

# Teaching about the UK with geography

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**Steve Brace, the Society's Head of Education and Outdoor Learning, discusses how geography can be used to teach about the UK as part of the new National Curriculum. The National Curriculum will be taught from September 2014.**

We live in a country of 63 million people which has scenery spanning dramatic coastline, moorlands and mountains, managed agricultural landscapes and futuristic urban development. The UK provides schools with a diverse, unique, and accessible geographical resource that is accessible as soon as we leave our front door in the morning. Yet there is a perennial refrain that 'people don't know much about the UK', which was recently illustrated when a Year 5 teacher in a North London school displayed an outline map of the UK and asked her pupils to locate the city where they lived. Following a process of scatter gun elimination, with London being potentially located variously in the Shetlands, Wales, at the 'bottom' of the map, most of her pupils finally correctly located the UK's capital – and their home city.

This experience chimes with the findings of the most recent Ofsted report for geography which identified that:

*The majority of students ... had poorly developed core knowledge in geography. Their mental images of places and the world around them were often confused and lacked spatial coherence*

## **Geography: Learning to make a world of difference (Ofsted 2011)**

However, this sometimes hazy understanding of our home country is of course not confined to children. In 2007 polling by Esri UK (a Geographical Information Systems business) identified that 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of Britons thought Mount Everest was either in the Alps or 'somewhere in Britain'.

So it is to be welcomed that the new National Curriculum for geography places greater emphasis and requirements to teach about the geography of the UK, as well as the wider world. In the primary years the foundations are laid in Key Stage 1, with the need to:

- name, locate and identify characteristics of the four countries and capital cities of the United Kingdom and its surrounding seas
- understand geographical similarities and differences through studying the human and physical geography of a small area of the United Kingdom
- identify seasonal and daily weather patterns in the United Kingdom
- use maps, atlases and globes to identify the United Kingdom and its countries

Key Stages 2 and 3 build on this with additional requirements focusing on different regions of the UK, the countries human and physical characteristics, how the land is used and the geographical changes that are taking place. In addition, the new subject content for GCSE geography includes specific coverage of the UK's geography and its human and physical landscapes.

Whether in the primary or secondary years study of the different elements of the UK's geography provides significant opportunity for pupils to develop their knowledge alongside the use of a wide range of geographical skills, such as using atlases, maps (both paper and digital), aerial photographs, data about the UK (such as the online 'neighbourhood' statistics available from the census of local flood risk maps). Through this they will be able to set specific studies of different elements of the UK's geography within the wider national and indeed international contexts.

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The National Curriculum also highlights the importance of using Ordnance Survey (OS) mapping. Schools are to be encouraged to join the OS 'Digimap for Schools' which provides access to a range of current and historical OS maps of the UK as well as street level maps showing street names and road-atlas style maps. And a Digimap subscription provides whole school access to a very wide range of UK mapping, at well below the cost of buying a 'class set' of OS paper maps. In addition, the inclusion of the use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) provides the opportunity for schools to use GIS, such as ArcGIS Online to better understand the complexity and diversity of the British landscape.

A perspective on the UK which has really captured the imagination of young people, as well as their parents, is the use of aerial photography which can engage viewers with a variety of different landscapes from a 'bird's eye view'. The Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)'s *Britain from the Air* project captures many different aspects of British geography through its 100+ visually arresting aerial photographs. This project has been shown as a street gallery and all of the images and accompanying maps, text and educational resources are available online at: [www.rgs.org/bfta](http://www.rgs.org/bfta). These images reveal both the familiar and often surprising national landscapes.

Finally, there is probably no better way of understanding a place than by visiting it first hand and the new National Curriculum specifically requires geographical fieldwork at all Key Stages. Such studies might start with fieldwork in the local area and also reach out further afield. The Society provides a wide range of support for fieldwork and its *Discovering Britain* ([www.discoveringbritain.org](http://www.discoveringbritain.org)) project encourages people to get to grips with the geography of their local areas through more than 100 geographically themed local walks. A number of schools have been inspired by the project to develop their own local walks too.

The new National Curriculum has rightly placed greater emphasis on the geography of the UK, although not to the exclusion of other places across the world which are also well represented within it. There is much for pupils to gain from this renewed emphasis on the UK, which will enhance their geographical knowledge, understanding and skills. Indeed, all too often, we can forget the beauty of Britain's geography and the remarkable nature of the places on our doorsteps.

### **Further information**

For further details on the support provided to schools by the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG), including resources, fieldwork advice and support, CPD opportunities and how you can become a Schools Member, Fellow or your students as Young Geographers please see: [www.rgs.org/schools](http://www.rgs.org/schools)

### **Additional sources of information about the UK:**

- Local census data providing information about population, housing, ethnic and religious diversity or employment types is available from Neighbourhood Statistics. <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/>
- Information about climate data is provided by the Meteorological Office. UK climate averages for the period 1981-2012 covering temperature, rainfall and sunshine are available. <http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/climate/uk/averages/key-features-1981-2010.html>
- You can view a map of your local area through the Ordnance Survey's Open Data <http://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/oswebsite/opendata/viewer/>.
- Schools can access extensive Ordnance Survey data through Digi Maps for Schools <http://digimapforschools.edina.ac.uk/cosmo/home>.



- Information about the underlying geology of your local area can be found at <http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain/home.html>
- ArcGIS online is available through Esri UK, which provides a range of free and subscription services for schools [www.esriuk.com/](http://www.esriuk.com/)
- BBC Coast. The Coast series provides a journey around the coast of the United Kingdom, uncovering stories that have made us the island nation we are today. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006mvlc>

There are also a wide range of other national data sets available, which can also be searched by your local area including:

- Flood risk maps <http://maps.environment-agency.gov.uk/wiyby/wiybyController?value=N21+1AL&lang=e&ep=map&topic=floodmap&layerGroups=default&scale=11&textonly=off&submit.x=11&submit.y=10#x=531311&y=195850&lg=1,&scale=11>
- Air quality and pollution <http://uk-air.defra.gov.uk/interactive-map>
- Crime <http://www.police.uk/>

For details of the geography National Curriculum please see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-geography-programmes-of-study>