciplines enshrined in the subject orders are fundamental to young people’s learning. The overloaded requirements at Key Stage 3 however obstruct the ability of teachers to tailor their teaching to young people’s needs. Taking account of the views of teachers and pupils must be fundamental to the review therefore.

Over the years, secondary school teachers have had to juggle their teaching styles in response to the enormous range in their pupils’ maturity and enthusiasm for learning. Two recent studies highlight youngsters’ views of the curriculum at Key Stage 3. NFER’s research review, on ‘Pupils’ Views of the curriculum, found a “Year 8 dip” in pupils’ motivation and engagement with the curriculum. NFER found that, “from the pupil’s point of view, the curriculum should be ‘fun’ and ‘interesting’…”... it should be kept practical and challenging... pupils should be given responsibility for their own work and a chance to work independently... above all, pupils want greater connection of the
coupled with the findings of NFER’s research review, are the findings from Cambridge University’s study in, ‘A Life in Secondary Teaching : Finding Time for Learning’, commissioned by the NUT and published in 2004. Cambridge University concludes that, in Years 7 and 8, “pupils wanted work that was energetic and fun and which they could relate to .... they wanted less writing .... as far as these pupils were concerned, the heavy marking required of teachers could easily be reduced by cutting down on testing and by setting less homework”.

In addition, the NUT has conducted a small scale survey of secondary teachers on the future of the Key Stage 3 National Curriculum. Their views were sharply focused.

- A vastly reduced National Curriculum would give teachers the flexibility to meet individual needs.
- Low ability pupils are disadvantaged because of the emphasis placed on exams. They believe that failure is reinforced by the prescriptive nature of the curriculum, that the curriculum discourages innovation, and that pupils’ struggle to access the curriculum.
- The Key Stage 3 National Curriculum does not encourage cross-curricular approaches.
- Drama and the Media are two disciplines which should be included in the revised National Curriculum.
- The current Key Stage 3 National Curriculum does not encourage and accommodate enrichment of learning through a range of activities beyond the curriculum.
- The Key Stage 3 Strategy has had a positive impact.

Despite the pressures of the current curriculum it is clear that there are many schools which, despite the constraints of the curriculum, are testing to the limit organisational and curriculum solutions to meet the needs of 11-14 year olds. Extended projects, involving cross-curricular learning and imaginative timetabling to accommodate such approaches, are being adopted by a number of schools. Others still feel constrained, however, by existing statutory requirements.

What is clear from the evidence is that, although the Government’s commitment to reduce the overall level prescription in the Key Stage 3 is welcome, it is not enough simply to streamline individual subjects and remove overlapping content. A much more imaginative approach to curriculum reform needs to be taken which responds to the views of pupils and those of the profession.

In its response to the QCA Enquiry on ‘English 21’, the NUT fleshed out its concept of the framework curriculum. It argued that the framework curriculum should consist of a series of signposts which identified the priorities to which teachers should have regard. Such signposts would cover existing key areas of the curriculum, emerging areas of
study and cross-curricular links. This approach is contained within the NUT’s initial submission to QCA set out below.

Set out below are principles and recommendations which the NUT believes should be addressed for the Key Stage 3 Review. The NUT intends to respond in detail to any formal consultation launched by QCA, and would welcome the opportunity to discuss further its initial submission.

Any review of the National Curriculum for Key Stage 3 must consider also statutory arrangements for National Curriculum assessment. The current arrangements sit uncomfortably with developments in assessment for learning. Indeed, teacher assessment has proved to be consistent and reliable through the life of the National Curriculum Assessment arrangements. Assessment should be ‘fit for purpose’ and driven primarily by the curriculum and the needs of learners.

The NUT’s proposals will centre on the processes of learning and teaching. Specific recommendations within the text of the submission are highlighted.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Summarised below are the NUT’s key principles for Key Stage 3 reform.

A revised National Curriculum for Key Stage 3 should:

- be inclusive;
- offer opportunities for all;
- offer both breadth and balance;
- be based on clear aims and values;
- be flexible
- have assessment arrangements which are fit for purpose;
- allow sufficient time for planning and preparation prior to its introduction;
- be supported by appropriate and timely resources;
- contain appropriate links to other Key Stages;
- be developed with teachers’ involvement;
- encourage learner centred education and secure the confidence of parents, the wider school community and the world at work; and
- be subject to evaluation and review once every 10 years.

It is at Key Stage 3 where young people are required to follow the broadest curriculum during statutory education. At the beginning or during Key Stage 3 young people make the transition from primary to secondary education or from middle to high school provision. During that time, young people’s learning and social relationships will develop significantly and at different rates.

It is vital that Key Stage 3 represents, for pupils, a manageable transition to secondary school provision, in such a way as to further develop and build upon the knowledge, understanding and skills which they have been developing throughout their early years and primary school education; and that it provides a basis for making informed choices about their future learning. Learning in Key Stage 3 should challenge and motivate every young person, and should be a keystone in the development of lifelong learners. For this reason, any consideration of the future of Key Stage 3 must have regard both to
the primary National Curriculum, especially at Key Stage 2, and to the emerging 14-19 stage of education.

TWELVE KEY PRINCIPLES FOR A KEY STAGE 3 REVIEW

Set out below are the NUT’s principles for the Review.

An Inclusive Curriculum

The National Curriculum and its assessment arrangements for Key Stage 3 should be rooted fundamentally in the principles of equality of opportunity and access for all learners, regardless of their socio-economic background, ability or their attainment at the end of Key Stage 2. The statutory requirements for teaching in Key Stage 3 must be sufficiently flexible to meet the learning needs of all pupils age 11-14, with the exception only of those with the most profound special educational needs, for whom the Key Stage 3 National Curriculum may not be appropriate.

Opportunities for All

All pupils should receive a curriculum offer throughout Key Stage 3 based on a universally recognised individual entitlement, defined by access to a broad and balanced curriculum which incorporates personalised learning and opportunities for learning outside the classroom.

Curriculum Breadth and Balance

The National Curriculum for Key Stage 3 should continue to be based on an entitlement to a broad and balanced educational experience for every learner. The current subject distinctions between ‘core’ and ‘foundation’ subjects should be removed.

Curriculum Aims and Values

QCA should re-open discussion on the aims and values for a further revised Key Stage 3 National Curriculum, with a view to establishing a professional consensus upon which schools can build their own curriculum. Similarly, a discussion should be initiated on the aims and purposes of National Curriculum assessment at Key Stage 3.

A Flexible Curriculum

A revised National Curriculum for Key Stage 3 should be sufficiently flexible for teachers to apply it to meet the needs of every learner. It should facilitate excellent teaching and learning without acting as a ‘straitjacket’ and without hindering creativity or innovation. Teachers should ‘have regard’ to the National Curriculum Subject Orders when planning their work. Flexible, creative and innovative approaches to school curriculum design should be available to all schools regardless of status, rather than the privilege of a few schools of particular status.

National Curriculum Assessment

The key criteria for developing a new system of National Curriculum Assessment in Key Stage 3 should be that: it can be used diagnostically to improve learning and teaching; that it provides information to help pupils make decisions about their future learning from
14; and that it provides a means of reporting pupil progress and attainment to parents or guardians.

Planning and Preparation

The introduction of any revised Key Stage 3 Curriculum must have a sufficient lead to enable schools to prepare for changes. At least two additional professional days must be allocated to all secondary schools in the year prior to the introduction of the revised curriculum. The absolute minimum for publication of the revised National Curriculum must be 18 months before implementation.

Curriculum Resources

The Government should evaluate and make public an estimate of start-up costs for a revised National Curriculum for Key Stage 3, including costs such as additional teacher time required for planning, preparation and professional development. Time should be identified for any additional professional development needs likely to arise, for example in the form of additional in-service training days.

Links to Other Key Stages

Teachers in Key Stage 3 should be allocated time within the school day to liaise with primary school teachers at feeder schools in order to co-ordinate school curriculum design.

Teachers’ Involvement

The NUT believes that teachers will engage positively and enthusiastically in reform of the Key Stage 3 National Curriculum and its assessment arrangements, provided they are seen as lead agents for change in partnership by the QCA and the Government.

Learner Centred Education

School self-evaluation arrangements involving pupils should inform the content of the curriculum. QCA should regularly consult teachers and pupils how the curriculum can be improved. The Key Stage 3 curriculum must have the confidence of parents, the wider school community and the world at work.

Evaluation and Review

It is essential that all new arrangements are kept under a process of evaluation and review. The NUT believes that this will be best facilitated through a combination of QCA’s curriculum monitoring activities at a national level in combination with schools’ own school improvement and self evaluation procedures at a local level.

TOWARDS A MORE FLEXIBLE KEY STAGE 3 CURRICULUM

There is an inherent tension in devising a curriculum which provides an entitlement for all learners while retaining the flexibility to meet the needs of each learner across the full ability range. Nonetheless, it is a tension which must be reconciled in any future National Curriculum model. This is perhaps especially true within Key Stage 3, where
pupils face a broad curriculum which will act as the springboard to their future, yet some may still lack core learning such as literacy or numeracy.

The National Curriculum currently is seen by many teachers as an inflexible tool which does not always encourage or signpost opportunities for cross curricular learning or a cohesive approach across all subjects.

As the NUT noted in its overarching document *Bringing Down the Barriers*¹:

> There is strong evidence which suggests that teachers experience a lack of time for reflection, and lack also professional space for talking with and learning from colleagues. Allied to this issue, is the constant pressure of unacceptable behaviour from a minority of pupils. Many young people in years 7 and 8 themselves believe that the curriculum does not encourage variety, enjoyment and engagement. As Cambridge University has detected² there is “an intrinsic relationship between pupil behaviour, high class sizes, inappropriate curriculum, pressure to meet targets and keeping up with initiatives.

While the NUT is aware that a review of the National Curriculum cannot by itself address or alleviate all of these pressures, the interrelatedness of them suggests that it would be an important step to improving the learning environment.

A starting point for considering the best balance between a statutory curriculum and a flexible framework could be the suspension of National Curriculum Subject Orders in the ‘foundation’ subjects of the National Curriculum at Key Stage 2 in 1998. At that time, the National Strategies for literacy and numeracy were introduced as a Government priority. While the focus at the time was to promote the National Strategies, the approach meant that, at least in respect of the ‘foundation’ subjects, teachers were actively encouraged to utilise their professional judgement in teaching the National Curriculum in such a way as to ‘have regard’ to the frameworks of the Subject Orders but with the flexibility, for example, to combine aspects of the Subject Orders as part of a cross curricular approach.

The NUT recommends that the National Curriculum at Key Stage 3 should be based upon an approach which puts the professional judgement of teachers at its centre, based on their experience of the needs of the pupils that they teach, within a flexible framework which describes a minimum entitlement for all.

Such a framework would provide space and opportunity for enrichment opportunities; additional opportunities to challenge the most able; and ‘intervention’ programmes for pupils with learning difficulties or who have English as an additional language.

**Entitlement Within a New Curriculum Framework**

¹ *Bringing Down the Barriers*, NUT, 2005.
There is no argument for a piecemeal reduction of statutory Subject Orders within the compulsory National Curriculum, as has been the case at Key Stage 4. Simply to describe as an ‘entitlement’ access to humanities subjects, creative arts subjects, technology, and modern foreign languages at that Key Stage has led to a reduction in take-ups, particularly for MFL.

The NUT recommends that the review of the National Curriculum at Key Stage 3 should audit those areas of the National Curriculum within each Subject Order which would contribute to a statutory framework, and those which would have an advisory status. The framework would consist of statutory signposts, and would include also signposts to other subject disciplines to enable cross curricular links.

The statutory framework should describe a range of statutory entitlements including literacy, numeracy, science and technology, the creative arts, the humanities, including a knowledge of global developments, information and communication technology, and modern foreign languages.

In addition, a new curriculum framework on this model would additionally encourage new approaches, cross-curricular learning such as thinking skills, environmental learning and education for sustainable development, the impact of religious and secular beliefs on society, learning about industry and manufacturing, citizenship and personal and social education, including healthy living and the importance of exercise.

A cross curricular National Curriculum model should enable continuity of curriculum organisation between the primary and secondary phases.

Audit and review of individual Subject Orders should not take place in isolation, but with an holistic audit and overview of the National Curriculum in its entirety.

The development of the Primary and Secondary Strategies provide the basis for background for review. The Strategies exist as guidance and as a framework for professional development. The revised Key Stage 3 National Curriculum should emphasise the nature and purpose of the strategies, including highlighting their complementary and non-statutory status and any cross curricular areas.

In the words of Bringing Down the Barriers, a new framework curriculum would:

…encourage teachers to adapt the curriculum to meet the specific needs of pupils without teachers having to demonstrate artificially that they had covered the content of the National Curriculum. Much of the content of the current statutory curriculum would be re-designated as having an advisory status.

Personalised Learning

The NUT believes that, in the context of a fundamental review of the National Curriculum and its assessment, in the manner outlined within this document, greater moves towards a working model for personalised learning could be achieved. A National Curriculum framework should emphasise that every young person could be enabled to experience,
and teachers to provide, and increased degree of tailored, differentiated, and one-to-one learning.

Within this approach, for some learners, a 2 year programme might pass on those core areas on which they need to focus and which will motivate them. Year 9 would be devoted to extension and enrichment activities, preparation for the more specialised curriculum of the upper years of secondary education, and the start of studying towards qualifications.

The NUT recommends that as part of the review process, a funded pilot should be initiated to establish personal tuition arrangements for pupils, which would involve enhancing the number of teaching staff in those schools.

The concept of a guaranteed entitlement for all pupils should be included within the pilot. Personal entitlement would include a range of experiences, including for example, involvement in a minimum number of outdoor activities and visits to museums and galleries, theatres, concerts, study in outdoor centres and visits abroad.

TOWARDS A MORE FLEXIBLE APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT

Recent developments in UK education provide a starting point for a considered debate about the role of assessment in Key Stage 3. In England, a new approach to assessment in Key Stage 1 has been introduced. In Wales, the independent review of assessment commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) and chaired by Professor Richard Daugherty led to fundamental changes in the role of assessment.

While summative assessments in the form of tests have a role to play in the learning and teaching process, that ‘high stakes’ testing of full cohorts at specified times narrows the curriculum and demotivates pupils with learning difficulties.

The NUT recommends that the Government agrees on an independent review of Key Stage 3 assessment. The review should evaluate the role of assessment for learning within the framework of National Curriculum assessment and should examine also the purpose of summative assessment.

A Purpose and Rationale for Assessment

An independent review would trigger a debate on the purpose and rationale for assessment at Key Stage 3.

As in Wales, a key priority for the reporting of summative assessment outcomes in Key Stage 3 must be to enable young people to make choices on future areas of study and qualification.

Evaluating Standards: National Sampling and International Comparators

It is entirely legitimate that the Government should wish to have a coherent national picture of pupil achievement.

The NUT recommends that an Assessment of Performance Unit should be established. The Unit would be able to summarise data and ask questions through studies based on sampling.
Provided sampling is sufficiently representative, such a process could provide sufficient pupil performance data to enquire into national educational standards at Key Stage 3 without the continuing need to test full cohorts.

The replacement of annual testing of full cohorts by sampling would free up costs which could be redistributed towards promoting excellence and consistency of Teacher Assessment. It would also reduce the pressure on the recruitment of markers for level 2 and 3 qualifications such as GCSEs and AS/A levels.

England should continue to be included in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), to enable international comparisons of secondary school education provision to be made.

TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

The Key Stage 3 National Curriculum should be designed in such a way as to ensure that the specific educational needs of all pupils can be met, regardless of any ‘background’ factor such as socio-economic status, ethnic origin; cultural, linguistic and social experience; special educational need; disability; or gender.

In commenting on the proposals which led to the most recent review of the National Curriculum, the NUT welcomed the statements about the distinctive contribution of individual subjects to the curriculum as a whole, as well as the ‘overarching’ statement on inclusion. We continue to believe, however, that these can be improved. While there has been a welcome focus on improving boys’ achievement in specific areas for example, there has not been, at a national level, a corresponding emphasis on improving girls’ access to the science curriculum, for example.

There should be clear foci within the National Curriculum on meeting the needs of specific groups of pupils, for example those from socially or economically deprived backgrounds, those from minority ethnic groups, those with English as an additional language, or those with special educational needs, both at the level of the individual Subject Orders and as an overview within the aims and values of the National Curriculum at Key Stage 3. Non statutory guidance and professional development opportunities could reinforce a strong encouragement towards inclusive educational practices as appropriate.

The NUT recommends that the National Curriculum for Key Stage 3 should signpost opportunities to educate for equality and should encourage the promotion of respect for cultural diversity. It should signpost, additionally, opportunities for pupils to understand the nature and consequences of racism; sexism; homophobia; discrimination on religious grounds, including anti-Semitism and Islamophobia; and other forms of discrimination.

CONCLUSION

The NUT has a strong indication from members who teach at Key Stage 3 that there is a strong case for review of the National Curriculum, in particular one that reduces Subject Order content and overlap between them, in order to bring maximum flexibility in order to meet pupils’ needs and to offer a rich curriculum.
A final recommendation is that at the outset, QCA’s key Stage 3 Review team should seek existing alternative curriculum models, which are already in use in UK schools, such as those offered by the International Baccalaureate Organisation or the RSA’s Opening Minds programme in order to evaluate their appropriateness more widely. In addition, QCA should seek to research the degree to which curriculum flexibility is being exercised in those schools which are free to utilise that flexibility, as part of the same evaluative programme.