# Notes and guidance: Non-exam assessment

Step Up to English (5970) is an Entry Level qualification that can be used with learners in different teaching contexts: from Key Stage 3, alongside/as an alternative to GCSE study, through to adult literacy.

Step Up to English is designed to provide clear progression pathways for Entry Level learners, whether that's to continue onto a GCSE English Language course, Functional Skills English Levels 1/Level 2 or enter the world of work.

The assessment objectives are aligned with those for GCSE English Language which means Step Up to English can be used as a diagnostic tool, enabling teachers to track learners' strengths, areas for development and readiness for the demands of GCSE study.

The purpose of this guide is to provide additional support in all elements of coordinating the non-exam assessments (NEA): from understanding the requirements through to submission of a sample to the moderator.

This document should be read in conjunction with the specification.

Version 2.1
January 2026

# Contents

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# NEA advisers and support

All our centres have a designated NEA adviser. Advisers are experienced teachers and moderators who can provide guidance and support throughout the academic year on delivering NEA.

NEA adviser contact details can be found on Centre Services from mid-September each academic year.

If you are teaching Step Up to English for the first time, please email us to request an adviser: eos@aqa.org.uk

Your NEA adviser can discuss and support you with:
- specification requirements
- teaching approaches
- planning and conducting the assessments
- general guidance on application of the mark schemes
- general processes, administration and submission of assessments.

Your NEA adviser will contact you once in the autumn and spring terms with key reminders and signpost key documents in readiness for NEA submission deadlines.

# NEA requirements

Learners are entered at Silver or Gold step, and they can enter for Silver and Gold in the same series. Learners do not necessarily need to be entered for Silver before Gold; the step which is most appropriate for your learners will depend on their current level of academic achievement and the level of demand they are working towards:

| Silver step | Gold step |
|---|---|
| Certificated at Entry Level 1 or Entry Level 2 | Certificated at Entry Level 3<br><br>GCSE-ready descriptors are provided for diagnostic purposes only. |

## Overview of subject content for both Silver and Gold

| Component 1: Literacy topics<br>Non-Literary/Transactional/Functional tasks | |
|---|---|
| Required number of NEAs | Two live topics |
| Content overview (set by AQA) per NEA | • One spoken language (two in total)<br>• Three reading texts<br>• One writing task |
| Duration (under controlled conditions) | 1 hour 30 minutes per NEA<br>(not inclusive of spoken language assessment) |
| Assessment weighting | 25% + 25% of the final award |
| Guided learning hours | 120 hours |

| Component 2: Literary reading and Creative writing | |
|---|---|
| Required number of NEAs | One |
| Content overview (set by AQA) per NEA | • Two reading tasks<br>• One writing task (choice of two) |
| Duration (under controlled conditions) | 1 hour 30 minutes |
| Assessment weighting | 50% of the final Award<br>(Mark scaled or doubled by AQA after moderation) |
| Guided learning hours | 120 hours |

# Preparing for assessments

Each learner must submit:
- Two Component 1 NEAs.
- One Component 2 NEA.

There is a choice of **six differently themed, externally-set NEAs,** for each component. These are available to download and print from Centre Services. Speak to your Exams Officer about how to register for Centre Services if you don't have an account.

We provide a range of different NEAs:
- to enable you to choose topics that will best engage and enthuse your learners
- to allow you to use particular NEAs for practice purposes, enabling learners to build familiarity and confidence with the assessment before settling on the NEA topics that will be conducted under controlled conditions.

Each academic year we replace one NEA, for each component, with a newly-themed NEA. This ensures that the content remains up-to-date, relevant and interesting to teachers and learners. We will notify centres with information about which NEAs will expire, with one year's notice. This means that expiring NEAs have one academic year's shelf-life remaining and will not be valid for submission thereafter.

Specimen and expired NEAs (that the centre has previously downloaded) are **not valid** for submission, but they can be used:
- as a source of additional teaching material
- as practice assessments
- as a diagnostic tool to identify which level (Silver or Gold step) to enter learners for.

# Access arrangements

Step Up to English aims to develop foundation literacy skills and so the access arrangements for this specification **differ from those available for GCSE English Language**.

Any guidance provided here does not replace, and should be read in conjunction with, the most up to date Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) Access arrangements and reasonable adjustments guidelines.

In exceptional circumstances e.g. a learner needs a human reader for the Reading section or a scribe for the Writing section, then this must be discussed with our Access Arrangements Team before the NEAs are attempted. The access arrangements team can be contacted on: accessarrangementsqueries@aqa.org.uk Please note that these arrangements are indicated on the learner's certificate.

Visit our website for more information about access arrangements.

The key differences are outlined as follows:

## Spoken language

- Learners are able to complete the Spoken language assessment using British Sign Language (BSL) – prior approval is not required.
- Learners who are mute can apply for an exemption.

## Reading

- A human reader **will not be allowed to read questions or text in papers (or sections of papers) that assess reading.**
- A computer reader or reading pen will be allowed for the Reading tasks.
- A human reader is allowed for both the Writing and Spoken language tasks.

## Writing

- A scribe or speech recognition technology **will not be allowed for papers (or sections of papers) that assess writing.**
- A scribe will be allowed for both the Reading and Spoken language tasks.
- Learners may produce their assessments in Braille, but it is the centre's responsibility to provide the transcript for the moderator.
- Learners (where it is their normal way of working) may use a word processor, with the spelling and grammar check facility/predictive text **disabled** (switched off).
- Please bear in mind that the AO5 strand of the mark scheme for the Writing tasks rewards learners' handwriting skills, so this part of the mark scheme will not be accessed if all their responses to writing tasks have been word processed. In order to award marks for this strand of the AO5 skills descriptor learners must supply some evidence of handwritten work (for example a handwritten plan would be sufficient).

The following table indicates the access arrangements that might be applicable to your learner for Step Up to English. All arrangements should also be clearly recorded on the front cover of each NEA in the additional assistance box.

| Access Arrangement | Spoken Language | Reading | Writing | JCQ Forms Required |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Enlarge (A3) or photocopy to coloured paper | Yes | Yes | Yes | No evidence required |
| Human Reader | Yes | No | Yes | Form 13 (state **Human Reader for Spoken language/Writing tasks only**) and Form 11 (retain for records) |
| Computer Reader | Yes | Yes | Yes | Form 11 (retain for records) |
| Read aloud/ examination reading pen | Yes | Yes | Yes | No evidence required |
| Scribe (or word processor with spelling and grammar check enabled) | N/A | Yes | No | Form 13 (state **Scribe for Reading tasks only**) and Form 11 (retain for records) |
| Word Processor | N/A | Yes | Yes - **SPaG check must be disabled** | No evidence required. State 'SPaG disabled' in 'Details of additional assistance' box on NEA front cover |
| 25% Extra time | N/A | Yes | Yes | Form 11 (retain for records) |
| Braille Transcript | Yes Transcribed by centre | | | Form 5 (Braille Transcript cover sheet) |
| Prompter | Yes | Yes | Yes | No evidence required |
| Language Modifier | Yes | No | Yes | Form 6A (Language Modifier cover sheet) and Form 13 |
| Communication Professional (for learners using Sign Language) | No | No | No | N/A |
| Practical Assistant | Yes | Yes | Yes | Form 13 and Form 11 (retain for records) |
| Bilingual Dictionary with 25% extra time (for the use of the dictionary) | Yes | Yes | Yes | Form 11 (retain for records) |

# Conducting the assessments

These NEAs are confidential and should be stored securely until the time of issue. Once completed, they must be returned to the secure storage until the folders are submitted for moderation.

Learners may attempt more than the required number of NEAs and you can submit the required combination of NEAs where they have achieved the highest marks. However, once an NEA has been attempted it cannot be repeated, i.e. learners can only be assessed once on a given task.

## Spoken language

The spoken language element of the specification is completed as part of Component 1. Key points to note include:

- The spoken language task in both submitted topics should be completed.
- The spoken language task is not inclusive of the 1 hour 30 minutes assessment time; there is no specific time allocated to this task.
- The spoken language task can be conducted by the teacher at any time during the course and does not have to be completed prior to the written assessment, but be mindful that the spoken language task set is in-keeping with the overall topic of the NEA and supports the reading and writing tasks.
- The assessment is structured into two stages: planning and delivery.
- During the planning stage learners should be given relevant materials to help them prepare for their individual presentation (for example information leaflets).
- Learners may prepare materials to support their delivery (for example PowerPoint slides or prompt cards).
- Learners should be prepared to answer questions that seek additional information and/or clarity.
- The spoken language task can be completed in front of a single teacher and by virtual means if appropriate.

## Reading and writing

Key points to note include:

- The assessment must be completed under controlled conditions with formal supervision in the time totalling no more than 1 hour 30 minutes.
- The total assessment time may take place over one or more sessions, i.e. the assessment can be broken down into any number of sessions, as appropriate for your learners, but must be stored securely between sessions.
- The assessments can be completed one section at a time, ensuring they are stored securely between sittings. For example, you could teach the skills required for the reading section of Component 1 using similarly themed texts to your choice of topics. Learners then complete the reading section of the assessment before you move on to teaching the skills required for the writing sections and so on. The learners should only be given the pages of the assessment that they are attempting in the sitting.
- The texts and questions must be unseen by learners, but teachers can prepare learners for what to expect on the assessment and how to tackle the text-types or question-types they're going to encounter in the NEA.

- For learners working towards 'GCSE-ready', it may be more appropriate to complete the NEA in a single sitting to give the assessment a 'GCSE' type feel.

## Re-taking assessments

- Learners can re-take individual components during the course, but they cannot re-take the same task, i.e. they must complete a new, unseen, externally-set task.
- This is a linear qualification which means that all assessments are submitted in one series (January or May). Learners can re-sit the qualification as many times as they wish, within the shelf life of the qualification.

# Progression and co-teaching with GCSE English subjects

Silver Step (Entry 1, Entry 2)

Gold Step (Entry 3)

GCSE-ready (not certificated)

Functional Skills English Level 1

Functional Skills English Level 2

GCSE English Language
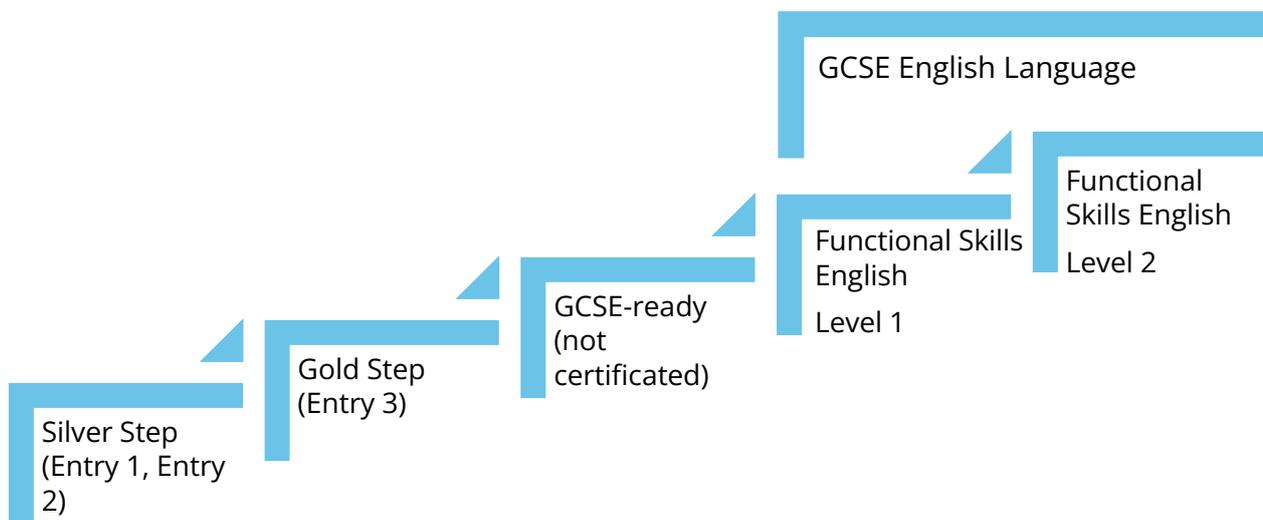
Step Up to English helps build the necessary foundation literacy skills that are required for progression to Functional Skills English and/or GCSE English qualifications. It is designed to be used as a bridging qualification for those who require it but is also a standalone qualification. (Please note that GCSE-ready is not certificated and can only be used as a diagnostic tool).

Component 1 has the 'functional' element that dovetails with Functional Skills English Level 1/Level 2 and builds into GCSE English Language.

Component 2 provides the literary element that is integral to GCSE English subjects.

Gold Step's high-quality, level-appropriate texts provide learners with the opportunity to develop critical and analytical reading skills of a wide range of texts from the 19th to the 21st century, whilst also building confidence/familiarity in responding to literary texts, which would support them in progressing to both GCSE English Language and Literature.

Step Up to English shares (differentiated) assessment objectives with GCSE Language which allows for seamless progression and/or co-teaching.

# Assessment objective coverage

The tables below show the coverage of assessment objectives for each component:

# Gold Step
## Component 1: Literacy topics

| | Spoken Language task | Reading Task 1 | | | Reading Task 2 | | | Reading Task 3 | | Writing task | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q1 | Q2 | | |
| AO1 | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | 23% |
| AO2 | | | | | | | ✓ | | | | 5% |
| AO3 | N/A | | | | | | | | | | |
| AO4 | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | | | 12% |
| AO5 | | | | | | | | | | ✓ | 25% |
| AO6 | | | | | | | | | | ✓ | 15% |
| AO7/8/9 | ✓ | | | | | | | | | | 20% |

## Component 2: Creative reading and writing

| | Reading Questions | | | | | | | Writing | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8/9 | |
| AO1 | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | | 20% |
| AO2 | | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | | 17% |
| AO3 | | | | | | | ✓ | | 13% |
| AO4 | N/A | | | | | | | | |
| AO5 | | | | | | | | ✓ | 30% |
| AO6 | | | | | | | | ✓ | 20% |
| AO7/8/9 | N/A | | | | | | | | |

# Silver Step
## Component 1: Literacy topics

| | Spoken Language task | Reading Task 1 | Reading Task 2 | | | | Reading Task 3 | Writing task | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Q1 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | | |
| AO1 | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | 25% |
| AO2 | | | | | ✓ | | ✓ | | 7% |
| AO3 | N/A | | | | | | | | |
| AO4 | | | | | | ✓ | | | 8% |
| AO5 | | | | | | | | ✓ | 25% |
| AO6 | | | | | | | | ✓ | 15% |
| AO7/8/9 | ✓ | | | | | | | | 20% |

## Component 2: Creative reading and writing

| | Reading Questions | | | | | | | | | | | | Writing | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13/14 | |
| AO1 | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | 30% |
| AO2 | | | ✓ | | | | | ✓ | | | | | | 10% |
| AO3 | | | | | | | | | | | | ✓ | | 10% |
| AO4 | N/A | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| AO5 | | | | | | | | | | | | | ✓ | 30% |
| AO6 | | | | | | | | | | | | | ✓ | 20% |
| AO7/8/9 | N/A | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

The skills within each assessment objective are threaded from Silver Step Entry Level 1 through to GCSE-ready. This enables you to use the assessment criteria diagnostically, providing a progression map for individual learners or the whole cohort. This, in turn, allows you to tailor teaching to focus on specific skills gaps within assessment objectives.

# Marking assessments

## Teacher Online Standardisation (T-OLS)

T-OLS is available at any time and can be accessed by all teachers in a department. You can see sample work that's been marked by the Lead Moderator with detailed commentaries. You can submit marks and receive instant feedback on how your marking compares to the standard.

Visit our website for more information on [how to access T-OLS](#).

It is the responsibility of the teacher to mark the NEAs. Please ensure sufficient detail is provided to help a moderator understand how you arrived at the marks awarded. Remember that where more than one teacher delivers the course you must ensure that internal standardisation has taken place (see Section 5.5 of the specification).

## Spoken language

Key points to note are:

- It is not requirement to provide a video or audio recording of the presentation.
- Use the levels of response marking grid in the mark scheme to determine a mark for this part of the assessment. Complete the 'key' column by marking 'D' (demonstrated), 'W' (working towards) or 'N' (no evidence) for each skill. This approach will help you to determine the band of 'best fit'.
- You must provide comments in the 'Comments and notes on contextualisation' box outlining: the context of each stage (planning and presentation) of the activity; justification for the overall mark awarded and make clear reference to the assessment objectives. It may be easier to type this section.
- Best practice is to provide some key examples of contributions that the learner made during the planning and delivery stages of the assessment.
- You may enclose a copy of the completed Spoken Language level of response grid, marked 'D', 'W' or 'N', to further support the moderator in understanding how the centre arrived at the mark.
- The grid can helpfully be used as a diagnostic tool, to see where learners' strengths or areas of development lie.

## Reading

Key points to note are:

- Straightforward responses can simply be ticked (i.e. annotation not required).
- Tasks requiring more subjective/extended responses (such as those assessing AO2, AO4 and AO1- inference) should have some annotation (referencing the relevant assessment objectives) to explain why marks have/not been awarded.
- Annotations should be tailored to the learners' responses rather than simply copying the wording of the assessment objectives.

## Writing

Key points to note are:

- Marginal and/or summative comments (referencing the assessment objectives) will help you to see where learners' strengths and areas for development lie.
- Annotations help the moderator to understand how you arrived at marks.
- Use the levels of response marking grid in the mark scheme to determine a mark for this part of the assessment. (You may enclose a copy of the completed grid to further support the moderator in understanding how you arrived at the final mark.) Complete the 'key' column by marking 'D' (demonstrated), 'W' (working towards) or 'N' (no evidence) for each skill. This approach will help you to determine the band of 'best fit'.

Once the best fit band has been determined, the following principles can be applied:
Lock into the marks for best fit band. For each skill (bullet point) in the marking criteria indicate whether the learner has demonstrated (D), is working towards (W) or provided no evidence (N).

## Component 1

| **AO5** Communicate clearly, effectively and imaginatively, selecting and adopting tone, style and register for different forms, purpose and audience. Organise information and ideas using structural and grammatical features to support coherence and cohesion of texts | |
|---|---|
| **Bullet 1** Handwriting | D = award 1 mark (e.g. if you're placing the skill in Band 3 award 11 marks; for Band 2 award 6 marks; for Band 1 award 1 mark). <br><br> W or N = 0 marks. <br><br> Where a word processor is used exclusively, no marks are available for this bullet point as no evidence is available. |
| **Bullet 2** Structure and audience | D = add 2 marks. W = add 1 mark. N = 0 marks. |
| **Bullet 3** Construction (ideas and sentences) | D = add 2 marks. W = add 1 mark. N = 0 marks. |

| **AO6** Learners must use vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation | |
|---|---|
| **Bullet 1** Spelling | D = award 1 mark (e.g. if you're placing the skill in Band 3 award 7 marks; for Band 2 award 4 marks; for Band 1 award 1 mark). <br><br> W or N = 0 marks. |
| **Bullet 2** Punctuation | D = add 1 mark. W or N = 0 marks. |
| **Bullet 3** Vocabulary choice | D = add 1 mark. W or N = 0 marks. |

## Component 2

| **AO5** Communicate clearly, effectively and imaginatively, selecting and adopting tone, style and register for different forms, purpose and audience. Organise information and ideas using structural and grammatical features to support coherence and cohesion of texts | |
|---|---|
| **Bullet 1** Handwriting | D = award 2 marks (e.g. if you're placing the skill in Band 3 award 13-14 marks; for Band 2 award 7-8 marks; for Band 1 award 1-2 marks) <br><br> W = 1 mark <br><br> N = 0 marks. <br><br> Where a word processor is used exclusively, no marks are available for this bullet point as no evidence is available. |
| **Bullet 2** Structure and audience | D = add 2 marks. W = add 1 mark. N = 0 marks. |
| **Bullet 3** Construction (ideas and sentences) | D = add 2 marks. W = add 1 mark. N = 0 marks. |

| **AO6** Learners must use vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation | |
|---|---|
| **Bullet 1** Spelling | D = award 1 mark (e.g. if you're placing the skill in Band 3 award 9 marks; for Band 2 award 5 marks; for Band 1 award 1 mark). <br><br> W or N = 0 marks. |
| **Bullet 2** Punctuation | D = add 1 mark. W or N = 0 marks. |
| **Bullet 3** Vocabulary choice | D = add 1 mark. W or N = 0 marks. |

There is also an extra mark available for AO6 for Component 2, so if a skill has exceeded the criteria, for example spelling is beyond Band 2 but not quite into Band 3, award the extra mark.

It is also useful to note, that if you have marked all of AO5 Band 2: NDD and Band 3: NWW, you can move into the higher band and begin to award just at the bottom of the Band 3 range because that is the best fit band that the learner is 'working' within.

For AO6, mark positively, for example if you have marked Band 3 DNW, then you can award marks within Band 3 but at the bottom of the range.

## Grade boundaries

Step Up to English uses a compensatory mark scheme. Therefore, the final award is cumulative (across both components). Both Component 1 and 2 are equally weighted. You will enter a Component 1 mark out of 120 and a Component 2 mark out of 60, but the marks will be scaled (doubled) after moderation. This will give you the total out of 240, which will determine the final award.

Grade boundaries are determined at the end of each series (January or May).

You can access grade boundaries for previous series on our website and use this as a guide to the marks that are likely to be required to achieve each award.

# Submitting assessments and moderation

- Learners will be entered at either Silver or Gold Step.
- However, it is possible to enter a learner for **both** Silver and Gold steps in the same series. Please note, they must submit a full portfolio for each step:
  - 5972/1 + 5972/1 + 5972/2
    and/or
  - 5973/1 + 5973/1 + 5973/2
  They cannot submit a combination of Silver and Gold in the same folder.
- Exams Officers will submit entries via Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) or Centre Marks Submission (CMS) on Centre Services.
- For further advice, please see our website for information on submitting marks online.

# Checklist

Before posting your sample to your moderator, please ensure that the following has been completed:

| | |
|---|---|
| One signed [Centre Declaration Form](#) kept in centre. Use the Unit Code 5970/U. | ☐ |
| To comply with OFQUAL, all NEAs front covers are fully completed and signed by the learner and teacher. | ☐ |
| Completed JCQ Form 13 ([from CAP](#)) for a human reader for the writing task (if applicable). | ☐ |
| Completed JQC Form 13 ([from CAP](#)) for a scribe for the reading tasks (if applicable). | ☐ |
| If a word processor is used for the writing task state 'SPaG disabled' in 'Details of additional assistance' box on NEA front cover. | ☐ |
| JCQ Form 13 and **enclosed letter from AQA** if a reader has been granted for the reading tasks. | ☐ |
| JCQ Form 13 and **enclosed letter from AQA i**f a scribe has been granted for the writing task. | ☐ |
| Check addition of marks is correct on NEA front sheets and CMS/EDI. (Incorrect addition can change the required sample, leading to additional postage.) | ☐ |
| Check each learner's work is numerically compiled and treasury tagged. | ☐ |
| Check marks submitted to CMS/EDI are correct (ensure the two Component 1 NEAs are added together). | ☐ |
| All learners requested on CMS/EDI are enclosed to moderator. | ☐ |
| **Two fully annotated** Component 1 NEAs are enclosed for each learner in the sample. | ☐ |
| **One fully annotated** Component 2 NEA is enclosed for each learner in the sample. | ☐ |
| Ensure the NEAs are valid for submission (i.e. not specimen or expired NEAs). | ☐ |

Please do not post work to a moderator which requires their signature.

After the series has concluded, a moderator [feedback form](#) will be issued to your centre, via your Head of Centre/Exams Officer.

# Additional support and resources

On our website you will find:

- A complementary scheme of work for each NEA, to support you in preparing learners for the assessment.
- Specimen NEAs. Please note these are **not valid** for submission.
- Suggested teaching plans.
- Subject specific vocabulary: high frequency and medium frequency.

On Centre Services you will find:

- Teacher Online Standardisation (T-OLS).
- Examiner reports.
- All live NEAs to download on demand.