



Department of
Education

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Transform**ED**

Policy Framework for Statutory Assessment in Northern Ireland



APRIL 2026

Introduction

A central aim of the **TransformED** Strategy is to establish high, common attainment standards for pupils in Northern Ireland, underpinned by clearly defined learning outcomes that we expect children to meet at key stages in their education. Clear and consistent expectations enable teachers to assess progress with confidence, identify where additional support is needed and help parents understand what their children should know and be able to do at each stage of their education.

This document sets out the Department of Education's policy framework for a new system of statutory assessment designed to provide clear, coherent and high quality assessment arrangements.

The framework aims to support every learner, strengthen teaching, restore system-level insight and align closely with the ambitions of the **TransformED** Strategy. It outlines the aims, objectives, design principles and assessment pathway that will guide statutory assessment from Year 1 to Year 10, ensuring that pupils, parents, teachers and policymakers have dependable information about progress and attainment.

International evidence consistently shows that the highest performing education systems share common features: well designed curricula, clear expectations for all pupils and timely, targeted interventions. In jurisdictions such as East Asia, Canada and Estonia, high achievement is viewed as the product of effort, effective teaching and a supportive learning environment.

These systems set rigorous, common standards and provide structured support to help every pupil meet them. Establishing such common standards contributes to curriculum coherence, reduces unnecessary variation between schools and, critically, helps reduce inequalities linked to socio-economic background.

Northern Ireland has faced longstanding challenges in establishing high, common attainment standards. Confidence in the former Levels of Progression was limited, participation in statutory assessment was inconsistent, and system level performance data has been largely absent for more than a decade.

Research demonstrates that children's learning and development are shaped significantly by high quality teaching, support and effort over time, highlighting the need for a modern, reliable and equitable approach to assessment to identify need and inform intervention.

The new statutory assessment framework responds directly to these challenges and establishes the foundations for an equitable, world class statutory assessment system in Northern Ireland. It introduces a coherent structure for setting and assessing high expectations, strengthens early identification of need, and ensures that teachers and parents have clear, meaningful information about children's learning.

Purpose and Aims of the New Statutory Assessment Framework

The purpose of the new statutory assessment framework is to provide a modern, coherent and reliable system capable of supporting every learner, strengthening teaching and providing dependable system-level insight.

The framework is designed to provide clear expectations, consistent processes and robust information that enable teachers to plan effectively, parents to understand their child's progress, and policymakers to monitor and improve educational outcomes.

Together, these aims reflect the Department's commitment to a fair, evidence informed and future focused statutory assessment system aligned with the **TransformED** Strategy and the new Northern Ireland Curriculum.

The aims below set out the overarching long-term intentions of the new framework.

Support high quality learning for every pupil

Provide clear, dependable and curriculum aligned assessment information that helps teachers, parents and pupils understand progress and inform next steps in learning.

Strengthen core literacy, numeracy and science skills

Ensure that foundational skills are securely developed through high quality, technically robust assessments that focus on these critical areas for long term attainment.

Enable early and accurate identification of need

The new assessments will quickly identify emerging difficulties and support timely, effective interventions.

Rebuild system-level Intelligence

Restore reliable, comparable data across Years 1–10 to evaluate system performance, support evidence informed decision making and policy impact.

Reduce workload and increase professional confidence

Replace the previous bureaucratic teacher judgement model with low workload, high utility standardised assessments, alongside clear expectations, consistent processes and high-quality digital reporting.

Ensure coherence across curriculum, assessment and pedagogy

Align statutory assessment with the new Northern Ireland curriculum so that assessment reinforces, rather than distorts, high quality teaching and learning.

Objectives of the New Statutory Assessment Framework

The Department has identified the following objectives, which set out the specific actions required to deliver the aims of the new statutory assessment framework.

Establish a clear, sequenced assessment pathway

Introduce a coherent statutory pathway from Year 1 to Year 10, ensuring predictable and equitable assessment points across primary and Key Stage 3.

Replace the Levels of Progression, with precise, transparent standards

Remove the broad and inconsistent Levels of Progression and move to scaled scores with clearly defined expected standards, improving transparency, precision and public confidence in reported outcomes.

Strengthen teacher expertise in assessment

Embed assessment theory and practice in Initial Teacher Education, induction and early career development, supplemented by ongoing professional learning and guidance to support confident and accurate use of assessment data.

Deliver reliable data without high stakes accountability

Ensure assessments inform teaching, track progress and support system improvement but are not used for school level performance tables, or any high stakes accountability measures.

Provide dedicated Irish medium assessments

Develop linguistically and culturally appropriate statutory assessments for the Irish medium sector, ensuring full technical equivalence, fairness and comparability across linguistic pathways.

Modernise reporting and data infrastructure

Introduce a digital Record of Development and Education for every child, enabling high quality analysis, secure information sharing, and coherent monitoring of progress throughout primary and Key Stage 3.

Structure of the New Statutory Assessment Framework

All statutory assessments will be short, low workload, auto marked where possible, and designed to sample core curriculum domains without narrowing teaching.

Pupils with Special Educational Needs will be entered for statutory assessments wherever appropriate. When unsuitable, alternative attainment will be recorded in the Record of Development and Education.

The table below sets out the structure of the new framework.

Year	Assessment	Purpose
Year 1	Baseline Check	Early identification of literacy, numeracy, language, cognitive and social emotional needs; establishes starting point for value added measures.
Year 2	Phonics Check	Ensures mastery of early decoding; identifies pupils who require additional reading support.
Years 3–5	Annual Reading Fluency Checks	Tracks reading development; early identification of declining progress or hidden reading difficulty.
Year 4	Literacy and numeracy assessments	Short, curriculum-aligned standardised tests using scaled scores; providing diagnostic insight.
Year 5	Multiplication Check	Establishes mastery of multiplication facts essential for more complex mathematics.
Year 7	Literacy, numeracy and science assessments	Short, curriculum-aligned, standardised tests; can be used for value added measures for post primary education.
Year 10	Literacy, numeracy and science assessments	Short, curriculum aligned, standardised tests; provides a second checkpoint for value added to GCSE.
Years 4, 6 and 8	Samples to Writing Repository	Each school will upload ≤5 unmarked writing composition samples for each year group to a bank of anonymised writing. These can be used for benchmarking and will help track trends in writing composition.

Assessment Design Principles

Each of the assessments within the pathway will adhere to the design principles below.

PRINCIPLE	WHAT THIS MEANS
1 Purpose-driven, inclusive and equitable	<p>Assessments must have a clearly defined purpose(s) and be specifically designed to meet the stated purpose(s). They should generate information that supports the progression and development of every child across all educational pathways.</p> <p>Assessments must be designed to meet the needs of all pupils, including those with additional or exceptional learning requirements.</p>
2 Growth-orientated Attainment	<p>Assessment should be grounded in the understanding that attainment is the combined result of the effort of the pupil and the quality of education. Assessments should promote learning, progression and growth rather than models fixed ability or predetermined outcomes.</p>
3 Curriculum-aligned	<p>Assessments must align with and support attainment in the statutory curriculum for Northern Ireland.</p>
4 Fair, transparent and supportive of learning	<p>Assessment processes and outcomes must be transparent, building trust among pupils, parents, educators and stakeholders. Reporting and data from assessments should be clear, with information that supports accurate interpretation and meaningful use of assessment outcomes.</p> <p>All assessment outcomes must be treated as consequential and used responsibly to enhance learning.</p> <p>Statutory assessment should complement high quality school based assessment practices, recognising their essential role in informing teaching and providing a fuller picture of pupil progress.</p>
5 High technical quality: valid, reliable and free from bias	<p>Assessments should be based on clear constructs and appropriately sample the intended domain of attainment. They should assess what they are intended to assess, sample adequately from the relevant domain and be used consistently with their intended purpose and design.</p> <p>Assessment outcomes must be consistent and dependable meaning that similar performance yields similar results across occasions and assessors.</p> <p>Assessment design must not unfairly advantage or disadvantage any individual or group.</p>
6 Efficient and proportionate	<p>All assessment processes should be low workload, cost effective and proportionate providing value for money. They must deliver clear educational benefit relative to the cost, time and effort required.</p>
7 Agreed service standards	<p>All assessment providers must meet agreed service standards and ensure a sustainable supply of high-quality statutory assessments.</p> <p>All assessment outcomes and reports should be provided to agreed schedules and service standards.</p> <p>Publicly available information should include technical evaluations, reliability data, participation statistics and other evidence relating to assessment performance.</p> <p>Assessments must be monitored, evaluated and improved regularly. New elements and processes should be introduced only when they demonstrably meet the assessment principles and provide improvement to statutory assessment.</p>

PRINCIPLE**WHAT THIS MEANS**

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| 8 Strong professional competence in assessment | Initial teacher education and continuing professional development must support teachers to conduct assessment effectively, interpret outcomes accurately and take appropriate action based on the information generated. |
| 9 Clear communication with parents and stakeholders on assessment and its outcomes | Parents and stakeholders must receive timely, clear and useful information about assessments and their outcomes, enabling them to understand results and support learners effectively. |

Data Use and Reporting

Data generated through statutory assessment will be used for clearly defined educational purposes as follows:

Pupil-level feedback

Providing teachers with clear information about attainment, progress and next steps, enabling targeted support and effective planning of teaching.

Reporting to parents

Offering timely, accessible and meaningful reports that help parents understand their child's learning, strengths and areas for development.

School self-evaluation

Supporting evidence based reflection on teaching and learning, enabling schools to identify strengths, address areas for improvement and monitor progress over time.

System-level analysis and equity monitoring

Restoring dependable, comparable data across Years 1–10 to monitor system performance, track trends and identify any inequities between different groups of learners.

System-level policy decisions

Informing strategic planning, early intervention strategies, curriculum and professional development at system level.

Data will not be used for high stakes accountability or published at individual school level.

Academic research shows that when an assessment is asked to serve too many purposes at once, it becomes less effective at each one. For example, a test designed to help teachers understand pupils' needs and guide learning should not also be used to judge schools. Using it for high stakes accountability would weaken its value as a diagnostic tool and distort what it was intended to measure.

Experts increasingly agree that no single assessment can successfully meet several very different purposes.

The new system in Northern Ireland avoids these problems. It protects the core purpose of statutory assessments – to support pupils' learning – by not using them for the dual purpose of school accountability. This means the assessments will remain low-stakes and will not drive unhelpful practices such as teaching to the test or focusing only on pupils close to key performance thresholds.

Summary:

A coherent, equitable and future focused framework

This document establishes a fully reformed statutory assessment policy framework for Northern Ireland, grounded in international evidence, high technical standards and a clear educational purpose. It defines a coherent pathway from Year 1 to Year 10 ensuring that every pupil benefits from accurate, meaningful and fair measures of progress.

The new system is designed to deliver low workload, high value assessments that strengthen early identification of need and support sustained progression throughout a child's educational journey.

It is intended that parents and teachers will benefit from clearer, more consistent information about learning, enabling better support for pupils both at home and in school.

By providing dependable information, the new assessment framework will enhance the quality of teaching, enabling teachers to plan effectively and respond to pupils' learning needs with confidence.

It will also ensure that assessment arrangements are equitable and inclusive, offering a system that meets the needs of all learners, including those with Special Educational Needs and those in the Irish medium sector.

In restoring reliable and comparable system-level data, the framework aims to rebuild the capacity to monitor performance, identify inequities and guide evidence-informed policy making.

Crucially, statutory assessment will fully align with a modern, knowledge rich curriculum, ensuring that assessment reinforces high quality teaching and learning.

Next Steps

The Department will now move directly into implementation. This will involve:

- Establishing a formal Assessment Reform Programme, supported by 12 workstreams to ensure strong governance and oversight.
- Developing an implementation and resourcing plan for statutory assessment, including consideration of specialist expertise and technical requirements within CCEA.
- Working jointly with Health and other partners to design the Record of Development and Education Northern Ireland, ensuring that early developmental and school age assessment information is securely and effectively integrated.
- Introducing structured professional learning to strengthen assessment literacy across Initial Teacher Education, induction, early career support and ongoing professional development.
- Providing clear timelines, guidance and communication for schools, parents, unions, sectoral bodies and other stakeholders as the new arrangements are introduced.

These next steps will be taken forward in partnership with stakeholders across the education system.

