Introduction and background

This month, Ofsted will consult on a new education inspection framework (EIF). At the heart of the new proposals will be a refocussing of inspection on the quality of education, including curriculum intent, implementation and impact. To this end, Ofsted commissioned a 2-year, 3-phase research study into the curriculum as currently delivered in schools. Forty schools were visited in Phase 1, 23 in Phase 2 and 64 in Phase 3.

Research in Phase 1 found that many schools were teaching to the test, delivering a narrowed curriculum in pursuit of league table outcomes; Ofsted recognised that the inspection process itself was partly responsible for this. Phase 2 focussed on schools which had been innovative with curriculum design and which specifically aimed to raise standards through their curriculum delivery models. A number of common factors related to curriculum quality were identified, including: the importance of subjects as individual disciplines; retrieval of core knowledge; use of the curriculum as the progression model; and regular curriculum review.

In Phase 3 the main aim was to explore how curriculum quality can best be inspected. In this phase, Ofsted sought to look at how schools’ curricular thinking was embedded (i.e. the links between intent and implementation.) To this end, inspectors visited 33 primary schools, 29 secondary schools and 2 special schools. The sample was balanced in terms of previous Ofsted judgements, regions, school type and the level of pupil deprivation. Four pilot visits were carried out. These generally confirmed the validity of the research design and they were therefore included in the full sample of schools.

The summary below is based both on the full report and also on the commentary by the Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman.

Key points

Indicators of curriculum quality

- Based on the Phase 2 findings, discussions with inspectors and a review of the academic literature, Ofsted identified 25 indicators of curriculum quality. These indicators will not be translated into the new EIF: Ofsted recognises that they are too numerous and that they were only tested in schools, and not in early years or further education settings. They were used in this research to prove the concept that it is possible to make valid and reliable assessments of curriculum quality.
- Inspectors used conversations with school staff (senior leaders, subject leads), pupils and governors and evidence of implementation to collect evidence during visits. Conversations were based on a set of standardised questions and prompts. In this way, they were able to collect a range of evidence for the indicators. A 5-point scale was used for each indicator, with 5 as the highest. A score of 5 means that ‘this aspect of the curriculum is central to the school’s work/embedded practice/may include examples of exceptional curriculum’. A score of one denotes that ‘this aspect is absent in curriculum design’.
- In each school, inspectors looked at one core and 3 foundation subjects. Schools were placed in a band according to their total score, with Band 5 being the highest and Band 1 the lowest.

Overall curriculum bandings

- There was a striking difference in the distribution of the overall bandings between primary and secondary schools. Only 8 out of 33 primary schools scored an overall Band 4 or 5, whereas 16 out of 29 secondary schools did so. Looking at subject level data gives some insight into reasons for this primary/secondary gap.
- Indicator 6a looks at whether the curriculum has sufficient depth and coverage of knowledge in different subjects. Looking at this indicator in primary schools reveals that scores in the core subjects are generally very high. This is particularly the case in English and maths, with 10 out of the 17 schools assessed for English falling into Band 4 or 5 and 7 out of 17 schools assessed for maths falling into these top bands.
- There are 2 probable reasons for this. Firstly, there is a particular focus on English and maths at key stage 1: schools recognise that without literacy and numeracy skills, children cannot access other parts of the curriculum. Secondly, English and maths are the only subjects which actually get measured in primary school. They therefore command the most lesson time and curricular attention. Ofsted note that this can be done badly. In Phase 1, for example, it was found that some schools were practising...
SATs as early as Christmas in Year 6, focussing on reading comprehension papers rather than encouraging children to read.

- The emphasis on English and maths means that the foundation subjects lose out; they achieved much lower scores in primary schools against indicator 6a. In Humanities, 25 out of 30 primary schools fell into Bands 1-3; there were none in Band 5. In Arts, 19 out of 22 primaries fell into Bands 1-3; there were just 2 in Band 4 and one in Band 5. These low scores may be linked to Phase 2 which showed that a large number of primaries were using topics or themes to deliver the foundation subjects. By contrast, the schools which were most invested in curriculum design had a clear focus on the knowledge to be learned in each subject and they then designed the topics round the knowledge.

- In secondary schools, there was considerably less difference between how well core and foundation subjects were delivered. Bandings for the Arts and Humanities were much higher at secondary level. However, in modern foreign languages (MFL), many of the features of successful curriculum design and implementation were absent because of a lack of subject specialists. History was also less well implemented, often because of the lack of a clear progression model. A shortage of subject experts, especially in leadership roles, contributed to this weakness.

### Curriculum banding by Ofsted grade, disadvantage and progress

- There was a slight positive correlation between the bandings which schools received in their curriculum review and their curriculum grade. The 3 schools which received the highest curriculum score were all Outstanding. However, 9 of the 64 schools were Outstanding but were in Band 2 or 3 and 9 schools with a judgement of Good were in Band 1.

- No link was found between the deprivation levels of a school’s community and curriculum quality. Looking at the top 3 bands, there are in fact more schools in the most deprived communities (69%) than there are in the least deprived (62%). This would suggest that a move away from using performance data as such a key part of judgement and a move towards curriculum quality will enable Ofsted to reward schools in challenging circumstances which are raising standards through a strong curriculum.

- Key Stage 4 Progress 8 data and Key Stage 2 maths data were used to place primary and secondary schools in progress bandings (above average, average, below average, no data). The vast majority of schools placed in Band 4 or 5 for curriculum quality (20 out of 24 schools) have average or above average progress cores. However, 2 of the 8 schools with below average progress scores were in Band 4 or 5.

### Curriculum intent and implementation

- Although there were 25 indicators in the research model, the relationship between groups of scores and overall bandings meant that they could be distilled into 2 key elements: intent and implementation. The intent indicators related to rationale, ambition and concepts. The implementation indicators related to subject leadership and knowledge, equitable delivery, planning the progression model, breadth, depth and assessment.

- In a majority of schools, the scores for intent and implementation were similar. However, in other schools it was possible to see a difference in quality between intent and implementation, suggesting that the 2 elements should indeed be judged separately.

- Most of the schools which scored well for intent but not so well for implementation were primary schools. This is not surprising and may be due to difficulties, particularly in small primary schools, with recruiting the right teachers. Primary schools with a small staff face a real challenge in thinking about and delivering the curriculum across the whole range of subjects and year groups. Inspectors will consider these challenges when making judgements.

- The schools which scored much better for implementation than intent were all secondary schools. This may be due to the influence of strong heads of department making up for weak leadership. The strong curricular steer provided by the GCSE syllabi may be a further factor.

- In introducing the new framework and shifting more focus to schools’ curricular thinking, Ofsted will not be seeking to downgrade large numbers of school or to ‘raise the bar’.

### Equity in the curriculum

- Equality of opportunity was often found to be an issue for lower attaining pupils or for those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). These pupils were sometimes taught by non-specialists in lower sets or by teaching assistants (TAs). Previous evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has suggested that when TAs are used to substitute rather than supplement teaching, it can have a negative effect on pupils’ outcomes.

- Equality was also an issue when English and maths catch-up sessions were timetabled in a way which meant that pupils missed out on other aspects of the curriculum. One key example was the removal of pupils from MFL lessons for this purpose.

- In some primary schools, a ‘lost curriculum’ was identified. This occurred when the intent was for all pupils to access the same curriculum, but when, in practice, some teachers did not teach the full range of key ideas and there was insufficient challenge. This lowering of expectations was typically associated with science.

### Assessment

- The evidence forms for the secondary schools revealed some weaknesses in how curriculum assessment was being applied. A common finding for the secondary schools in Band 2 or 3 for curriculum quality was that they were assessing pupils in Key Stage 3 using GCSE grades 1 to 9 from the beginning of Year 7. This is problematic as this form of assessment does not focus on the Key Stage 3 curriculum being delivered and what pupils actually knew and understood.

- Evidence from the HMI focus group showed that school leaders were sometimes establishing a whole-school assessment approach which used exam models to structure notions of progress. They had not, however, considered what progression looked like in different subjects.

### Next steps

- Ofsted believes that this research study forms a solid foundation for the proposals which will be put forward this month for the new EIF. It is confident that the findings provide a degree of confidence that its plans to look beyond data and assess the broader quality of education are achievable and necessary.