

SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE SNSA INQUIRY REPORT

The Scottish Government welcomes the opportunity to respond to the findings from the [Committee's inquiry into the Scottish National Standardised Assessments](#). The Government's response addresses each of the Committee's conclusions and recommendations in turn and sets out, where appropriate, the action that will be taken.

The Committee's Inquiry took place at a similar time to the [P1 Practitioner Forum](#) and the Independent Review of the P1 SNSAs, which published their findings on 18 April and 11 June respectively. This response should be read alongside the Scottish Government's responses to the recommendations of the Forum and the Independent Review.

The actions identified in response to the recommendations from the three reports have been summarised in "Standardised assessments in Scotland: draft improvement activity 2019/20" which sets out the action that we plan to take. This activity has also been informed by the Progress Report of the 2018/19 SNSA User Review.

All key documents can be found on the [National Improvement Framework](#) page of the Scottish Government website.

Education and Skills Committee SNSA Inquiry: Conclusions and recommendations

The replacement of the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) with the Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels (ACEL)

1. The Committee notes that there was valuable data produced by the SSLN and its predecessor that is no longer available in outputs from SNSAs and ACEL. The Committee also notes that continuing the SSLN would have enabled accurate monitoring of any changes in performance in literacy and numeracy in Scottish education.

2. The results of the 2016 SSLN survey showed declining performance in literacy on many of the measures. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills acknowledged that the results were disappointing. The results of the 2015 survey also showed declining performance in numeracy on a number of measures. On this basis, it would have been of particular interest to be able to analyse SSLN results through further surveys in 2017 and beyond in order to effectively monitor these performance issues. At a time of education reform, the ability to assess changes in performance using rich datasets from the SSLN has been lost.

SG response:

As part of the development of the National Improvement Framework, the Scottish Government decided to stop the SSLN and adopt the Achievement of CfE Levels Return instead. The Government believes that this approach has a number of significant advantages over the SSLN:

- *Moving to ACEL data empowers teachers, placing primacy on their professional judgement as the key indicator of children's progress prior to national qualifications;*

- *It looks across the full CfE level, not just elements of each level, and determines whether a child or young person has achieved that level;*
- *It embeds the primary method of assessing the standard of Scottish education within the curriculum. A teacher's professional judgement on whether a child or young person has achieved a level is based on a range of evidence from a number of sources;*
- *It aligns to systems that schools and local authorities now have in place for monitoring and tracking each individual child or young person's progress within and between CfE levels;*
- *It reflects the OECD's endorsement that "an assessment system that encompasses a variety of assessment evidence, that includes rich tasks and a clear indication of expected benchmarks referenced to the breadth and depth of the curriculum, can enhance teachers' assessment skills and learners' progress.";*
- *The SSLN assessed around 4,000 pupils per stage in literacy or numeracy in alternating years; whereas, via ACEL, we have literacy and numeracy performance data for around 50,000 pupils per participating stage every year;*
- *The SSLN did not provide a breakdown below national level (the sample size was too small to provide reliable school or local authority level data) so the data it provided was of limited value to schools and local authorities in determining where to target improvement activity;*
- *ACEL provides annual data at school and local authority level and data which is broken down by pupil characteristics, allowing school and local authority staff to analyse their own data for improvement purposes. National level data also contributes to national improvement planning;*
- *It includes an additional stage, Primary 1, that was not covered by the SSLN;*
- *The results can be published and used for improvement purposes more quickly, within 6 months of the data being collected. SSLN results were generally published 11 months after the survey took place.*

It was decided not to continue with the SSLN alongside the ACEL returns primarily because of concerns about the workload involved for schools and local authorities if they were asked to run the SSLN alongside the collation of ACEL data – combined with the very clear feedback we had received from some schools and local authorities that there was no benefit to them of running the SSLN, given that they did not receive school or local authority data in return. The Scottish Government was also mindful of the cost to the public purse of running the SSLN alongside the development and implementation of SNSA. The cost of running the SSLN was approximately £1.5m in 2015-16, the final year of its operation. This included grant funding to SQA for the delivery of the survey (£700k), Education Analytical Services resource costs (circa £210k), estimated compliance costs to schools (£455k) and Listening and Talking Support Assessors (£117k).

The ACEL data we now have provides data at school and local authority level, allowing partners to better target improvement activity; supplementing this with information from the SNSA National Report, this activity can focus on identified weaknesses in particular literacy and numeracy organisers. The ACEL collection also allows tracking of progress of individual pupils by schools.

3. In addition, there are elements of the SSLN data that cannot be factored into the SNSA system. On the basis that SNSAs are not taken in independent schools, the results cannot reflect the extent of the poverty-related attainment gap in the same way as the SSLN. However, the Committee appreciates that there are a suite of indicators in the National Improvement Framework that are specifically designed to assess the gap.

SG response:

The poverty-related attainment gap as reported by the SSLN did not include attainment from independent school pupils. The Scottish Government does not hold home postcode details of independent school pupils and, as such, is not able to assign these pupils to a Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation category. These data were excluded from the calculation of the attainment gap using SSLN data.

The number of independent schools involved in the SSLN was relatively small when compared to the overall number of schools that took part. For example, just 18 independent schools participated in the SSLN in 2016, compared to 2,233 local authority schools, therefore local authority schools represented 99% of the total number of participating schools.

It is possible to identify a number of “attainment gaps” from looking at Scottish education data. In order to determine what progress is being made towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap, the Scottish Government consulted with key stakeholders to identify a suite of 11 key measures, as recognised by the Committee. Seven of these measures cover children and young people’s attainment across the broad general education and the senior phase. The remaining four, are measures of children and young people’s health and wellbeing which is known to impact significantly on attainment.

The Scottish Government believes that this suite of measures, taken together, provides a far more comprehensive and balanced view of progress towards closing the attainment gap than can be provided by a small number of attainment measures such as those in the SSLN.

4. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government reviews the statistical value of the SSLN and the burden to produce it and the value of ACEL and the burden to produce it. The review should have a particular focus on the burden on schools. The Committee recommends that the outcome of this review should inform decision making on whether to continue with ACEL, whether to reinstate the SSLN or whether to run both processes in parallel.

5. Given the support that the data produced by the SSLN received in evidence, the Committee recommends that the viability of scaling up the SSLN to provide information at a local level should be re-examined.

SG response:

The Scottish Government undertook a comprehensive review of the SSLN in 2014. This included an assessment of the burden, costs and feasibility of upscaling the SSLN in order to produce local authority level data. We will revisit this evidence, and assess the comparative issues and costs of conducting the SSLN and the Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels data collection.

Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSAs) – Policy decisions

6. The Cabinet Secretary argues that the Scottish Government was led by advice from the OECD in reaching its overarching policy positions on SSLN, SNSA and ACEL.

7. The Committee notes that the evidence from certain witnesses to this inquiry reflected that the Scottish Government announced policies quickly without meaningful collaboration with certain key stakeholders or establishing an in-depth evidence base for elements of these policies. The evidence from certain witnesses suggests that the Scottish Government moved quickly to announce these policies and that the policy formulation process was perhaps compromised as a result.

8. The Committee considers that the Scottish Government should reflect on this evidence and learn lessons for future policy development.

SG response:

Scottish Ministers share absolutely the Committee’s recognition of the importance of a consultative, evidence-based approach to developing policy and can certainly commit to continuing such an approach for future policy development.

We are clear that consultation and use of evidence have been at the heart of our work to introduce the National Improvement Framework, and national standardised assessments in Scotland.

As the Committee notes, the OECD’s international knowledge and expertise has been instrumental in informing our thinking in this regard; both through its direct advice to the Scottish Government following the 2015 review of Scottish education “Improving Scotland’s schools: an OECD perspective” and more generally, through its influential body of work on assessment, most notably “Synergies for Better Learning: an international perspective on evaluation and assessment” (2013) and “Student Standardised Testing: Current Practices in OECD Countries and A Literature Review” (2011).

A number of the key policy priorities identified by the OECD in relation to developing evaluation and assessment frameworks are central to our standardised assessment policy, not least the need to adopt an holistic approach to assessment; to align assessment with educational goals; to focus assessment on improvement; and to avoid the perverse incentives associated with the use of assessment for high stakes purposes and teacher accountability.

In addition to an adherence to this respected, international evidence-base, following the First Minister’s announcement in September 2015 of the draft National Improvement Framework and the national standardised assessments which would form part of that Framework, the Scottish Government undertook an intensive engagement period with key stakeholders, to further inform and refine our policy approach.

During the autumn of 2015, teachers, school leaders, parents, local authority representatives, union members and representatives, other interested parties and over 900 children and young people who would be directly impacted by the introduction of the National Improvement Framework were involved in a wide range of engagement activities across Scotland.

Alongside discussion, and an identification of widespread support for the priorities set out in the draft Framework and its vision for a better, fairer Scotland, this engagement involved more detailed scrutiny of the draft document; highlighting many elements of the framework as welcome, but also a number of areas of concern.

The introduction of national standardised assessments was a key feature of a number of stakeholder discussions, with participants identifying particular concerns around the potential for unintended consequences, such as the publication of league tables. The need for assessments to be adaptive, inclusive and diagnostic was clearly supported and the view that teachers should be empowered to decide when within the school year children should undertake the assessments was strongly voiced.

All input was analysed carefully, and stakeholder recommendations played a key part in informing the revision of the draft in the run up to publication of the National Improvement Framework in January 2016.

Our engagement with the education sector and key stakeholders has not ended with the publication of the National Improvement Framework. As part of our annual review of the Framework, we have a statutory duty to provide education authorities, teachers, young people, and parents with the opportunity to express their views, and to have regard to those views. In line with our clear commitment to continuous improvement, we have worked on an ongoing basis with practitioners and key groups, to invite views and feedback which can be fed into a planned cycle of system enhancements.

The National Improvement Framework Strategic Group was instrumental in advising the Scottish Government in the early stages of developing the National Improvement Framework. More recently, the Scottish Education Council continues to provide valuable oversight and feedback on all issues pertaining to the Framework. The P1 Practitioner Forum was specifically constituted to invite feedback and suggestions for improvement, and our annual user review of the SNSA delivered tangible improvements in year two of the assessments, and will continue to identify and drive forward further developments.

Has the initial policy intention of the SNSAs changed?

9. The view expressed by certain witnesses, including one of the Scottish Government's advisers, was that the intention of the policy has changed from being about national performance data to more of a focus on data to inform teacher judgment. The Committee considers that the shift in policy intention has contributed to a lack of clarity about who the SNSAs were developed to provide information for, policy makers or teachers. The Committee would suggest that this shift is as a result of the Scottish Government responding to

stakeholders such as the EIS and to specialists such as the International Council of Education Advisers.

SG response:

As the written evidence we submitted for the Committee's Inquiry sought to make clear, Scottish Ministers have identified from the outset, the primary purpose of national standardised assessments as being diagnostic; in support of teachers' professional judgement. While a number of commentators and critics have chosen to present the SNSAs as high stakes assessments, comparable to primary school testing in England, that has never been our intention.

The introduction of national standardised assessments was announced alongside the introduction of the National Improvement Framework. These two initiatives, while closely inter-connected, have two distinct purposes.

The National Improvement Framework was introduced explicitly as a means of measuring progress against a wide range of indicators, across the education system in Scotland at school, local and national level. The intention of gathering and publishing that performance information was to drive improvement at all levels of the system, ultimately with a view to closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

We have been clear that within the National Improvement Framework, the key measure of children and young people's progress in literacy and numeracy is teachers' professional judgement of achievement of Curriculum for Excellence levels. That is the attainment information which reflects an holistic view of children's progress in all aspects of literacy and numeracy, taking account of teachers' wider knowledge and understanding both of the individual child, and of the standards within the experiences and outcomes within Curriculum for Excellence. That attainment information is gathered nationally and published at school and local level.

While the SNSAs cover only some aspects of literacy and numeracy, the information they generate in relation to individual children and young people is objective and nationally consistent, providing teachers with a valuable additional source of nationally standardised information, to add to their existing understanding of children's progress. SNSA data can be used as part of a range of evidence when assessing children's achievement of the relevant Curriculum for Excellence levels, and planning next steps in learning.

This approach to using standardised assessments reflects the advice contained in the OECD report on Scottish Education (2015)

"Standardised assessment tools can be used formatively in all parts of the system if they are referenced to the curriculum, flexible in their use, and provide high quality just-in-time information for teaching and learning, while at the same time having efficient ways to aggregate the results through the system."

In designing the SNSA on these principles, the clear intention is to support teachers and build their confidence in making professional judgments on children's progress.

SNSA data are not published, nor are they gathered at national level by the Scottish Government (although the aggregate information in the ACER SNSA National Report can inform national policy). Decisions on these aspects of standardised assessment policy were taken in direct response to the clear views expressed during our autumn 2015 engagement with stakeholders on the draft National Improvement Framework. Our approach reflects the Scottish Government's explicit recognition of the need to avoid any of the perverse incentives associated with more traditional approaches to standardised assessments adopted elsewhere.

The transition from the SSLN to the ACEL

10. The Committee is concerned that the Scottish Government's decisions on national performance data, including the discontinuation of the SSLN, have generated a data gap of at least five years, with no guarantee that the gap will not be longer.

11. The loss of continuity in datasets is a particular concern as the last SSLN results in 2017 highlighted performance issues in relation to numeracy and literacy. The ACEL datasets will not be comparable with SSLN data. The lack of baseline data means no meaningful conclusions on upward or downward trends can be reached, at a time of reform within Scottish education.

12. The Scottish Government contends that it did not want to overburden the education system with the continuation of the SSLN in tandem with work towards a new data gathering mechanism. However, the Committee is concerned at the loss of rigorous national performance data that assisted Parliament and wider society in holding the Government to account for its performance on education and allowed for transparent scrutiny of the education system.

SG response:

As discussed in the response to recommendation 3 above, the Scottish Government has established a suite of 11 key measures to determine whether progress is being made towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap. These measures and performance against each of them were first published in December 2017 in the National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan 2018, to establish a baseline against which to measure progress. Four of these key measures cover attainment in the broad general education (BGE), and the data for them is drawn from the ACEL returns.

ACEL data are an Official Statistics output which have the additional label of Experimental Statistics to reflect the fact they are still in development. While the 2016/17 and 2017/18 ACEL returns are badged as experimental, the Scottish Government believes they do represent an accurate picture of overall attainment at national level and as such provide a baseline against which to measure progress in the BGE. The primary reason they have been badged as experimental is because of some residual concerns about the consistency of the data at school and local authority level. The similarity between the 2016/17 and 2017/18 national level ACEL data supports the belief that the data provides an accurate picture of progress at the national level.

It is also worth noting that the ACEL returns provide data for just four of the 11 key measures we are using to assess progress. The data gathered for the other seven indicators are “official statistics” many of which have been gathered for a number of years, such as the national qualifications data. Taken together, these 11 measures provide “rigorous national performance data”.

The Scottish Government also notes the Committee’s reference in recommendation 12 to “holding the Government to account for its performance on education”. The delivery of education in Scotland, and by extension responsibility for the achievement of our children and young people, lies with all of those involved in Scottish education: central and local government, schools, teachers and parents.

Estimated costs of standardised assessments at national and local authority level

13. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government provides the Committee with an estimate for the cost of the first 5 years of the SNSA policy at this stage including detailed evidence on the basis for the overspend. This should be set against the initial estimate of £10 million for a 5 year contract to develop and deliver the policy.

SG response:

There has been no overspend in relation to the delivery of the SNSAs. As set out in the information on costs provided to the Committee on 15 March 2019, it was not possible for the Scottish Government to attach a budget or a concrete estimate of costs to the SNSA contract ahead of contract award, as the work being procured was without precedent against which to compare.

The indicative £10 million cost for a five year contract referenced by the Committee originates in the supplementary financial memorandum to the Education (Scotland) Bill in 2015. In line with requirements for financial memoranda in support of bills, figures in this document, relating to costs arising from the introduction of the National Improvement Framework, were expressed against the five year period immediately following commencement of the Bill (i.e. from 2016/17). The indicative cost of £2.5 million per year from 2017/18 - 2020/21 (with no costs incurred during the first year, as the contract would not yet have been let) was heavily caveated:

“Work is on-going with stakeholders to develop a specification for a bespoke Scottish standardised assessment for P1, P4, P7 and S3 from 2017-18 onwards. Until that work is completed we are not able to estimate the cost of developing and delivering the Scottish standardised assessment.

Approximately 230,000 pupils will take the Scottish standardised assessment once per year. Standardised assessments covering both literacy and numeracy are currently available for purchase at a unit cost of around £11 per pupil. Delivering the assessments on this basis would result in a cost of approximately £2.5 million per year. However, it is important that this figure be treated with a significant degree of

caution, not least because work is still on-going to agree the specification for the new bespoke assessment.”

The figure quoted in the financial memorandum was inclusive of VAT given that the assessments available for purchase used in that calculation attracted VAT. The contract to deliver the SNSA does not include VAT – hence the guide price figure in the contract specification was £10m over five years.

ACER Limited was awarded the SNSA contract following a competitive procurement exercise which evaluated tenders on the basis of both quality and value for money. The initial contract with ACER for the development and delivery of the SNSA over a three year period (with the option thereafter to extend the contract by one year, and then a further year as appropriate) was awarded at a cost of £9 million, in line with ACER’s fully costed bid. That figure has not been exceeded, nor is it expected to be.

It has since been agreed to extend ACER’s core contract by an additional nine months until July 2020, to bring it into line with the school year. The cost of that extension has yet to be finalised and discussions about whether the contract should be extended for a further year, until July 2021, have yet to commence. The contract is clear, however, that any cost increases relating to extensions to the core contract should be based on the Consumer Price Index and therefore reflect inflation only. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that should ACER’s contract be extended until July 2021, the cost of developing and delivering the SNSA over that 4 years and 9 month period will be in the region of £15.4 million.

14. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government undertakes an assessment of the value of the introduction of the SNSAs to the public purse.

SG response:

The fundamental value to the public purse of introducing a standardised assessment system which contributes to improving educational outcomes for all children and young people, and reducing the attainment gap will be hard to isolate and measure. This is due to the number of initiatives being taken forward in pursuit of these aims, and the far-reaching impact on all aspects of public services of achieving success. We assume this recommendation relates more specifically to the savings to local authorities inherent in providing a centrally funded and supported assessment system for their use.

We believe it is too early to obtain an accurate assessment of the value of the introduction of the SNSAs to the public purse, but we are content to take forward the Committee’s recommendation once the implementation of the SNSAs is more fully underway. We believe that an assessment would be most meaningfully conducted once the position as regards the potential ACER contract extensions has been established, and local authority plans for the continuation or otherwise of previous standardised assessment regimes is better understood. We would anticipate, therefore, that such an assessment would be unlikely to conclude in advance of July 2020.

15. The evidence suggests the reduction in local authority use of their own standardised assessments at authority and school level is not as great as the Scottish Government

anticipated, indeed there is evidence to suggest new assessments are being adopted in some parts of authorities and that SNSAs and local assessments are being used in a 'blended approach' in others.

16. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government alongside COSLA assesses the likely reduction in the use of local authority level standardised assessments by the end of the first three academic years of the SNSAs, and the associated saving at local government level. Set against the cost of the SNSA, this will assist scrutiny of the net cost of the SNSAs.

SG response:

We recognise that at this stage in the implementation of the SNSAs, not all local authorities or schools have stopped using their previous standardised assessments. In part this can be attributed to authorities' need for a transition period: a number of Directors of Education have indicated to us their intention to phase out their previous assessments once the SNSAs have had the opportunity to bed in. We should also recognise local authorities' likely wish for greater confidence and stability, as regards the future of the SNSAs, particularly in relation to P1, ahead of the findings of David Reedy's Independent Review. It is perhaps unsurprising that local authorities have been reluctant to move away from long held assessment regimes when there has been such intensive debate about the SNSAs' future use.

We are happy to accept the Committee's recommendation to explore with local authorities their plans for reducing the use of commercially available standardised assessments in the near future, and seeking to identify the cost savings arising from any such reduction. To this end, Scottish Government officials have had an initial discussion with COSLA and ADES colleagues and will look to work with them on this issue over the summer.

The purpose, or purposes, of the SNSA

17. The Committee is concerned that there appears to be an inconsistency from, and between, organisations at a strategic level as to the purpose of the SNSAs. For example Education Scotland's submission states the assessments are not summative and then discusses data being used to assess the performance of a particular school.

18. There has perhaps been a hesitancy to state that assessment data can be used for summative purposes at a strategic level, because of a desire to prevent any misconception that the assessments are part of a high stakes accountability measure. However, this has proved unhelpful in providing a clear understanding of the assessments, indeed the word 'confusion' was often cited to the Committee during evidence taking as a result. The assessments are intended to have a formative function, and this is the function the Scottish Government emphasises is the most important feature of the assessments. However, they can undoubtedly also perform a summative function through the use of the aggregated data, as reflected in the evidence from Education Scotland amongst others.

19. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government and its agencies acknowledge explicitly the summative function of the assessments in future communications.

SG response:

It should be noted that the terms “formative” and “summative” do not in themselves describe a specific type or form of assessment. Instead, they describe the uses to which assessments are put.

In describing the SNSA as formative assessments, the Scottish Government is emphasising the primarily diagnostic purposes to which assessment outcomes are put. The information generated by the SNSA – whether at individual, school, local or national level – is not an end in itself, but is intended to be used for improvement purposes: identifying strengths and development needs and informing next steps in learning. That approach is wholly consistent with formative assessment.

In contrast, summative assessment is used to identify whether a child or young person has secured key learning outcomes or achieved a particular standard or level – such as the Curriculum for Excellence levels relevant to that child’s stage. The value of that type of assessment lies in the information it provides of performance at a given point in time. Outcomes are not used to direct future learning strategies.

As has been made clear since their introduction, the SNSAs have been designed to assess progress in aspects of literacy and numeracy. They do not, cannot and should not assess all the standards outlined within the experiences and outcomes or the literacy and numeracy benchmarks. On their own, therefore, they cannot provide a summative assessment of whether a learner has achieved the Curriculum for Excellence level relevant to his or her stage.

The responsibility for that judgement has rightly and intentionally been placed with teachers, in recognition of their professional knowledge and understanding of individual learners, and of the national standards outlined in the benchmarks.

The annual Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence levels data collection provides summative, national level data on children’s progress in literacy and numeracy at P1, P4, P7 and S3. Teachers submitting these data returns are asked to make a professional, summative evaluation of whether, by the census date in June, the children in their classes have achieved the relevant Curriculum for Excellence level. It is evident that SNSA data is being used within schools to support teachers’ professional judgements in this regard and that is a perfectly valid use of the data. Crucially, however, it should be noted that SNSA data should only ever be considered as part of the full range of assessment information available to teachers when making their judgements. The SNSAs can therefore contribute to, but are not in themselves, summative assessments.

David Reedy’s review of the evidence firmly supports our position that, while capable of informing more comprehensive summative teacher judgements, the SNSA is first and foremost a formative assessment. Mr Reedy is unequivocal in stating that the SNSA “is not, and should not be, summative, as it only assesses part of the early level CfE and also only forms part of the toolkit a teacher draws on to make professional judgements.”

The Scottish Government accepts the need for greater clarity around the purpose and rationale behind the SNSA and its role alongside other methods of assessment. This issue was

also raised by the P1 Practitioner Forum and the Independent Review. We will therefore work with Education Scotland to publish a clear and definitive statement on the purposes and uses of the SNSA in advance of the 2019/20 school session.

20. There is a tension, in setting conditions for the SNSAs, between seeking to satisfy one purpose focused on each individual child's learning and another linked to aggregated data on performance to aid improvement. The evidence suggests having assessments taken throughout the year diminishes the statistical rigour of the aggregated data. Equally the requirement to generate aggregated data restricts how flexibly the assessments can be used by teachers. This example on the timing of assessments supports the suggestions highlighted above about the challenge of prioritising both learning and accountability. The Committee questions whether the SNSAs have the capacity to perform both the formative and summative functions.

SG response:

The Scottish Government does not share the Committee's view about "the challenge of prioritising both learning and accountability". The Scottish Government is clear that the SNSAs have been provided to support learning and improvement and are absolutely not for accountability purposes at any level of the system. As set out in the response to 17-19 above, SNSA data while primarily diagnostic in purpose, can also be used to help target improvement activity at school and local authority level and can be used as part of a range of evidence to assess children's achievement of the relevant Curriculum for Excellence levels, and support planning of next steps in learning.

The SNSA is a unique and bespoke assessment tool for Scottish schools designed both to be standardised and to offer flexibility to schools and local authorities to use them when they think fit.

The SNSAs are standardised in a number of important ways, which provide reliable, consistent and useful information to teachers:

- They use a single pool of assessments developed to align with CfE, never before available to Scottish teachers.*
- They use a standard assessment platform so that children all undertake the assessments in the same format.*
- They provide a set of standard results and reports, providing teachers with nationally consistent information on children's progress.*
- Children are placed on a standard scale from P1-S3 that enables teachers to track their progress over time.*

The SNSAs are designed as diagnostic, low stakes assessments, and retaining flexibility for teachers to identify the best timing and approach to delivering the assessments was identified in consultation as a critical means of maintaining that low stakes status. However by conducting two robust national norming exercises the SNSA is still able to provide teachers with statistically robust national frames of reference; one in November 2017 and the other in March 2018. This means teachers have two points of reference against which to consider their learners' outcomes, depending on when within the year assessments were undertaken.

The SNSA therefore provides reliable comparative information on children's progress. The majority of assessments in years 1 and 2 were conducted towards the end of the year therefore the March norm provides a reliable and consistent reference point to compare children's progress.

Low stakes assessments

21. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government clarifies in response to this report the circumstances in which it considers information on SNSA results can be shared with parents, including when detailed information is explicitly requested. The Committee also recommends that the Government clarifies where it considers decision making lies in this regard. The Cabinet Secretary's evidence suggests decisions can rest with the individual teacher, whereas some evidence suggests a prescriptive approach is being taken at local authority level in some areas.

SG response:

While decisions regarding the routine sharing of SNSA outcomes with parents are essentially a matter for schools, we recognise that local authorities, as those responsible for the delivery of education, may wish to establish a consistent approach in responding to such requests.

The diagnostic information generated by the SNSA in relation to an individual child's strengths and areas for further development is intended first and foremost for the teacher, who can consider their wider professional knowledge and understanding of that child's progress alongside SNSA outcomes, when planning next steps for learning.

Clearly, if parents explicitly request sight of their child's assessment outcomes, a school must comply with that request. The Scottish Government is clear, however, that such information should not be provided in isolation. Schools and local authorities should ensure that any parent being informed of their child's SNSA outcomes has an understanding of the role of national standardised assessment (both its value and its limitations) within the wider assessment context; and a sense of their child's all round progress, as understood by the teacher when taking all assessment information into account.

22. The Committee recommends that the Government takes a lead in ensuring that the checks and balances highlighted by Professor Ellis, such as those that should be undertaken by Education Scotland or should be part of the inspection regime, are implemented. The Committee requests a summary of the work being undertaken by the Government, Education Scotland and HMIE in this area.

SG response:

Education Scotland provides professional support to the system on an ongoing basis; emphasising key messages on the purpose of the assessments through a variety of channels, including:

- *Joint ES/SG workshops at five CfE school leadership conferences across the country (autumn 2017)*

- *As part of the Quality Assurance and Moderation Support Officer programme, each numeracy, reading, writing and listening and talking event throughout session 2017/18 and 2018/19, for example emphasising the purpose of the SNSAs and their place within the BGE moderation cycle*
- *Assessment Coordinator meetings (3 per session) e.g. joint ES/SG presentations*
- *Updates at other national events e.g. National Literacy Network; National Numeracy Network*
- *NIF presentation at Education Scotland All Staff Conference – June 2018*
- *Professional support materials developed and uploaded to the Education Scotland National Improvement Hub – P1 SNSA case studies; P1 Practitioner Forum presentations and other materials*

Similar professional support will continue to be offered at local, regional and national level and the Scottish Government and Education Scotland will review the need for any additional channels of support or strengthened messaging on an ongoing basis.

The effective use of assessment is also a core element of school inspections. HM Inspectors of Education (HMIE) comment on the extent to which staff make effective use of assessment to ensure children and young people maximise their successes and achievements when evaluating the Quality Indicator 2.3 Learning, Teaching and Assessment as set out in How Good Is Our School? 4th edition. HMIE expect staff to use a variety of assessment approaches to allow children to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding, skills, attributes and capabilities in different contexts across the curriculum. They explore with staff the extent to which assessment is an essential part of planning children's learning.

Education Scotland is working with ACER and SCHOLAR to offer training on the purpose and appropriate use of the SNSAs to all of its education staff, including HMIE, on a rolling basis.

In response to David Reedy's Independent Review of the P1 SNSA, the Scottish Government has also undertaken to produce a draft code of practice/practical framework which sets out what SNSA data in P1 should productively be used for and what it should not, including a statement about purpose. The scope of this work will be widened to include all stages of SNSA presentation. The draft will be made available by autumn 2019, and will then be consulted upon widely, including through channels such as the P1 Practitioner Forum and the Scottish Education Council.

23. International evidence highlights 'teaching to the test' and a narrowing of the curriculum are risks associated with large scale national assessments, especially with assessments that carry a 'high stakes' status. Professor Andy Hargreaves, one of the Government's education advisers, stated that "The [SNSA] test is meant to be low stakes and is at risk of becoming medium stakes, but it is not at all high stakes". The Committee considers that certain Government decisions have contributed to low-medium stakes assessments becoming 'politically high stakes'. This includes: the decision not to publicise the new policy to parents; the decision to announce the assessments in tandem with the announcement that education was the Government's top priority; and the decision to shift the initial policy intention of the SNSAs (which has contributed to confusion over the purpose of the assessments). The Committee recommends that the Government sets out in its response the

practical steps it intends to take to actively engage with parents and teachers on this issue, including through its agencies.

SG response:

We welcome the Committee's recognition that the assessments are not high stakes, though would question some of the specific points identified as shortcomings in the Scottish Government's approach.

An information leaflet for parents and carers outlining the new achievement of Curriculum for Excellence levels data collection and the introduction of national standardised assessment was published in May 2017 and shared with parents organisations and all schools in Scotland. A dedicated SNSA website was published in August 2017, with a specific section for parents. This was publicised by Scottish Government, Education Scotland and the General Teaching Council of Scotland. The website is updated regularly.

As outlined in response to the Committee's recommendation at paragraph 9 above, we do not accept that the policy intention of national standardised assessment has changed at any stage. We do, however, recognise that the continued presentation by some commentators and stakeholders, of the SNSAs as high stakes assessments, has led to some confusion within the wider public, as to the purpose and value of the assessments.

We will work with the P1 Practitioners Forum, parents organisations and professional associations to establish a communications strategy which enables us to clarify and counter some of the negative messaging surrounding the SNSAs; recognising that parents are most receptive and likely to engage with communications originating from their child's school, and that SNSA training has a vital role to play in helping teachers to understand where the SNSA can help them and, just as critically, where it will not.

24. The Committee recommends that the Government, local authorities and schools prepare for FOI releases relating to the performance of schools or local authorities based on the SNSA. The evidence to the Committee suggests that such FOI releases could increase any feeling of anxiety amongst teachers and parents and lead to the unintended consequence of the assessments becoming high stakes.

SG response:

Scottish Government and local authority colleagues have the necessary processes and procedures in place for handling FOI requests, and we recognise the need for careful communications handling, in the event that an FOI requester seeks to use SNSA data irresponsibly, through the presentation of inappropriate and unhelpful comparisons.

It should be noted that the Scottish Government does not gather or hold any raw assessment data from the SNSA.

Conclusions on supporting learning

25. The Committee considers it is a potential weakness in the SNSA system in its current form should a sizeable number of teachers be of the view that the information generated by

the assessments is not telling them anything new. Evidence received, including the responses to the EIS survey confirms that a substantial amount of teaching time is being used to administer assessments and assess the output. If there is not sufficient added value then the staff time taken to support assessments could usefully be used on other priorities such as teaching or moderation work. This issue is particularly pertinent since the key stakeholder group that the SNSAs are intended to assist is classroom teachers.

26. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government undertakes an assessment of the workload implications of the SNSA policy on teachers and other school staff, taking into account any reduction in workload as a result of the removal of local level standardised assessments. The workload assessment should also have a particular focus on any impact on teaching time of the introduction of SNSAs.

SG response:

A teacher survey has been built into the SNSA so we can get direct feedback from those carrying out the assessments at all stages, including feedback on workload and the value of the SNSA reports to teachers. Further visits to schools and focus groups have been undertaken as part of the annual user review. These include discussions on purpose, implementation, workload and the value of the assessments.

Implementation of the SNSA and use of the data were 2 of the 4 key themes that the P1 Practitioner Forum explored and made recommendations on. The Scottish Government's response to the Forum's report sets out the activity that will be taken forward to address those recommendations.

The information that teachers receive has been enhanced in session 2018/19 with the introduction of a single "long scale" for children from P1-S3 which provides more detail on individual children's performance, described across 12 bands. Evidence from surveys and discussion with teachers indicates that they are finding this a helpful development, providing more detailed information on children's capacity and progress. Teachers are also very clear that, if the results of the assessments are broadly in line with their own professional evaluation that is a positive outcome, giving them increased confidence in their understanding of children's progress and how it compares across Scotland. Increasingly the SNSA is being used alongside other evidence within moderation activities, and across school clusters to provide additional information for improvement activities .

Scottish Government officials have had an initial discussion on this issue with COSLA and will continue those discussions over the coming months.

27. The SNSA is in its second year of operation and the Government has said it is committed to continuous development. The Committee supports the view of Professor Andy Hargreaves, one of the International Council of Education Advisers to the Scottish Government, that feedback from some teachers to suggest the SNSAs are not adding value to their judgments should be acted upon by the Government and ACER, specifically they should reconsider the content of the assessments based on this feedback.

SG response:

While we recognise there are some teachers who have expressed reservations regarding the value of the diagnostic information provided by the SNSA, we would also note that many have identified the reports as useful when used as part of a range of evidence to assess children's progress.

In concluding that "a majority of teachers and headteachers see the value of the P1 SNSA to support professional judgements about learning, teaching and assessment" David Reedy identified a link between the minority expressing negative views, and the fact they had not received any training in the use of the assessment tool and the data it generates.

It is evident that ensuring more classroom practitioners have access to SNSA professional learning should be a clear priority moving forward. Work has already been carried out to improve the support for teachers undertaking the 2019 assessments by providing better access to support and training materials through GLOW, providing exemplars of classroom practice and improving signposting to key messages in the help sections. We will continue to explore with local authorities ways of ensuring our training messages reach their target audience.

There is a clear and ongoing commitment to continually improve the SNSA based on user feedback. Updates were made in light of the 2018 user review (published in August 2018) and the 2019 user review is ongoing, including new teacher and children's surveys. A specific action was the setting up of the P1 Practitioner Forum. The report and recommendations from the Forum were published in April 2019 and these will be acted upon as per the Government's response to the Forum's recommendations.

Education Scotland works with ACER to quality assure the questions for the SNSA. Each new question is carefully considered with respect to suitability for the curriculum and level of difficulty in relation to the standards within the experiences and outcomes. Questions are then trialled in live assessments before being finally accepted (or rejected). User feedback is included in this review process.

28. The Committee is concerned about the evidence from ACER that there was limited engagement with current teachers during the development of SNSAs. The Committee recommends that the Government develops an action plan of direct engagement with teachers to ensure the concerns raised in evidence are understood and taken into account by ACER in the further development of the system. This could prevent any mismatch between the benefits of the SNSAs in theory and the practical experience of classroom teachers.

SG response:

There was significant involvement of teachers and school leaders during the development of the SNSA. Education Scotland staff, as experienced classroom practitioners, reviewed each of the proposed questions for the SNSA in January 2017 which led to an agreed content for the first year of SNSA and the establishment of the quality assurance process described previously. An original 'alpha' design was trialled in 5 local authorities with over 60 schools taking part (February 2017). The updated 'beta' design was showcased to more than 25 local authority and headteacher groups (June 2017), alongside trials with individual pupils to determine how

children would respond to the questions and the SNSA platform. Curriculum and ASN advisory groups were set up and used to advise on design and content.

This process of engagement and involvement is ongoing as part of the continuous improvement process and is effectively an action plan of direct engagement. This includes an annual user review, which now includes feedback from new surveys of practitioners and children, the establishment of the P1 Practitioner Forum which will be continued and extended and regular contact with schools and local authority groups and networks. We will also involve practicing P1 classroom teachers in the ongoing work with ACER around the development and quality assurance of SNSA questions, including signing off each individual question for all assessment stages and curricular areas.

29. The Committee would welcome an update from ADES at the end of the second year of the implementation of SNSAs that includes tangible examples of where SNSA data has contributed to improvement.

SG response:

It would be for individual local authorities to provide an annual update. We have however had an initial discussion with ADES and COSLA and we will continue the discussion on this issue.

30. The Committee recommends that the Government, in conjunction with ACER, conducts further work on the potential for SNSA results, and the way they are presented in teacher readouts, to mask the existence of certain issues with performance which may be linked to particular conditions. This is particularly important given the importance of identifying undiagnosed conditions as early as possible. The Committee has scrutinised the support available for children with additional support needs since 2016 and will continue to do so.

SG response:

We will continue our work with ACER to ensure that the reports that teachers receive from the system are as helpful and informative as possible. The Scottish Government does not however share the Committee's concern (identified at paragraph 244 of the report) that the readout for teachers on the exact format in which different questions were taken is a limitation in the design of the SNSA. As David Leng explained to the Committee on 20 February, the skill being assessed in the type of literacy question that was discussed, is not reading itself, but a precursor to reading, focusing on phonological awareness; an understanding of the concept of rhyming/recognition of rhyming sounds. As the challenge level increases within the adaptive assessment, questions which assess a child's decoding skills (i.e. the process of translating a printed word into a sound) will be presented, and of course, audio support will not be provided for such questions. Rather than providing a readout on a single question (e.g. the question with audio support which was one of the earlier/easier questions in the assessment), the adaptive nature of the assessment means the report the teacher receives once the child has completed the assessment will provide insight to teachers on all of the literacy skills relevant to their stage, including the degree to which the child can read independently, based on all of the questions they have answered.

We do not therefore share the Committee's concerns about SNSA reports masking the existence of certain issues with performance linked to particular conditions. SNSA reports may

help identify whether a child has additional support needs – but they have not been designed to do that and other means (e.g. the 27-30 month check and teachers’ daily interactions with the child) are likely to be far more effective in identifying needs.

The Scottish Government takes additional support for learning and inclusion very seriously and we want all children and young people to get the support they need to reach their learning potential. We will continue to work with CALL Scotland and the SNSA additional support needs advisory group to ensure that SNSAs are accessible and useful to children and their teachers.

Data literacy and assessment literacy

31. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government works with COSLA and other partners to produce an anonymous sample survey that allows it to produce an estimate as to the proportion of relevant classroom teachers that have yet to complete SNSA specific training. The survey could also seek feedback as to whether the teachers feel equipped to run the assessments, to analyse SNSA data and to use the data to inform pedagogy.

SG response:

Professional learning has been an important part of the support provided for the SNSA. SCHOLAR engage with local authorities annually and agree individual training programmes based on local authority needs and preferences. A significant number of staff have been trained and evidence gathered by the Independent Review of P1 assessments shows this has had a positive impact on their understanding of the SNSA and constructive use of SNSA data. The number of practitioners indicating a positive perception of the diagnostic value of SNSA rose from just over half, before training, to almost 90% after training. All training materials are also available on-line and recent steps have been taken to make this available on GLOW as well as the SNSA platform. New course development has focussed on data literacy and these courses have been well received.

Recommendations from the P1 Practitioner Forum on training are being taken forward, and the teacher survey which has been part of the SNSA system during 2018/19 has provided us with an opportunity for staff to comment on any gaps in the training provision. We will also be working with ACER and SCHOLAR to carry out more detailed analytics of the take up and effectiveness of the SNSA training.

We have had an initial discussion with COSLA and ADES on this issue and we will continue that discussion in the coming months.

ICT

32. The SNSAs policy implementation is reliant on access to good quality ICT. The Committee considers that an analysis of the capacity of schools to accommodate the introduction of the SNSAs, including in relation to access to good quality ICT, should have been undertaken in advance of the implementation of the policy.

SG response:

Considerable groundwork, including on ICT capability, was undertaken in advance of national rollout to help ensure that the assessments would work effectively from the point of introduction.

Trialling of assessments was conducted in 66 schools across five local authorities six months prior to launch. This trialling was designed to assess the effectiveness of the assessment platform as well as the ability of school and local authority ICT to run the assessments. Each local authority involved in the trialling was provided with information in advance on the minimum technical requirements for the assessment platform, with no significant concerns raised or any impediment to the trialling being encountered. All local authorities were provided with this information in advance of national rollout of the SNSA and, similarly, no particular concerns were raised.

In order to maximise the availability of existing ICT capability, the SNSA has been designed to work effectively on the full range of ICT platforms, e.g. laptop, iPad, tablet etc, and the full range of browsers. Pressure on available ICT equipment within schools is alleviated by the ability to sit assessments at any time during the school year, and the facility to pause and resume an assessment at any time.

Further, the SNSA platform has been purposefully designed to minimise the impact on schools' ICT capability. In comparison to the typical web page, a representative assessment question page consumes a fraction of the bandwidth, with all images and audio optimised to that end.

We maintain regular contact with local authorities on the SNSA, including on ICT issues. We also keep a close eye on SNSA analytics information to give us an understanding of the pace and direction of travel as far as technology is concerned, and to observe any anomalies which may require further investigation.

33. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government works with COSLA to assess the extent to which there is increased pressure on the use of ICT resources in schools as a result of the roll out of the SNSAs.

34. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government works with COSLA to assess the extent to which the quality and type of hardware owned by schools, and school broadband speed, impacts on the usability of the SNSAs and the associated data literacy training.

SG response:

We will explore with COSLA and ADES the possibility of including questions relating to recommendations 33 and 34 into a forthcoming survey of local authorities. The survey is specifically about use of technology to support education and will be structured around the four objectives in our Digital Learning and Teaching Strategy. We expect to have the findings from that survey in late 2019.