

# The National Curriculum for History from September 2014: the view from Ofsted

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## Introduction

With the publication on 11 September 2013 of the final version of the revised National Curriculum for September 2014, subject leaders and classroom teachers could start to consider the implications of the proposed changes. For history at Key Stages 1 and 2, some parts of the programmes of study are new and some aspects of the previous curriculum have been retained. There are some marked changes, however, at Key Stage 2. These new elements and the requirements of the programmes of study overall have significant implications for the way in which senior leaders structure the history curriculum and classroom teachers teach history.

This article summarises:

- what inspection evidence reveals about curriculum planning and classroom teaching
- what is compulsory and what is optional in the new curriculum
- what are the implementation issues for schools of the revised programmes of study.



## The lessons of inspection

Inspection evidence reveals a mixed picture in primary schools. It provides some important messages for leaders and teachers as they begin to consider their response to the new curriculum. Six particular messages stand out.

- 1. Historical knowledge is important.** Pupils' knowledge and understanding of the topics studied is not as good as it was at the time of Ofsted's last subject report, *History for all*.<sup>1</sup>
- 2. Over the last three years, teaching in history has become more variable,** and fewer pupils leave primary school with good knowledge and understanding as a result of the teaching they have received. Where teaching is not good, too little focus has been placed on strengthening pupils' knowledge and understanding and on ensuring that the aims of the history curriculum have been fulfilled.
- 3. Too many pupils' chronological understanding is not good.** This is because their historical knowledge is episodic and their ability to make links across that knowledge is weak. A number of factors have combined to create this situation. The current curriculum at Key Stage 2 is itself episodic in its structure. For example, teachers teach separate units on the Ancient Greeks and the Romans. These are frequently in different

year groups and not necessarily in chronological order. In addition, the curriculum does not require teachers to make links between the historical topics studied. The resulting weakness in pupils' understanding of chronology and developments over time is not helped by the absence of accurate time-lines from classroom walls in many schools visited.

- 4. Pupils have better knowledge and make better progress when history is taught as a discrete subject, with links made to other subjects as appropriate.** The growing popularity of a topic or thematic curriculum, in which a number of foundation subjects are grouped together, has increasingly undermined the identity and integrity of history. In a small number of schools where this structure exists, teachers have effectively focused on ensuring that pupils know when they are studying history, and the subject-specific aims and objectives are effectively covered. However, this is far from the norm. Too often history is submerged within an integrated curriculum structure and, as a result, pupils' knowledge and understanding has suffered.

**5. The most effective subject pedagogy, ensuring high achievement in history, was shown by teachers whose approach focused on well-structured enquiry, which helped pupils think for themselves.** In the most effective primary schools visited, a culture of resourcefulness, investigation and problem-solving in history provided excellent preparation for later study. It also developed pupils' skills in research, analysis, evaluation and communication, which would be valuable for future study and employment.

**6. The best learning in history took place when the teaching developed pupils' historical knowledge and historical thinking and, as a result, enabled them to show their historical understanding.** Historical thinking demands the ability to investigate, consider, reflect and review the events of the past. Consequently, pupils acquired historical knowledge which they learnt to communicate in an increasingly sophisticated way. Their historical understanding was revealed in the way that they communicated the developments they had studied.

The weakness in pupils' knowledge and understanding, the increasing variability in the quality of history teaching, and the preference for an integrated curriculum, mean that leaders and teachers in many primary schools have much to do. They would do well to start by answering this fundamental question as they plan for the introduction of the new curriculum, namely:

*How are we going to structure our curriculum so that we strengthen teaching in history and improve pupils' historical knowledge and understanding, including their chronological understanding?*

## The new curriculum

The purpose of study, the aims and the preliminary paragraphs for both key stages give teachers a very clear steer as to what they should be trying to achieve when they teach the specified content. The revised programmes of study state what must be covered and what might be taught.<sup>2</sup> They include three elements at both key stages, namely:

- an explanatory preamble paragraph which explores what pupils should know, do and understand as a result of the teaching they receive
- a sentence which highlights the importance of planning for progression
- a list of topics to be covered which must be considered alongside the crucial statement in bold type which notes that **schools are not required by law to teach the example content in [square brackets] or the content indicated as being 'non-statutory'.**

The programmes of study at Key Stage 1 have undergone some minor changes, but those for Key Stage 2 have been changed markedly.

The Key Stage 1 requirements are not too dissimilar to the current structure. What is particularly new

Table 1

At Key Stage 1 the programmes of study focus on four points, all of which must be covered:

1. changes within living memory
2. events beyond living memory that are significant nationally or globally
3. the lives of significant individuals in the past who have contributed to national and international achievements
4. significant historical events, people and places in their own locality.

Table 2

At Key Stage 2 the programmes of study focus on nine points, all of which must be covered:

1. changes in Britain from the Stone Age to the Iron Age
2. the Roman Empire and its impact on Britain
3. Britain's settlement by Anglo-Saxons and Scots
4. the Viking and Anglo-Saxon struggle for the Kingdom of England to the time of Edward the Confessor
5. a local history study
6. a study of an aspect or theme in British history that extends pupils' chronological knowledge beyond 1066
7. the achievements of the earliest civilisations – an overview of where and when the first civilisations appeared and a depth study of one of four named civilisations
8. Ancient Greece – a study of Greek life and achievements and their influence on the western world
9. a non-European society that provides contrasts with British history – one study chosen from a list of three named societies.

is that in selecting the lives of significant individuals in the past to be studied, teachers should make sure the pupils sometimes compare aspects of life in different periods. The programme of study gives a number of examples.

There are some important changes to the current programmes of study at Key Stage 2. All but one named aspect of the content falls before 1066, and the core content is British history from earliest times to 1066.

Schools are also required to select a theme in British history that extends pupils' chronological knowledge beyond 1066. Schools which decide to use some of the topics they currently teach to meet this requirement must ensure that the material is organised so that the theme selected is British history, is linked to what has been taught before 1066, and develops pupils' chronological knowledge beyond 1066.

To cover the specified history content, teachers are expected to teach using a mix of overviews and depth studies. Although an overview was required by the current programmes of study in relation to the study of Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings in Britain, it is set to become a much more central teaching strategy for teachers at Key Stage 2.

Schools can choose what they teach and when they teach it. There is a clear and inescapable requirement that children develop a strong chronological understanding within and across the areas of study, but there is no statutory requirement to teach them in a chronological sequence.

## Implementation issues

Although many teachers will be pleased that much of what they teach now is retained in the new programmes of study, the new content and expectations demand considerable prior thought and planning especially at Key Stage 2.

Table 3

### Teachers will need to consider, among other things:

1. what to teach in history
2. when to teach this content
3. how best to teach this content to develop pupils' historical knowledge and chronological understanding
4. how to access the most useful and age-appropriate resources
5. how best to fulfil the expectations of the local history study
6. how best to develop a study of an aspect or theme in British history that extends pupils' chronological knowledge beyond 1066
7. how to enrich the curriculum and make best use of the heritage opportunities which are available within the locality
8. how best to fulfil the breadth of the stated aims and the preamble summaries of what pupils should know, do and understand at each key stage
9. the most effective teaching and learning strategies to ensure that pupils have 'the opportunity to examine cultural, economic, military, political, religious and social aspects' and 'the opportunity to study local history'
10. how best to fulfil the requirements of the attainment target.

As a result, many primary school teachers will need support and guidance to ensure that they have subject and curriculum knowledge sufficient to increase their confidence in their grasp of attainment, progress and assessment in history, and are able to ensure highly effective teaching and learning in the subject.<sup>3</sup>

In answering the questions in table 3 (above), teachers should bear in mind that inspection evidence reveals that good and outstanding history comes when:

- history is taught as a discrete subject
- teachers focus on well-structured enquiry, embracing independent thinking and learning
- teaching develops pupils' historical knowledge and historical thinking and, as a result, enables them to demonstrate their historical understanding.

There is much to be accomplished in the next few months. The new curriculum brings not only a number of challenges for pupils and teachers but also many exciting opportunities. It is to be hoped that teachers exploit these opportunities to develop new engaging and successful approaches, as well as to refine those they currently employ, to ensure that pupils leave primary school with a more sophisticated grasp of chronology, and a more coherent knowledge and understanding of Britain's past and that of the wider world than has been the case in recent years.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> *History for all*, Ofsted (090223), 2011; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/history-for-all](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/history-for-all)
- <sup>2</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/239035/PRIMARY\\_national\\_curriculum\\_-\\_History.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/239035/PRIMARY_national_curriculum_-_History.pdf)
- <sup>3</sup> Teachers might find the history subject criteria helpful in considering how to develop teaching and learning in the subject. This has been revised and is to be found here: [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/generic-grade-descriptors-and-supplementary-subject-specific-guidance-for-inspectors-making-judgement](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/generic-grade-descriptors-and-supplementary-subject-specific-guidance-for-inspectors-making-judgement)