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Rt Hon Nicky Morgan MP
Secretary of State

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Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP
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Dear Geoffrey

Thank you for your email of 7 June, enclosing correspondence from your constituent Ms Megan Thomas, on behalf of year six pupils at Andoversford Primary School, about key stage 2 assessment.

Firstly, I would like Ms Thomas to know that I really appreciate her pupils writing to let us know that they think we could have done things better. Their letter is an excellent example of strong and persuasive writing. I agree with your constituents that it is very important to make sure that the tests are as good as they can be.

One of the purposes of the tests is to ensure that the national curriculum is taught well in schools. Pupils who learn the basics of reading, writing and mathematics in primary school are more likely to do better in school and working life later on.

To make the tests as fair as possible, the development process is very thorough and takes a number of years. During this time, the questions are reviewed by a range of experts including teachers, subject specialists and people who work with children with special educational needs and disability.

The tests are also trialled by year 6 pupils all over the country. From the trials, officials in my department can see whether the questions are clear and ensure that pupils can answer them. If the questions do not work, the questions are changed or removed. The texts are chosen following feedback from pupils during trials – a significant number said that they enjoyed the texts in the 2016 test. That is one of the reasons they were chosen.

I was sorry to read that your constituent's class found the third text to be dull. Not all non-fiction is structured with sub-headings and bullet points, and we aim to reflect this variety of structure in the material we use in the tests.

Your constituents' letter mentions the lack of complex punctuation in the reading texts. In writing, it is good practice to choose a style appropriate to the purpose of the writing. However, it is not essential to good writing to use complex punctuation or grammar structures, such as fronted adverbials. In grammar, you need to know about these techniques and when it is appropriate to apply them. In the case of the reading texts used this year, the authors must have felt they were not needed in this particular instance, but that does not make them bad pieces of writing.

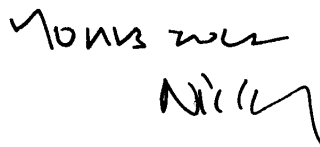
In terms of the language used in the texts chosen, one of the aspects being assessed in the reading test is that pupils are able to work out unfamiliar vocabulary in texts. If only familiar, widely used vocabulary is used, this aspect could not be assessed.

Your constituents also comment on the reading ages of the texts. While we do review this, our research shows that the methods used for calculating reading ages can produce widely variable outcomes. For this reason, the Standards and Testing Agency prefers to use the advice of experienced teachers, reading experts and pupils themselves.

I was concerned to read that your constituents found their recent examinations a stressful experience. I recognise that many young people find tests stressful, and that while some students enjoy the challenge and find it motivating, others find it worrying. While school is one of the most important experiences for children, it is not meant to cause significant stress or anxiety.

From reading your constituents' letter, I can see Ms Thomas has taken a sensible approach to these tests in ensuring her pupils were well prepared and I would encourage any pupils experiencing high levels of stress to speak to their teacher or school counsellor. They can advise on all aspects of examination preparation and school work, such as how to better remember information and how to plan effectively. Such support can help make examinations a much less stressful experience.

Thank you for writing to me on this important matter. I wish the year six pupils at Andoversford Primary School the very best of luck with their future studies.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nicky Morgan', with a stylized flourish at the end.

RT HON NICKY MORGAN MP