Introduction

1 Research over a number of years in this and other countries has shown that homework can make an important contribution to pupils' progress at school. An OFSTED Report published in 1995 (Homework in Primary and Secondary Schools, HMSO, London) confirmed that, many pupils and their parents saw work done at home as a valuable and essential part of school work. . Also the 1996/97 OFSTED Annual Report noted that homework is important at all stages in a child's education and that when used properly, it extends the challenge open to the pupil and ensures that teaching time is used to maximum effect. In this country there is evidence that pupils in the highest achieving schools spend more time on learning activities at home than pupils in other schools. Among primary schools, NFER research in 1995 showed that almost half of all pupils in Year 6 were not given regular homework.

2 The Government believes that there is enormous advantage in children spending regular periods of time, initially quite short, on different learning activities devised by schools as part of a homework programme which supports the work they do in class. These need not be very formal or done without help: for infants homework should consist largely of reading and sharing books with parents and carers. Homework need not, and should not, get in the way of other activities which they may do after school such as sport, music and clubs of all kinds. These activities can be very beneficial and one of the aims of the Government's proposals for the development of study support (see Extending Opportunity: A national Framework for Study Support * published earlier this year) is that a wide range of after school activities should be available to children who have not had access to them in the past.

3 The Government's White Paper, Excellence in Schools proposed that national guidelines on homework should be published. The following guidelines set out the Government's view on the purposes of homework in primary and secondary schools respectively, on how much and of what sort should be set for pupils of different ages, and on what should be expected of both schools and parents in supporting pupils. They take account of comments on earlier versions of the guidelines for primary and secondary schools, published separately for consultation in April.

4 There are no guidelines specifically for special schools as they vary so much both in age range and in the appropriate homework expectations. However, special schools should review their policies carefully taking account of the aspects of the primary and secondary guidelines which are most relevant to them.

* Copies of the National Framework ISBN 0855 22 755 9 are available from DFEE Publications Centre, PO Box 5050, Sudbury, Suffolk, CO10 6ZQ; tel 0845 602 2260; fax 0845 603 3360.
The evidence on which the guidelines are based

5 The guidelines draw on extensive research and analysis into current good practice in schools. They are informed, in particular, by a study conducted by OFSTED in 1997 which involved a systematic review of research literature, analysis of the OFSTED database, a structured telephone questionnaire survey of 368 schools identified from the database for the quality of their homework arrangements, visits to a further 29 schools and a questionnaire survey of about 1,000 Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 pupils across the visited schools. A summary of the findings of this study is included as an annex to these guidelines (see page 25). The primary guidelines also take account of ideas and experience generated through the National Literacy and Numeracy Projects.

6 The OFSTED study shows that homework is well established in a number of primary schools. Many have been very successful in ensuring that homework is well integrated within their everyday work and planning, and in winning the support of parents. In the secondary sector, while almost all schools have homework systems and policies in place, there is inconsistency across the country and room for improvement in many schools in the way it is planned, managed and evaluated. The evidence suggests that homework makes the greatest contribution to learning when:

- homework policy is led by the senior management of the school as part of the school's overall learning and assessment strategy;
- tasks are carefully planned and structured to support progression in learning, as part of schools' schemes of work;
there is consistent practice across the school in setting, managing and marking homework (as appropriate);

- there is a regular programme so that everyone—teachers, children and parents or carers—knows what to expect each week;

- pupils and parents or carers are very clear about what they need to do;

- parents and carers are treated as partners in their children’s learning;

- there are high expectations of pupils in completing homework;

- pupils receive prompt, clear feedback on their work;

- homework policies are regularly monitored and evaluated to check that they support pupils’ learning in the best possible way.

Implementing the guidelines

- These guidelines are intended to help schools draw up and implement effective homework policies. They are not statutory; schools are not required by law to follow them. As now, OFSTED inspectors in considering schools’ homework policies and their operation will be guided by the relevant section of the OFSTED framework for inspection.

- Many schools already have detailed arrangements for homework and will need to make little, if any, change to their arrangements in the light of the guidelines. For others, implementing the guidelines will require some more radical changes. New policies for homework need to be drawn up with care and sensitivity, in full consultation with parents. The Government is aware that this may take time.

What is homework?

- Schools do not always define homework in exactly the same way. For these guidelines homework refers to any work or activities which pupils are asked to do outside lesson time, either on their own or with parents or carers.

A partnership with parents; homework and home-school agreements

- To be effective homework needs to be part of a wider partnership between parents and schools. Schools need to be able to count on parents’ support for their aims and parents need to be consulted and informed about school policies. In some schools homework is already an important part of home-school agreements between parents and schools. This can help to create and maintain parents’ commitment to homework, which is essential if it is to be
effective. The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 contains provisions requiring all schools to draw up home school agreements in consultation with parents. Guidance from the DfEE on the requirements of the legislation, Home-School Agreements Guidance For Schools*, makes it clear that all home school agreements will need to set out the school’s expectations about homework and the means by which parents will be consulted about changes.

A whole school policy for homework

11 In any school, both teachers and parents need to be completely clear about what is expected of pupils in the way of homework and how it should be organised and managed. They should also be consulted regularly about school policies. The Government believes that the best way to ensure that everyone knows what is expected is for schools to have a written policy on homework, publicly available on request. All schools are encouraged to draw up a written policy or, if they have one already, to review it, consulting parents and teachers carefully. All parents should then be sent a copy of the policy and encouraged to discuss it with their child’s teacher.

12 Policy documents should aim to be an important source of guidance and information for both teachers and parents (or, in the case of secondary schools, a common consistent framework for more detailed guidance drawn up, for example, by subject faculties and departments) and should cover all the issues set out in these guidelines. A good whole school policy,

* Copies of the Home-School Agreement Guidance For Schools are available from DfEE publications centre, PO Box 5050, Sudbury, Suffolk CO10 6ZQ; tel 0845 602 2260; fax 0845 603 3360.
consistently applied, can ensure that homework arrangements are manageable for everyone, not least teachers, as well as educationally beneficial.

Leaflet for parents

13 The DFEE has published a leaflet for parents about home-school agreements which covers homework, setting out the key messages in these guidelines. Schools should ensure that parents see copies of the leaflet, Home-School Agreement Leaflet For Parents*, as part of schools consultation over their own policies.

Case study (1)

Greenwood Junior School, Nottingham

In 1993 head teacher John Botham introduced Home Study at Greenwood Junior School in inner city Nottingham, through home school contracts. Parents agree to work with pupils at home, using an imaginative home study book which the school gives to pupils along with a special home study bag and other resources. Homework assignments follow a set pattern every week of four activities: Spelling, English, Maths and Science each with a recommended time allocation, usually 15 minutes for year 3 pupils ranging to around 30 minutes for year 6 pupils. In return for parents commitment the school undertakes to provide regular feedback and opportunities for discussion with parents, including home visits.

What should be in school homework policies?

14 Homework policies need to have enough detail to give clear guidance to parents and teachers about what is expected of them and of pupils on a weekly basis. The following paragraphs set out the issues which the policies of primary and secondary schools respectively should address. Individual schools may, of course, wish to add other issues to reflect their particular circumstances.

* Copies of the Home-School Agreement Leaflet For Parents are available from DfEE publications centre, PO Box 5050, Sudbury, Suffolk CO10 6ZQ; tel 0845 602 2260; fax 0845 603 3360.