

Striking the Right Note (summary)

Ofsted's research and analysis paper published 21 September 2023

[Link to the report](#)

[Full report \(Ofsted webpage\)](#)

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This summary mainly follows the structure of the original report, except that:

- the summary of the methodological note is freer;
- case studies which are included in the body of the report are listed at the end of this summary.

Every section and paragraph is summarised and numbering corresponds with the original report.

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Context

Despite the new National Plan for Music Education, *The Power of Music to Change Lives* (2022) and the government's investment in Music Education Hubs and other music and arts programmes since 2011, music provision remains patchy. Schools have reduced KS3 provision and trainee primary teachers receive shrinking amounts of music training. Pupils taking a music qualification at KS4 has risen but uptake at KS5 has fallen.

The report splits findings between primary and secondary and also includes evidence from Reception and sixth form classes. In each section, it covers:

- aspects of the curriculum
- pedagogy
- assessment
- the impact on what pupils learn
- the way schools are organised

Main findings

- Almost all the primary schools ensured adequate time to learn music in Reception and at KS1&2.
- In almost all schools, the Reception curriculum prepared children well for KS1 Music.
- In very few cases, pupils were taught music on several isolated days.
- Curriculum time varied considerably in KS3, with insufficient time for Music in just under half of schools visited, meaning pupils were not adequately prepared for further study.
- Most KS3 provision seen was organised into termly or half-termly blocks, typically as isolated units; in many cases, longer-term musical development outside these blocks had not been considered.
- Many schools equated curriculum ambition with range of activities, with fewer schools addressing incrementally developing pupils' knowledge and skills.
- The strongest curriculum aspect in primaries was singing but vocal work was far rarer in secondaries. Most secondaries did not build on pupils' progress and enjoyment of singing at primary school.
- In most schools, composition was the weakest curriculum aspect, with very few schools considering the underpinning knowledge required.
- Commonly at KS1-3, the focus was on covering activities more than ensuring learning to a high standard.
- A few schools (generally those whose staff had significant musical expertise or worked closely with their Music Education Hub) had a clear understanding of what pupils should be able to do as a result of following the curriculum.
- Most school leaders had a realistic view of teachers' subject expertise but far fewer leaders had a plan for addressing weaknesses.
- Around half of secondary schools ensured that teachers had subject-specific training. Others were left isolated or supported by colleagues who were not music specialists.
- Many headteachers and music leaders were still in the process of re-establishing their pre-COVID extra-curricular provision.
- Inequalities highlighted in Ofsted's 2012 report persist, with socio-economic status a determining factor.
- Many school leaders have reduced subsidies for instrumental lessons in recent years; others had stopped providing. Around half of the primary schools visited did not currently offer instrumental or vocal lessons.
- There was a significant disparity in the range and quality of extra-curricular opportunities however around half of schools visited had strong extra-curricular offers, which were valued and seen as promoting pupils' wider musical development.

Discussion of findings

Covid-19 had a significant effect on music provision in schools and schools were still slowly 'returning to normal'.

Concerns raised in Ofsted's 2012 report remain, despite many school leaders particularly at primary level giving music a more prominent place in the curriculum:

- KS3 provision that does not prepare pupils for further study;
- Some schools where adequate preparation for KS4 is only achieved by pupils with access to paid instrumental and vocal lessons;
- Inequality of opportunity, principally the ability to pay for music tuition.

Music was stronger in schools which focussed on teaching pupils to get better at music rather than just doing or encountering music. While stronger examples were in the minority, many school leaders were aware of the need for a sharper focus on musical development and were starting to use resources such as the Model Music Curriculum.

It is impossible to include every aspect of music without the curriculum being a mile wide and an inch deep. If school leaders do not consider what pupils can realistically learn, pupils are likely to simply 'experience' music rather than get better at it

The most effective teaching was characterised by a narrow range of instrument choices and allowing pupils to develop fine motor skills. In weaker practice, pupils had shallow encounters with too many instruments or insufficient practice time.

There was variation in how well teachers taught music. Many primary teachers reported lacking confidence in teaching music. Many primary headteachers knew this but had no plans for addressing weaknesses. A third of secondaries assumed that their specialist music teachers did not need subject-specific training. In some, this left significant knowledge gaps unaddressed.

Schools with strong and vibrant musical cultures had strong and flexible leadership which valued music in the curriculum and recognised how extra-curricular music complemented the taught curriculum. Leaders in these schools reached out to Music Education Hubs for support.

Few other subjects are so dependent on flexible support from the school and its systems in order to flourish

Recommendations

Curriculum

Schools should make sure that:

- pupils, particularly at key stage 3, have enough curriculum time to develop their musical knowledge and skills incrementally
- the curriculum identifies precise end points in performance, composition and listening work, and then sets out the knowledge and skills pupils need, step by step, to reach these end points
- the curriculum builds, incrementally, pupils' knowledge of the technical and constructive aspects of music

Pedagogy and assessment

Schools should make sure that:

- teachers provide ongoing feedback to pupils that improves the quality of pupils' music making both in terms of technique and expressive quality
- teachers routinely demonstrate to pupils what high-quality musical responses sound like, and the processes for achieving those outcomes

Systems at subject and school level

Schools should:

- actively seek the support of local Music Education Hubs or other sources of expertise when developing and improving the curriculum
- support subject leaders to develop a curriculum that deliberately and incrementally teaches all pupils to become more musical
- continuously develop teachers' subject knowledge, including their musicianship skills and their understanding of what high-quality music-making should sound like for pupils in the age group they teach; this approach should align with the choices set out in the school's curriculum
- make sure that all pupils can develop their musical talents and interests by offering extra-curricular activities and instrumental and vocal lessons

Other organisations

- Those involved in writing commercial curricula should clearly identify what pupils should know and be able to do (and what this should sound like) before moving on to the next stage of learning.
- Music Education Hub leaders should continue to develop and build relationships with school and trust leaders to support them in developing their curriculum and wider musical offer.

Key terms

Knowledge in music

Procedural knowledge	Knowledge used to perform a task, which becomes automated
Declarative knowledge	Knowledge that can be stated verbally, which underpins thinking

Pillars of progression in music

Technical	Development of motor skills, important for controlling sound
Constructive	Knowledge of how the building blocks of music come together
Expressive	Requires technical expertise and combines with other knowledge

Primary

Curriculum intent: identifying what pupils need to know and do

High-quality music education is likely to:

- take into account what can realistically be learnt in the time available
 - give regular opportunities to return to and consolidate learning and gradually introduce new ideas, methods and concepts
 - set out specific content to be learned by the end point(s)
1. Almost all primary leaders were committed to music as part of the curriculum and had a clear vision for all pupils to enjoy music and to increase self-confidence and sense of achievement.
 2. Around half of schools visited had changed or were changing their music curricula in response to the new Ofsted framework or the Model Music Curriculum. Mostly this was to provide regular lessons in preference to isolated experiences.
 3. Most primaries were using bought-in schemes. A few schools were not covering the full scope of the national curriculum, with the main deficits in composing and improvising.
 4. Almost all schools were preparing Reception children well for music in KS1.
 5. Most music leads associated curriculum ambition with the range of musical activities offered; far fewer were thinking in terms of pupils' musical development.
 6. Most schools were not clear about what they wanted pupils to learn or why. Where they were clearer, this usually related to singing and playing instruments and very rarely to composition.

Planning the curriculum so that pupils become more 'musical'

A high-quality music curriculum is likely to:

- build procedural knowledge in controlling sound
 - provide opportunities to consolidate procedural knowledge
 - be gradual, iterative and coherent with regard to instrument choice
 - allow pupils to practise the skills identified in the school's curriculum
 - include tasks at an appropriate technical level for pupils to realise their expressive intentions
 - give pupils opportunities to learn about musical culture and repertoire
7. Most schools could show the different activities and topics taught but fewer could articulate how they were sequenced for musical progression. Many leaders had identified this and over a third were addressing the weakness.
 8. A few schools were ensuring that pupils were incrementally gaining greater control, fluency and accuracy in singing and playing instruments, mostly where there was a clear view of what children should know at the end of Y6.
 9. The most effective teaching was where technical development went alongside learning about the provenance of the music pupils were learning.
 10. In the few schools where pupils were learning to control sound effectively, leaders recognised that this takes time and that technical skills are not always transferrable to other instruments.
 11. These schools had often reduced the number of instruments pupils learned. Other schools offered shallow encounters with more instruments and consequently pupils played more mechanically and less expressively.
 12. Fewer than half of schools offered a Whole Class Ensemble Tuition programme and around half of these were supported by the Music Education Hub. The latter were mostly sequenced logically.
 13. About a quarter of schools had decided to deliver Whole Class programmes in-house for budget reasons. Several schools had not considered whether their teachers had the knowledge to do this.
 14. In many schools the Whole Class programme stood alone and the following year's curriculum took little or no account of the learning from it. Only a few examples were seen of bespoke Whole Class programmes that were planned to tie into the school's curriculum.

15. The strongest curriculum aspect was support for singing. Where this was not the case, singing was seen as a participatory activity with no focus on its technical or expressive demands.
16. Of schools using commercial schemes, about half understood the progression model poorly. In the weakest examples, teachers followed curriculum plans rigidly without assessing learning.
17. Where curriculum thinking was strong, pupils had repeated opportunities to learn about the interrelated dimensions of music in ways that broadened and deepened their knowledge through performing, composing and listening.
18. With notable exceptions, most schools were weakest at teaching composing, with very few having considered the building blocks of knowledge needed.

What pupils know and remember

19. In most primary schools visited, pupils did not have a secure grasp of skills and knowledge and leaders often paid little attention to whether they learned the curriculum.
20. In around a third of schools, pupils showed increasing skills in singing as they moved up the school.
21. Many schools ensured pupils learned instruments in KS2; this was most successful where children learned one or two instruments over several years. Low levels of progress were associated with shallow encounters with many instruments.
22. Very few pupils showed secure knowledge in composition skills.

Pedagogy: teaching the curriculum

High-quality music education is likely to have the following features:

- high levels of guidance for novices
- a focus on the quality of musical responses with ongoing feedback
- clarity about what will be in formative assessments

23. In two-thirds of primary schools visited, music was delivered by non-specialists. Many of the specialists in the remaining third were bought in.
24. In over half of the schools, teachers did not have the subject knowledge to teach music well and lacked confidence. Nearly all teachers welcomed any training offered.
25. Effective teaching matched activities and pedagogy closely to intended learning outcomes. Musical sounds played a dominant role and teachers modelled their thinking.
26. A marked difference was seen in the quality of musical guidance and modelling across the schools.
27. Many teachers felt more secure using published schemes and appreciated the accompanying instructional videos.
28. In many schools, lack of content knowledge resulted in too little effective modelling and too little focus on the quality of pupils' musical responses.
29. In a few schools, feedback focussed on components pupils needed to move on in their learning and teachers understood clearly what quality should sound like.

Assessment

High-quality music education is likely to have the following features:

- summative assessment used to check whether pupils are learning as intended
- assessment identifies pupils' misconceptions or gaps in their understanding

30. Assessment was mostly weak with no summative assessment in around half of schools visited. Where assessment was effective, it mostly focussed on performance.
31. Many schools were unsure how to assess music, which is consistent with their being at an early stage of identifying the knowledge and skills they wanted pupils to learn.
32. Many assessment models focussed only on what parts of the curriculum had been covered and not on pupils' learning. Teachers reported ticking the boxes and forgetting about it.
33. Where teachers were taking audio or video clips, very few of these were to support assessment.
34. In rare cases, assessment practices took too much time and reduced time for in-the-moment feedback.

Systems at subject and school level

High-quality music education is likely to have the following features:

- sufficient time for music
- a range of extra-curricular opportunities
- instrumental and vocal tuition opportunities
- flexible leaders who understand how music departments operate differently from other subjects
- leaders who understand staff expertise in music
- a focus on developing teachers' subject knowledge, including developing them as musicians

35. Around a quarter of primary schools visited had thriving and strong musical cultures.
36. All schools visited ensured that pupils learned music, weekly in most cases.
37. A small number of schools taught music on isolated days, in a single weekly block or when teachers chose to. A few that had bought in a scheme did not allocated sufficient time for it.
38. Around half of schools offered a good range of extra-curricular activities but a handful offered nothing outside of the classroom.
39. Around half of schools offered instrumental and vocal tuition, many working with their Music Education Hub. Participation rates varied and were generally higher in schools that subsidised the cost.
40. Where no additional tuition was offered, headteachers had had not considered the option, were unaware of their availability or judged that families could not afford them.
41. Many headteachers reported that the consequences of Covid-19 were still having an impact.
42. Schools with strong extra-curricular offers considered it important that all pupils, including those with SEND, could take part and they actively monitored this.
43. Around a third of schools were strongly committed to providing chances for pupils to attend concerts and hear professional musicians.
44. Some subject leaders were well supported and these schools were more likely to be further ahead in their thinking.
45. Most leaders were realistic about their teachers' subject expertise. Many however had no clear plans for addressing weaknesses, particularly where the school bought in a scheme of work. Some leaders were unsure where to find support.
46. Teachers most frequently mentioned training associated with bought-in curricula.
47. A few schools were strengthening teachers' musicianship, viewing it as an ongoing process.

Secondary

Curriculum intent: identifying what pupils need to know and do

High-quality music education is likely to:

- take into account what can realistically be learnt in the time available
- give regular opportunities to return to and consolidate learning and gradually introduce new ideas, methods and concepts
- set out specific content to be learned by the end point(s)

48. Most secondary schools visited were committed to ensuring that pupils learned music in KS3. Activities largely followed the national curriculum in KS3 and exam syllabi in KS4&5.
49. Almost all leaders were clear about their broad vision for music.
50. Time given to music was critical to the scope and ambition of curricula at KS3 and this varied significantly.
51. KS3 pupils got around an hour of music per week in most schools. Vocal work was rare.
52. Where KS3 was delivered in two years, and where music was taught in blocks of time, the curriculum was narrower and less ambitious. These curricula often focused on playing instruments, with deficits in composing and learning about a wide range of music.
53. Many KS4 curricula closely followed exam specifications and few schools had considered the knowledge required to perform highly in exams. Leaders were often aware of these weaknesses but had concluded that pupils could achieve well in exams without the underpinning knowledge.
54. Most schools offering music at KS5 had considered the knowledge required to perform highly in exams however many were providing additional tuition to fill significant gaps in pupils' learning.
55. End points and required learning were most clearly defined for performing and these schools' KS3 often focussed on preparing pupils for KS4. Some schools identified end points too broadly.
56. Clear end points for performing were often associated with clarity on knowledge of staff notation and recognition of the time required to learn to read fluently. In some schools, pupils encountered notation with no expectation that they would learn to use it.
57. Aims for composition were typically high-level, with insufficient thought given to the knowledge needed to achieve the aims.
58. Leaders in schools with effective curricula focussed on teaching the constructive knowledge required to reach their chosen end points.
59. Despite widespread wishes for pupils to develop an appreciation of music, very few schools had considered and sequenced the knowledge needed. Leaders sometimes assumed that listening to a wide range of music would suffice to achieve this.

Planning the curriculum so that pupils become more 'musical'

A high-quality music curriculum is likely to:

- build procedural knowledge in controlling sound
 - provide opportunities to consolidate procedural knowledge
 - be gradual, iterative and coherent with regard to instrument choice
 - allow pupils to practise the skills identified in the school's curriculum
 - include tasks at an appropriate technical level for pupils to realise their expressive intentions
 - give pupils opportunities to learn about musical culture and repertoire
60. Most secondary schools visited had designed their own music curricula and KS3 was typically organised into termly or half-termly blocks focussing on a musical style or genre.
 61. Most KS4 curricula followed exam specifications but few schools had seriously considered the chunks of knowledge needed to reach the defined end points.
 62. In most schools, KS3 curricula had not considered what pupils had learnt in primary school, sometimes because they were assumed to have done little or no music previously.
 63. Most schools prioritised broadening pupils' experiences of different genres with insufficient consideration for their musical progression.

64. About a quarter of schools ensured that the curriculum supported pupils to become more musical.
65. A small number of schools had considered step-by-step how pupils' singing would improve. In most schools, singing was viewed as participatory and was usually only taught in Y7.
66. In the few schools where pupils were learning to control sound effectively, leaders recognised that this takes time and that technical skills are not always transferrable to other instruments.
67. These schools had often reduced the number of instruments pupils learned. Other schools offered shallow encounters with more instruments and consequently pupils played more mechanically and less expressively.
68. A few schools taught staff notation effectively; in others, it was typically introduced in a single unit with insufficient opportunities to consolidate the knowledge.
69. In most schools, composition was the weakest aspect. Typically KS3 pupils composed during every unit of work but had insufficient time to learn the components needed to compose effectively in the styles studied.
70. Effective curricula for composition had several common features including identifying the components and knowledge required; using music technology; clear end points; a focus on one or two genres, traditions or styles; sufficient time to experiment and rehearse.
71. Most schools introduced knowledge about the interrelated dimensions of music but far fewer schools broadened and deepened pupils' knowledge of these over time.

What pupils know and remember

72. Pupils mostly did not have a secure grasp of the skills and knowledge planned and teachers paid insufficient attention to whether pupils were achieving the goals set out in the curriculum.
73. The depth of procedural knowledge learned in KS3 varied significantly and while some prepared all pupils (including those with SEND) well for KS4, more schools did not.
74. Some schools lacked ambition in the taught curriculum but enabled some pupils to develop strong procedural and declarative knowledge through the wider musical offer. This raises questions about equality in music education where access relies on paid-for tuition.
75. At KS4&5, considerably more schools enabled pupils to gain the knowledge to perform, typically learnt from peripatetic instrumental or singing teachers.
76. Pupils knew and remembered least in the area of constructing and deconstructing music.
77. Many leaders aspire for pupils to listen to music with increasing discrimination but few schools taught this effectively. KS4 pupils more commonly learned lists of facts and terminology without being able to recognise features aurally or comment on their expressive effect.

Pedagogy: teaching the curriculum

High-quality music education is likely to have the following features:

- high levels of guidance for novices
- a focus on the quality of musical responses with ongoing feedback
- clarity about what will be in formative assessments

78. Most secondary schools had specialist music teachers. In a small number of schools KS3 was partly or wholly taught by non-specialists, usually because of recruiting difficulties. A few schools were temporarily not teaching music at all because of a shortage of specialists.
79. Non-specialist teachers were rarely trained or supported in music and had insufficient knowledge and confidence to deliver the curriculum.
80. It was common for teachers to lack the confidence and knowledge to teach singing.
81. In around half of schools, teachers broke tasks down into component parts and allowed adequate practice time. The converse was true in other schools.
82. Almost all teachers understood the essential role of ongoing feedback however its effectiveness varied considerably.
83. In rare cases, inappropriate whole-schools assessment policies disrupted music teaching. There were isolated examples of assessment requirements taking up disproportionate class time and adding unnecessarily to teachers' workloads.

84. The most effective teachers understood the interrelated nature of technical, constructive and expressive aspects of music, and work that built on previous tasks and introduced new knowledge.
85. About half of schools focussed on the quality of the music that pupils created; in some others, feedback praised participation even when musical responses were poor.
86. Modelling was widely used to demonstrate how responses could sound but only in fewer cases did teachers model step-by-step how to achieve the desired outcomes so that pupils understood how to improve the quality of their own responses.

Assessment

High-quality music education is likely to have the following features:

- summative assessment used to check whether pupils are learning as intended
 - assessment identifies pupils' misconceptions or gaps in their understanding
87. KS3 mostly used inappropriate assessment models (typically based on KS4 exam criteria) which gave little useful information about pupils' learning. Leaders seldom used assessment data to evaluate the curriculum or identify gaps in pupils' learning.
 88. Effective assessment was closely associated with clarity about the smaller blocks of knowledge needed to reach defined end points.
 89. In most schools, particularly those with music specialists, frequency of summative assessment did not reduce learning time. A few schools required formal assessments as frequently as every six weeks (or 4-6 hours of learning) meaning that pupils had insufficient practice time.
 90. Most teachers made audio or video recordings of pupils' work but only some used these to check whether curriculum aims were being achieved.

Systems at subject and school level

High-quality music education is likely to have the following features:

- sufficient time for music
 - a range of extra-curricular opportunities
 - instrumental and vocal tuition opportunities
 - flexible leaders who understand how music departments operate differently from other subjects
 - leaders who understand staff expertise in music
 - a focus on developing teachers' subject knowledge, including developing them as musicians
91. There was considerable variation in time allowed for KS3 music, with sufficient time in just over half the schools. In some, pupils did not have sufficient curriculum time to get better at music.
 92. Nearly all schools offered music at KS4. All schools allowed sufficient time for music at KS4&5.
 93. A few schools offered other 'more accessible' courses in preference to GCSE. A few school leaders did not see that a poor KS3 curriculum left pupils unprepared for GCSE. A similar number of schools were improving their KS3 curriculum and extra-curricular offer to better prepare pupils for GCSE.
 94. Most of the schools visited with KS5 did not offer music, usually because leaders had determined that they could not afford to run courses with low student numbers.
 95. Schools with thriving musical cultures tended to be those where senior leaders allowed music leaders time to manage extra-curricular activities and peripatetic tutors. Additionally, several school leaders ensured that KS4&5 courses ran even with low numbers.
 96. In most schools, teachers had the resources they needed but in a few, teaching was hampered by insufficient or inadequate resources.
 97. Where school leaders valued curriculum music, the extra-curricular offer was more likely to be rich and vibrant. A few schools offered few or no extra-curricular opportunities and these correlated with schools with no music provision at KS4&5.
 98. Most schools offered instrumental and vocal tuition. Participation rates varied and were generally higher in schools that subsidised the cost.

99. Many schools have reduced subsidies for instrumental lessons because of budget pressures but leaders recognised that, as a result, fewer pupils were now taking instrumental or vocal lessons and studying music at KS4.
100. Many schools have seen a reduction in Y7s taking up instrumental or vocal lessons following Covid-19 and significant numbers gave up during the pandemic. Many schools were struggling to maintain their previous ensembles and in some ensembles had not yet restarted.
101. Strong subject leaders focussed on improving the quality of education, not just administration. They visited lessons and checked that pupils' work matched curriculum intentions.
102. In a small number of schools, whole-school policies were having a detrimental effect on music education. The negative effects on music lessons were rarely considered.
103. In around half of schools visited, staff had access to subject-specific training and music teachers typically had strong links with Music Education Hubs and professional associations. Other schools offered only generic, whole-school training and their teachers were not well-placed to make the necessary improvements to music curricula.

Methodological note

This report is based on one-day visits between December 2022 and June 2023 by inspectors with music education expertise to a balanced sample of 25 primary and 25 secondary schools. Participation was voluntary. Inspectors spoke to senior and subject leaders, visited music lessons, spoke to pupils and reviewed pupils' work.

Evidence was gathered on curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and school-level systems and their impact on music education. Inspectors did not make judgements about the quality of music education in individual schools.

Analysis drew on the conception of quality in music education, as outlined in Ofsted's [music research review](#).

Case studies

Primary

- How one school went about changing its approach to building an ambitious music curriculum
- How one school went about building pupils' knowledge of the interrelated dimensions of music
- How one school went about building pupils' knowledge of the building blocks of composition
- How one school went about using assessment to check on curriculum effectiveness
- How one school went about developing staff's subject knowledge

Secondary

- How one school set out the specific content pupils should learn
- How one school went about incrementally developing pupils' knowledge of the technical, constructive and expressive aspects of music at key stage 3
- How one school went about developing pupils' knowledge of how to use staff notation
- How one school went about ensuring that all pupils were better prepared for GCSE music

This summary prepared by Gary Griffiths for:
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