

Final Report of the Homework Working Party

This report was written by a number of colleagues who were set a task to complete some research on home work at Freemens.

The starting points were the Homework Policy and the Aims of the School, and examining these two documents in relation to each other. The secondary stage involved examining the school's levels of homework. The tertiary stage involved looking at feedback from staff and from students, and the final stage involved a series of recommendations. Please note that the Homework Working Party considered only the situation facing students in KS3 and above.

1. The School's Homework Policy v. The Aims of the School

The school's stated aim is to produce students that "learn, lead and make a difference", and it further elaborates on how this is done. Key extracts from this elaboration are that the school should produce students that are "ambitious about what they might achieve", "[given] relevant opportunities...to expand their horizons intellectually and socially; athletically and creatively; emotionally and spiritually", and that demonstrate "responsibility and capability; honesty and reliability; pride and passion". From these aims alone, even before looking at the homework policy or situation, it is evident that students should be given the opportunity for self-development, and that stellar academic achievement is not the be-all and end-all of what the school wishes to achieve. However, taken in conjunction with the school's Homework Policy, it appears that the aims of the school are either lost, or ineffective if that Homework Policy is rigorously enforced. The Homework Policy states that students should be given 4 hours 20 minutes of homework per week at Upper Three, an average of 52 minutes per night. This rises to seven hours and five minutes per week at Lower Four and Upper Four – an average of almost one and a half hours per night – and rises again to seven and a half hours at KS4, which is an average of precisely one and a half hours per night. Key Stage Five homework is much more flexible, being on an as-and-when basis. However, it is difficult to see how a student who endeavours to make progress in the school's other areas, such as sport, drama, music or indeed any after-school activity, will be able to complete this activity, return home, eat a meal and complete all their homework to a good standard. In many cases it must be assumed that a student will likely not be starting homework until around 7pm; there could well be a finish of 8:30pm or later. Such amounts of time dedicated to homework deny students to opportunities listed in the aims of the school regarding athletic and creative development, for instance. If a student is involved in a fixture rather than just a drop-in club, the start time for homework is likely pushed further back. This would suggest that a reduction in homework may well be of benefit to the furtherance of the school's aims.

2. The School's Levels of Homework

As noted above, the school sets levels of homework that vary from year group to year group, although the trend is to set more homework as students move through the school:

Year Group	Weekly workload
U3	13 x 20 minutes = 260 minutes = 4hr 20m
L4	17 x 25 minutes ¹ = 425 minutes = 7hr 05m
U4	As L4

¹ The guidance is for homework to be "20-30 minutes long", so I have adopted 25 as the mean. Had I adopted the lower level of 20 minutes, it would be five hours forty minutes for L4 and six hours for L5; but for the upper level of 30 minutes, it would be eight and a half hours for L4 and nine hours a week for L5.

L5	18 x 25 minutes = 450 minutes = 7hr 30m
U5	As L5

In terms of where this sits internationally and nationally, the school sets more than the average.

The UK average is approximately 5 hours of homework per week. The school's 7+ hours for every year except Upper Three comfortably exceeds this. Internationally, the UK's five hours per week is behind America (6 hours), Italy (9 hours) and China (14 hours.) However, it is vital to note that more homework does not actually translate into better results, as tables from OECD via the BBC show². This table shows amount of homework set compared to PISA score. PISA is Programme for International School Assessment; a standardisation of school achievement across the world.

Nation	Ranking in terms of homework hours per week	Ranking in terms of average PISA assessment
China	1 (almost 14 hours)	1 (around 590)
Finland	5 (around 3)	2 (around 540)
Italy	2 (around 9)	5 (around 480)
UK	4 (around 5)	3 (around 490)
USA	3 (around 6)	4 (around 500)

Table refers to 15-year-olds

Aside from China topping both tables there is no discernible pattern. Finland sets the least homework and gets the best results (apart from China). Italy sets the most homework (apart from China) and gets the worst results.

The school could, then, set around 33% less homework and still be around the UK average for homework set; it could also be anticipated that this would not have a detrimental effect on examination results, for two reasons.

Firstly, whilst no studies agree to have 'cracked' a homework 'code', there is broad agreement that whilst too little homework has no discernible effect, too much homework can in fact be detrimental. This would certainly be borne out by looking at the example of Italy in the above table. The consensus appears to be that fewer than two hours has no real impact, whereas more than six is detrimental to pupil health and wellbeing which – amongst other effects – will translate into examination results.

Secondly, many schools have shorter study hours than Freeman's. Indeed, the GCSE courses are designed to be delivered in 120³ guided learning hours, according to OFQUAL. Writing off the entirety of the sixth term in a two-year period of study, the Freeman's GCSE student receives 147.5 guided learning hours, almost 23% more than their state school counterparts. Yet they also receive over 80% more homework. With more guided learning hours delivered, there is less requirement for homework to be set.

Even without drawing any far-reaching conclusions, it is apparent that the school sets substantially more homework than would be expected given these external factors.

3. Feedback from Staff and Students

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-43386670>, article from 15-3-18, accessed 8-11-18

³ <https://qips.ucas.com/qip/general-certificate-of-secondary-education-gcse-graded-9-1-ofqual-accredited> - as on 9-11-18

The Homework Working Party consulted staff regarding their thoughts on homework in a survey that was designed to allow reflection on the current setup without steering towards a conclusion. To this end, responses were open-ended rather than tick-box, and the results were then summarised into broad headings to allow categorisation and statistical analysis. Eleven departments responded to the questions directed at KS3 and KS4; thirteen subjects to the questions about KS5 homework. The results suggested that the school has substantial capacity to adjust the homework policy.

At KS3, four departments broadly supported the current homework arrangements, with seven feeling that improvement was desirable. At KS4, these figures were reversed – seven supported the current arrangements with four endorsing change. At KS5, ten of the thirteen subjects that responded felt that the setup worked well, and three wished to see it develop. Asked whether the school's overall homework setup would benefit from some changes, five subjects said it would not, and eight agreed that change was, to some extent or other, desirable. When suggestions for *how* to improve were elicited, the most frequent request (ten of the sixteen suggestions) were for more flexibility over frequency of homework, three were in favour of 'more purposeful homework' (which can be interpreted as a concession that there is perhaps too much to fulfil any purpose), two for a longer completion time (which we discounted as this was within the capacity of the individual department to solve), and one department wanted no change with one further department wanting more homework. With ten subjects outright saying that a greater flexibility was needed, and a further three suggesting that there should be more purpose to homework, the Homework Working Party concluded a reduction in the amount of homework – which would, in turn, increase the relevancy and purpose of what homework *was* set – may be desirable. A further point to note was that many subjects stated that they had to reinterpret, reinvent or otherwise adjust the existing policy in order to make it relevant for their subject. One major subject argued at great length for no change to the homework timetable, stating that the 'drip drip' effect worked best in their subject.

The Homework Working Party also consulted consultative work that gained the views of students regarding homework. In this survey, less than half of the students consulted reported that the homework timetable was followed (61/167) with the fifty saying that it was not, and a further fifteen saying that they did not know they had a homework timetable. Students reported receiving 8-10 pieces of homework a week (65/168) or 4-7 (63/168) most commonly, at a time when the homework policy suggests that students should be gaining at least 12 pieces per week. Only 36/168 students reported routinely gaining "More than 10" pieces of homework, suggesting that the current Homework Policy is not being followed. 71 out of 168 students said that the amount of homework they were set made them feel stressed; 133 out of 168 said that it was not enjoyable. Students generally reported being clear on what they were being asked to do, but did not find it challenging. Aside from the complaint that the homework timetable was not being followed or was not fit for purpose, the most common complaint was that some staff placed a very short deadline for homework completion, which students found problematic. This ties in with the point on Section 1, suggesting that students are not always able to develop in other

areas due to homework commitments. One student specifically said that they could not complete after-school activities and others spoke of losing weekends to homework.

4. Recommendations

It was clear to the Homework Working Party that a new Homework Policy is needed, as firstly the current one is not being followed and as secondly, the current one is inhibiting student growth and development in other areas. However, it was also noted that some subjects do benefit from setting multiple homework to students and that removing these homework tasks could have a detrimental result on learning.

The Homework Working Party therefore makes the following six recommendations.

1. That the school resolves to ensure that no homework should be set with the expectation that it is completed for the following day. This is a straightforward change that will hopefully remove some of the pressures and stresses faced by students.
2. That the school moves to a fortnightly homework timetable in order to correlate fully with our fortnightly teaching timetable.
3. That the school homework timetables represent when a department **may** set homework, rather than when a department **must** set homework, with the expectation that **only a certain number** of those opportunities are taken. This number can vary from department to department but the Homework Working Party anticipate that certain similar subjects will be allocated similar opportunities. For instance, if History is afforded two opportunities a fortnight, it **cannot** take both, it **may** take one, or it **may** take none. The Homework Working Party, representing only a small number of departments, did not feel it should take responsibility for dictating what the number of these opportunities should be for each department, but simply notes that flexibility can be afforded here, and that those subjects with a 'drip drip' preference could be accommodated alongside those who do not require such frequent review.
4. That the timetables as outlined above do not allow for a student to sit more than ten hours of homework per fortnight, even if those ten hours are not perfectly distributed in a 5:5 ratio between both weeks. Ten hours should be considered the maximum, rather than the aim, in this regard.
5. That students are encouraged to review their work regularly, though they should not be required to do this as reducing the hours of homework only to increase the hours of review represents a zero net gain.
6. That the Senior Leadership of Freeman's head these changes and communicate them to both students and parents, as there is a strong feeling amongst colleagues that there is a section of the parental body who equate homework, irrespective of merit, with independent schooling. It is strongly felt that none of points 1-5 are likely to be effective if introduced without this sixth point.

The Homework Working Party believe that the benefits of this approach would be three-fold. The students would be afforded more time to develop as independent learners or as more active participants in the "learn, lead, make a difference" ethos. Staff would save time on marking and be able to reallocate that time towards resource development, professional development and lesson planning. Finally, the school would benefit from having a major policy that did not run contrary to its stated, and laudable, aims.