

28 February 2015

Guidance on Baseline Assessment in England

This guidance on current options for standardised baseline assessment of children's attainment on entry to a reception class has been compiled as a collaborative project by TACTYC and Early Education, leading national organisations with expertise in the education and care of early years and primary aged children.

Recommendations for school leaders:

- **We recommend opting not to use a baseline assessment scheme**, while ensuring robust tracking of individuals and cohort based on principles of Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) assessment. Although the pressure to comply with the baseline approach is considerable, take into account that:
 - The best interests of the child are not served by baseline test schemes.
 - Judgements of school effectiveness derived from baseline will not be relevant until 2022/3; given the changes subject to government policy, current intentions on baseline-based judgements may well be obsolete by then.
 - It will still be necessary to maintain a much broader EYFS assessment. Ofsted school reports contain a specific judgement based on implementation of the EYFS, which includes observational assessment, involving parents, and knowing where children are and supporting progress across all areas of learning and development and the characteristics of effective learning.
 - There are a number of uncertainties in the pilot year, including unresolved issues about comparability of data between schemes. Any chosen scheme might be withdrawn if it does not gather at least 10% of the market.
 - There are ethical issues in using a baseline scheme which does not enable all children to show their full capabilities.
- **We acknowledge there is strong pressure on schools to adopt a baseline assessment scheme, despite its non-statutory status. If doing so:**
 - **Choose the model which adheres most closely to the principles of EYFS assessment.**
 - Ensure ongoing individual formative assessment across all areas following principles of EYFS assessment.
 - If opting to use a baseline which does not fit well with principles of EYFS assessment, put away the resulting data and forget about it until children reach end of KS2. It is not valid as a basis for planning to support children's learning as it does not reflect the most important areas of learning and development in the early years and will not serve children's later success.
 - Think carefully about how you report results to parents, and the impact that such narrowly focused outcomes will have on parents and children.

The government has designed the criteria for nationally approved baseline assessment in order to measure the effectiveness of primary schools, and not with the interests of young children in mind. **It is important to note that the reception year is the final year of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Early years principles and practices which specifically respect and support the learning, development and well-being of young children should therefore govern assessment approaches within the reception year.**

Analysis of accredited baseline assessment schemes

In analysing the **six** accredited baseline assessment schemes the working group, composed of early years and primary specialists, judged each scheme against a set of criteria based on principles of EYFS assessment. Additional information regarding practical delivery of each scheme is also included in this review.

We have based our analysis on available information about the six schemes. Some of the providers made full details of their materials and approach available to us, while others were less forthcoming. We are also aware that some elements of the schemes are still in development and may be subject to change, and we will update this document as new information becomes available.

The Department for Education (DfE) has accredited six schemes which meet their criteria, which include requirements to provide a single numerical score with the majority of the content related to communication, language and literacy and mathematics.

DfE also requires that the final score is not age-adjusted. The assessment must be completed within the first six weeks of reception; in fact, some of the schemes specify completion within the first two weeks. This requirement may cause disruption of a child's early days in school at a crucial time when focus should be on settling in.

Most of the approved schemes are scripted tests, with children answering a narrow range of closed questions. Some rely exclusively on the use of laptops or tablets, which will not be equally familiar to every child. We are also concerned with inequality which arises from the degree of cultural bias which occurs in a number of the schemes.

Some of the schemes advertise as a bonus that they can be repeated at the end of the reception year in order to demonstrate progress. We are concerned that using the schemes in this way would result in an inappropriate focus on adult directed teaching in narrow curricular areas at the expense of the rich, broad curriculum and experience in the EYFS that would support children's longer term learning and development.

Given the criteria specified by DfE, no scheme would be able to fully reflect the principles of EYFS assessment. It is, however, apparent from the analysis that only the Early Excellence model is based as closely as possible on EYFS principles, and would be consistent with ongoing appropriate pedagogical practice.

The following table shows the results of analysis of the schemes in terms of principles of EYFS assessment

Does the scheme	CEM	Early Excellence	GL	Hodder	NFER	Speech Link
cover the prime Areas of Learning - Personal, Social and Emotional Development?	✓	✓	(✓)	(✓)	(✓)	(✓)
cover the prime Areas of Learning - Physical Development?	X	✓	X	X	(✓)	(✓)
cover the prime Areas of Learning - Communication and Language?	X	✓	✓	(✓)	✓	✓
cover the specific Areas of Learning – Literacy?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
cover the specific Areas of Learning – Mathematics?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
cover the specific Areas of Learning – Understanding the World ?	X	X	X	X	X	X
cover the specific Areas of Learning - Expressive Arts and Design?	X	X	X	X	X	X
cover the Characteristics of Effective Learning - Playing and exploring?	X	✓	X	(✓)	(✓)	X
cover the Characteristics of Effective Learning - Active learning?	X	✓	X	(✓)	(✓)	X
cover the Characteristics of Effective Learning - Creating & thinking critically?	X	✓	X	(✓)	(✓)	X
involve observation of the child?	(✓)	✓	X	(✓)	(✓)	(✓)
involve information from parents?	X	✓	X	X	X	X
cover the assessment of both child initiated & adult directed activities?	X	✓	X	X	✓	(✓)
identify that the child has special educational needs?	X	✓	X	X	O	(✓)
identify that the child has a disability?	X	✓	X	X	O	O
identify that the child uses English as an additional language?	X	✓	X	✓	O	✓

KEY

✓ yes	(✓) partly	X no	O no information
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Supplementary information on approved schemes

How is the assessment administered? (e.g. computer, paper, real objects, observation...)					
CEM Computer, lap top or tablet	Early Excellence Professional judgements evidenced through observation of play, whole group sessions and small group sessions	GL Two tablets – one for child and one for adult	Hodder Booklet, with illustrations and text; adult reads scripted questions. Literacy: Main assessment uses no real objects except plastic letters and book; Lower extension uses a few objects; Upper extension no real objects. Maths: Main assessment uses counters, cube and sphere, coins; Lower extension uses toy objects; Upper extension uses number cards.	NFER Real objects for Maths tasks, picture-based resources for communication, language and literacy (CLL). Includes observation-based CLL checklist to assess a wider range of CLL than the tasks. Also observation-based 'Foundations of Learning' checklist to be used when children are engaging in 'normal classroom activity'.	Speech Link Computer, lap top or tablet – listening to recorded prompts on computer, adult controls the mouse, child points. Optional checklist on aspects of PSED, Attention and Listening skills and Physical Development, involving guided observations. This does not form part of the final data submitted to DfE. Literacy score does not include writing, but information about letter formation and writing can be collected as part of the pupil profile.

Estimated time per child					
CEM 15- 20 minutes	Early Excellence See above – it is done over time within normal activities; Recording format 9-12	GL Complete in under 25 minutes; There are 3 sections that can be completed	Hodder 20-30 minutes per child (in two sessions) to complete the main assessments; extra 15	NFER Average time from trials: 30 minutes for tasks + 10 minutes for checklist per child	Speech Link 30 minutes per child, can be broken up into 3 x 10 (Not including optional

	minutes	in one session or separate sessions depending on the pupil	minutes each for Literacy and Maths lower and upper extensions if needed		elements)
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Within class, or separate one-to-one?					
CEM one-to-one	Early Excellence Within normal activities	GL one-to-one	Hodder one-to-one	NFER Both – see above	Speech Link One-to-one

Who can administer the assessment?					
CEM Teacher or teaching assistant	Early Excellence Reception class practitioners	GL Teacher or teaching assistant	Hodder Teacher, teaching assistant or nursery nurse	NFER Any suitably trained and qualified person, under the supervision of the Reception teacher.	Speech Link Any member of the Foundation Stage team'

Description of scoring system					
CEM Scaled scores in reading, maths and phonological awareness; Calculated by scheme provider	Early Excellence Uses Leuven scales; Numerical scores include Characteristics and five Areas of Learning; Initial recording paper-based or electronic formats; Totals submitted to provider electronically to be sent to DfE; data can be analysed	GL CLL and Maths included. Scoring automatically sent to the school's online account and DfE. At school level scores available as separate CLL and Maths. Data can also be provided as standardised age score, national percentile rank,	Hodder Subtotal scores for literacy and mathematics, combined for single total score. Separate score for PSED which is not included in final score. Scores are totalled by the teacher, with grids in the manual to convert to standardised and age-standardised scores,	NFER Scaled scores (and guidance on their interpretation): single overall score; separate scaled scores for Maths, CLL, and Foundations of Learning; age-adjusted scores (and interpretation). Two options for recording: electronic/online; or	Speech Link Scaled score for the assessment and sub-tests are sent to the DfE. Age standardised scores for each sub-test and assessment are available to the school. The observational checklists produce a result of working towards, average range, working above

	by any chosen factors	stanine and group rank. Reports available at a cluster level. Report for parents. Reports automatically generated, including recommendations. PSED being developed.	plus 'Literacy ages', 'Maths ages', and Hodder Scale score.	paper Pupil record and data is uploaded manually by school. Overview class record showing strengths and weaknesses; individual pupil report and optional report for parents	
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Training required to administer the assessment					
CEM None mentioned	Early Excellence One day free training for lead reception teacher	GL Minimal training would be required; GL offers free training and support	Hodder None required	NFER None required	Speech Link None required

Support from provider					
CEM On-line, email Live webinars and Milly the Bug assessment aid	Early Excellence Website support with FAQs, updated advice and video exemplification; Help desk 8.30 to 5.30 Mon to Fri with support and advice	GL Teacher's Guide pack (not seen) and free training and support	Hodder Manual with instructions for administering and scoring the tests. Online reporting; Can use online diagnostic reporting screen tool to generate individual and cohort reports. Links to the Hodder Scale which publishers say can be used to monitor and predict progress in reading and Maths through to Year 6.	NFER Teacher Guide plus scoring and analysis package; dedicated Helpline and support	Speech Link Video 'walk-through' and printable guide. Access to a Help Desk manned by speech and language therapists and specialist teachers

Further issues					
<p>CEM Children point to answer on screen, or give one-word answers to closed questions.</p> <p>'Adaptive rules' route questions so that children do not fail many items before moving on.</p>	<p>Early Excellence Timing of assessment guided by use of Leuven scales to assess children's wellbeing/involvement. Yes/no judgements for 46 descriptors, drawn from 30-50 months through to Early Learning Goals. Judgements based on all sources of information about a child, in process similar to EYFSP.</p>	<p>GL No separate CL score; combined with literacy (phoneme awareness including pseudo words). Sample materials appeared to include some culturally-specific references which may disadvantage children from other cultures.</p>	<p>Hodder PSED/Characteristics optional based on observation using descriptors from Early Learning Goals; not included in score. CL insufficiently covered, with minimal Listening and Attention, and speaking limited to required answers to scripted closed questions. Literacy score does not identify CL. Sample materials appeared to include some culturally-specific references which may disadvantage children from other cultures.</p>	<p>NFER Elements of PSED, Characteristics, PD included in 'Foundations of Learning'; CL not separated from L; observation supplements CLL assessment</p> <p>Optional report for parents includes space for their comments.</p>	<p>Speech Link Priority on understanding of language (developed by speech and language therapists and specialist teachers). Items assess some things that it is not expected that many children will have been taught (e.g. reading words). Closed tasks – only one chance to get each item right or wrong. Listening and attention, Speaking (children are asked to point not vocalize within the core assessment) and Writing are not part of the core assessment. Profile includes space for parents' comments.</p>

Principles of assessment in the early years

In this review, sound principles of assessment for young children were used as primary criteria for evaluating the baseline assessment schemes, as shown in the table below.

<p>Principle Assessment must ensure equality of opportunity for every child, and reflect the uniqueness of every child’s rate of learning, ways of learning and individual starting points.</p> <p>Rationale No child must be unfairly treated because their culture, ethnicity, religion, gender, home language, family background or disabilities. For all children early experience is key and early intervention needs to be based on accurate and detailed information and knowledge about the child. If these are not identified in the assessment then the assessment will be inaccurate. It may also have a negative impact by listing as ‘failing’ a child who may demonstrate learning in ways other than through narrow set tasks. An observational method which acknowledges the child’s needs would highlight what the child is able to do and therefore be more accurate.</p> <p><i>Evaluation questions: Does the scheme identify that the child has special educational needs, has a disability, or uses English as an additional language?</i></p>
<p>Principle Summative assessment should be based on on-going observational assessment across contexts and over time, reflecting the full range of achievements the child demonstrates consistently and independently.</p> <p>Rationale It is currently statutory in EYFS that observation forms the basis of assessment in the EYFS. Play and children’s self-initiated activities are key contexts for learning where children apply their understanding, skills, knowledge, creativity and dispositions to learning; these are therefore the key contexts for assessment. Children will show different aspects of their understanding in different contexts, so a reliable picture of attainment must take into account variations in a child’s response to activities and situations. This is possible only through observation, which is the cornerstone of assessment in the early years.</p> <p><i>Evaluation questions: Does the scheme involve observation of children? Does the scheme cover assessment of both child-initiated and adult-directed activities?</i></p>
<p>Principle Summative assessment should include areas of development known to be the underpinning for all other development and learning: social and emotional; communication and language; physical. Children’s learning is holistic.</p> <p>Rationale These areas, known as prime areas in the EYFS, are the most significant aspects of development in young children throughout the EYFS and continuing into KS1 and 2. Later learning and the specific areas are dependent on the prime being in place. Young children’s learning is holistic – they do not learn in subject areas. For example, reading is supported not only by knowledge of print and oral comprehension but also by experiences which provide a basis for understanding and thinking about the world and other people. All areas of learning should be taken into account when assessing young children’s learning.</p> <p><i>Evaluation questions: Is the scheme holistic in covering all EYFS areas of learning and development?</i></p>

Principle

Formative and summative assessments should reflect the ways children learn, including learning dispositions such as engagement, motivation, self-regulation and resilience.

Rationale

Research demonstrates that it is not the easily measurable skills and knowledge (such as phonics and numeracy skills) which show lasting effects on young children's later progress, but dispositions such as those set out in the EYFS Characteristics of Effective Learning. There is a danger of reducing accountability to factors in a child's development which are easily quantified, but which are less important in eventual outcomes than factors such as engagement, perseverance, resilience, motivation, and cognitive self-regulation.

Evaluation questions: Does the scheme cover children's learning dispositions such as those referred to in the EYFS Characteristics of Effective Learning?

Principle

Formative and summative assessments should be carried out by people who know the child well and include the perspectives of parents, and practitioners from other settings.

Rationale

Parents know their child best, and developing a partnership between parents and professionals is a powerful element in understanding individual children and supporting their learning at home and at school. The EYFS contains statutory requirements to involve parents in supporting learning, reflecting the central role of parents in their children's education and their knowledge about a child's learning and development. As baseline assessment is to take place in the first few weeks in reception, information from parents, previous settings and other relevant professionals is vital.

Evaluation questions: Does the scheme involve information from parents? Does the scheme involve information from previous settings?

The current context: Summative assessment in the EYFS

Early Years Foundation Stage Profile

At the end of the EYFS (the end of the reception year), a statutory assessment is completed for each child. The EYFS Profile (EYFSP) assesses attainment in relation to the EYFS Early Learning Goals across all the three prime and four specific areas of learning, and includes information on each child's development as a learner through the Characteristics of Effective Learning.

The assessment is not a one-off test, but sums up information gathered over time through observation across a range of contexts including both child-initiated and adult-guided activities, and includes input from parents and others involved with the child.

The government currently intends to make the EYFSP non-statutory from 2016. It remains, however, a valuable way of understanding children's attainment and progress, linking to assessment across the EYFS.

EYFSP Data set

As well as guiding planning for individual children's learning as they move into Key Stage One, the EYFSP generates data which is used for cohort tracking. Comparisons can be made between the proportion of children who are emerging, expected, or exceeding the Early Learning Goals at the end of the EYFS, with proportions of children at later stages of their education who are approaching, meeting or exceeding the expected levels. This information can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the school in supporting children's

progress through the primary years. A continuity of tracking throughout the early years and beyond can be managed by using summative judgements against earlier age/stage bands of the EYFS from the time a child enters early years education.

EYFSP data is currently submitted to the government, forming a national data set which is an important aspect of accountability for investment in early years care and education. EYFSP data is also used by Health programmes nationally and locally in order to assess effectiveness of programmes. The government's intention to make the EYFSP non-statutory, therefore, leaves a large gap in crucial data.

Introduction of accredited baseline assessment schemes

The stated purpose of baseline assessment is to form a basis for judging the effectiveness of primary schools, with the cohort results at the beginning of the reception year compared with outcomes at the end of Key Stage Two. The baseline results must be reported to the Department for Education, and at the end of KS2 this measure will be used to judge how well schools have supported children's progress. Although schools are not required to use a baseline assessment, those that do not will be judged solely on attainment floor targets which will be very challenging, and take no account of children's starting points.

The introduction of baseline assessment has been opposed at every stage by education experts. In the government's consultation only 34% were in favour of introducing baseline assessment, and the detailed concerns of expert groups were ignored in the government's response. Several key early years organisations have continued to oppose standardised baseline assessment, and the NUT has announced its intention to provide guidance to its own members with principled non-compliance as an option.

Nevertheless, plans for standardised baseline assessment are going ahead. Schools can opt in for September 2015, but September 2016 will be the first year that the scores will automatically form the basis for judging progress by KS2 (in 2023). Schools can choose from the six approved schemes, though a scheme may be withdrawn if it gathers less than 10% of the market, or if when the children reach the end of KS1 the baseline is found not to be sufficiently predictive of later attainment. Schools will be reimbursed for the basic costs of using a scheme, though this may not cover supplementary support services or materials offered by the scheme provider.

There are several areas of uncertainty in the plans which raise questions about the validity of the baseline-to-KS2 progress measure:

- How will expected progress measures from the baselines be determined?
- Will there need to be several different progress measures, linked to individual schemes?
- How comparable will the results be among the schemes? The Standards and Testing Agency is expected to conduct a comparability study with scheme providers in autumn 2015, to determine whether concordance tables can be constructed between the schemes.
- Schools with high pupil mobility may need to engage with a number of schemes.
- How long will pupils need to be in a school to be counted in the results at KS2?

Potential dangers of current baseline assessment models

Adopting a baseline assessment scheme which does not reflect EYFS principles of assessment is likely to be harmful in a number of ways. It may be:

Unreliable – Most children at such a young age will not be able to show their true abilities in a test or assessment taken out of the context of familiar relationships and practical experiences.

Disruptive and harmful to children’s well-being – Young children need a smooth transition and supportive relationships as they move into a new situation. Taking teachers away from their class group in the sensitive early days of the reception year for the time required to assess up to 30 children will compromise vital early teacher-child relationships and result in a focus on the tests rather than the essential underpinning well-being of individual children starting school. Children withdrawn for one-to-one assessments will know they are being tested, which will add to anxiety in this crucial period of settling into school.

Invalid – Assessments based on narrow checklists of basic skills and knowledge will not accurately predict future attainment since they do not take account of the different ways and rates at which children learn and develop, nor of the ability of children to build conceptual understanding and apply their knowledge, nor of the children’s learning behaviours. Any elements of cultural bias in the materials and failure to adjust for children using English as an additional language make the tests potentially discriminatory. They will also make invalid assumptions about a child’s attainment if home language, cultural background, and individual needs are not taken into account. In addition, summer born children and those born prematurely will be developmentally up to a year behind the eldest in the class, so without age-adjusted scoring children are at risk of being labelled as ‘failing’ at this early stage.

Harmful to effective practice and therefore to children’s learning and development – Narrow assessments will result in pressure on practitioners to ‘teach to the test’ in order to show rapid progress in the measured areas, distorting the early years curriculum and detracting from the rich physical, exploratory, playful, creative, and intellectual experiences which research shows benefit children in the early years. As well as distorting the reception experience, this pressure may result in preschools and nursery classes focusing inappropriately on a narrow range of experiences.

Harmful to the home-learning environment and parent partnerships – Parents will be misdirected in terms of the most important markers of their children’s progress and attainment, toward supporting narrow measures rather than engaging in the responsive, playful interactions which best support children’s learning and development.

Considering Baseline Assessment: An evaluation tool for school leaders

Points to consider when reviewing an accredited provider:	Yes 	No 	Notes:
<i>Is the scheme holistic in covering all EYFS areas of learning and development?</i>			
<i>Does the scheme involve observation of children?</i>			
<i>Does the scheme cover assessment of both child-initiated and adult-directed activities?</i>			
<i>Does the scheme cover children's learning dispositions such as those referred to in the EYFS Characteristics of Effective Learning?</i>			
<i>Does the scheme identify that the child has special educational needs, has a disability, or uses English as an additional language?</i>			
<i>Are logistics manageable in terms of staff time, equipment and space?</i>			
<i>Will children be aware of being taken out of normal activities and being tested?</i>			
<i>Will the assessment reflect the individuality of each child?</i>			
<i>Will the scheme make best use of teachers' knowledge and skills?</i>			
<i>Will it provide an accurate and useful assessment of children's learning?</i>			

Taking the assessment process forward

The purpose of assessment is to provide ongoing information which recognises achievement and supports children's learning. Head teachers and senior managers need to develop systems which support both breadth and depth of learning, and identify developmentally appropriate next steps for all children.

Adults working in Reception and Key Stage One need to gather evidence of achievement through careful observation of each child in different learning contexts. This will involve practitioners in an on-going process of reflection and evaluation, which will involve children and parents. Through professional dialogue the adults will be able to moderate their judgements and develop a more consistent approach to assessment.