



Department of

**Education**

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# Transform**ED**

Response by the Department of  
Education to the Independent Review  
of Statutory Assessment

April 2026



## Introduction

On 10 March 2025, the Education Minister, Paul Givan launched the [TransformED](#) strategy which aims to reform and improve education delivery in Northern Ireland. The strategy aims to create a world-class education system that is equitable, inclusive and responsive to the needs of all learners.

The strategy places teaching and learning at the centre of system improvement, setting out a renewed commitment to strengthening classroom practice. TransformED is, therefore, focused on the core areas of teacher professional learning, curriculum, assessment, qualifications, school improvement and tackling educational disadvantage.

The strategy is built around a [Ten Point Plan](#), which includes a key commitment to introduce a new system of attainment measures for end of Key Stage assessment, which set high standards for all children and provide reliable system level performance measures.

It was within this wider context of the TransformED strategy and Ten Point Plan that the Independent Review of Assessment Panel was established on 9 June 2025. The three person panel was chaired by Tim Oates CBE, working with Dr Mick Walker and Garry Matthewson.

## Background

As set out in the [Terms of Reference](#) the Review's purpose was *“to make a series of policy recommendations on the purpose, nature and design of assessment in Northern Ireland.”*

The review was asked to:

- Assess the effectiveness of current assessment arrangements in Northern Ireland, including statutory and non-statutory assessments, in supporting pupil learning and progression.
- Evaluate the alignment of assessment practices with international best practices and the needs of learners, educators and society.

- Identify barriers to effective assessment and propose recommendations for improvement, including innovative and inclusive approaches which will support children with Special Education Needs (SEN).
- Make policy proposals regarding the purpose, nature and design of assessment in Northern Ireland, which will result in improved assessment arrangements which set high standards and clearly defined learning outcomes for all pupils.

The Review, which was carried out between June 2025 and January 2026, was tasked with producing a detailed report providing coherent proposals and recommendations for change.

The Review's Final Report, *Supporting Progress for Every Child*, was published on Thursday 5 March 2026, accompanied by a summary report and shorter documents setting out assessment principles for Northern Ireland, 10 recommendations for change and the proposed new statutory assessment pathway:

- [Full Report](#)
- [Summary Report](#)
- [10 Recommendations for Statutory Assessment](#)
- [Assessment Principles](#)
- [Statutory Assessment Pathway](#)

## Key findings

The Review drew on a broad evidence base to examine assessment in Northern Ireland. Sources included system-wide data, key Departmental publications, international research, extensive stakeholder engagement, a public call for evidence and a teacher survey.

Stakeholder engagement included:

- 13 visits to schools and other educational settings, involving discussions with school leaders, teachers, pupils and classroom observations;
- 24 focus groups and 34 evidence sessions, representing a broad spectrum of stakeholders;

- 106 written submissions in response to the call for evidence; and
- 912 responses to the online teacher survey.

**Using this wide-ranging evidence, the review concluded that Northern Ireland needs a new statutory assessment framework.**

The key findings of the Review may be summarised as follows.

### **1. Weaknesses in the previous statutory assessment system**

- The former statutory assessment system - based on moderated teacher judgement against the Levels of Progression - has been significantly weakened due to declining participation, limited data collection and the long-term failure of the Levels of Progression. This has left the system without reliable information on pupil performance across Key Stages.
- The Levels of Progression are no longer fit for purpose. They are overly broad, inconsistently interpreted and unable to provide dependable measures of pupil progression. Initial moderation processes were unmanageable and contributed to widespread loss of confidence in the process.
- Northern Ireland currently lacks coherent, comparable system-wide assessment data, resulting in an incomplete picture of educational standards and the impact of public investment.

### **2. Challenges in system performance**

- Overall, the Northern Ireland education system faces major strategic challenges, including declining international performance (particularly at age 15), persistent socio-economic attainment gaps and marked variations in outcomes between schools with similar intakes.

### **3. Assessment practice in schools**

- Despite the absence of a functioning statutory system, there remains a strong assessment culture within schools. Teachers continue to use assessments effectively to support learning and improvement, reflecting high levels of professionalism.
- However, the lack of a statutory framework has led to widespread reliance on commercial assessment tools. Schools spend over £4m annually on tests that are not consistently aligned with the Northern Ireland Curriculum and cannot be aggregated for system-level insight.

### **4. Early identification and cross-agency working**

- Early identification of learning needs is not sufficiently robust. Information transfer between early-years settings, health services and schools is inconsistent, highlighting the need for strengthened early-years assessment and improved collaboration.

### **5. International evidence and system design**

- International comparison shows that high-performing systems share key features: coherence between curriculum, assessment and pedagogy; strong early-years provision; high-quality system-level data; and sustained investment in teacher professional development.

### **6. Proposed new statutory assessment pathway**

- The Review proposes a coherent statutory assessment pathway from Year 1 to Year 10, based on curriculum-aligned, low-workload standardised assessments in literacy, numeracy and science, and replacing Levels of Progression with scaled scores.

- Recommended components include:
  - Year 1 baseline check
  - Year 2 phonics check
  - Reading fluency checks in Years 3–5
  - Year 5 multiplication check
  - Literacy and numeracy assessments in Year 4
  - Literacy, numeracy and science assessments in Years 7 and 10.
  
- Writing composition should not be assessed through a statutory test. Instead, a Northern Ireland Writing Repository is recommended to support low-workload benchmarking without the reliability challenges of formal testing.

## **7. Tailored assessments for Irish-medium education**

- There is an urgent need for dedicated statutory assessments for the Irish-medium sector, supported by an intensive programme of test development.

## **8. Digital record and system-level reporting**

- The Review recommends creating a Record of Development and Education for Northern Ireland - a digital, longitudinal pupil record to support transitions, early identification, SEN provision and improved information sharing.
  
- An independent Education Reporting Unit should be established to enhance system-level analysis, interpretation of assessment data and support for educators.

## **9. Assessment training**

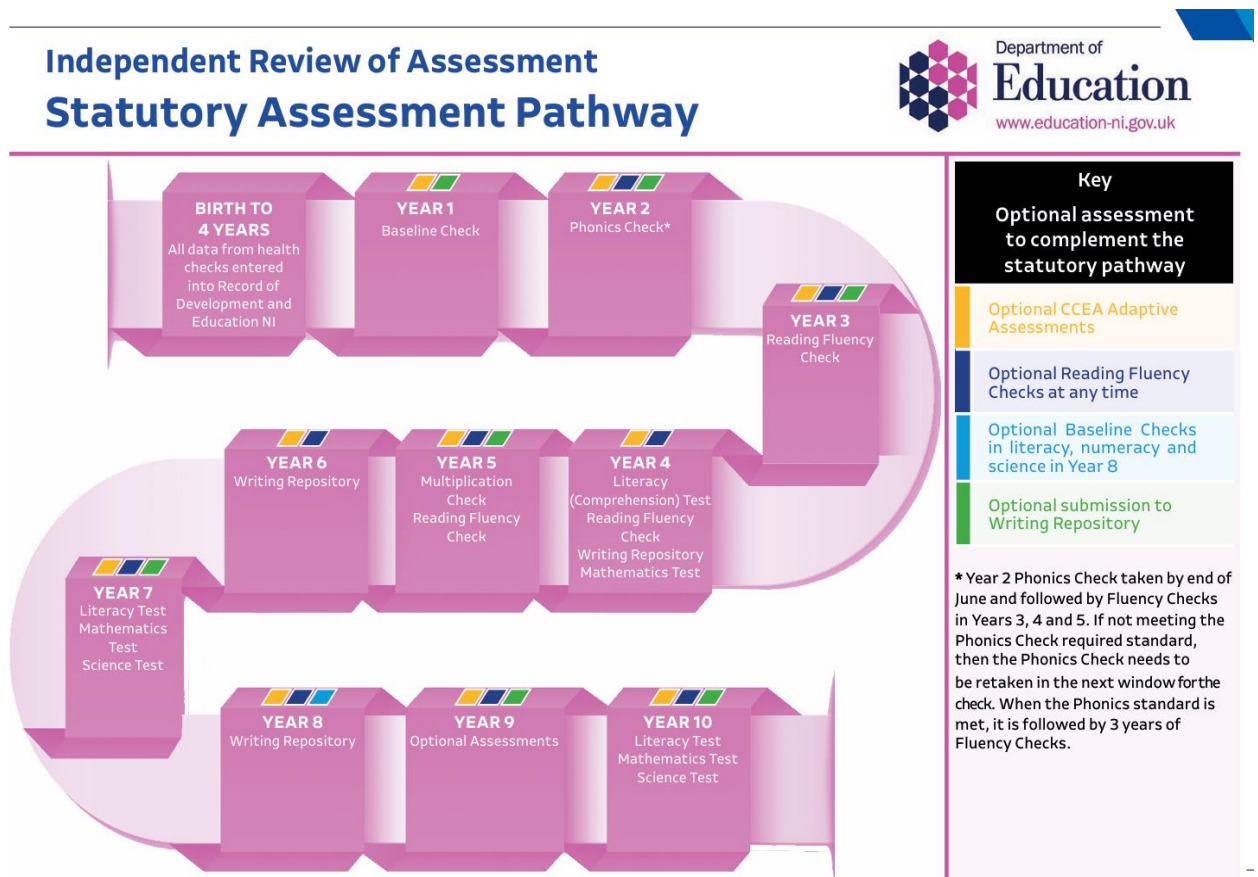
- Teacher preparation in assessment is inconsistent and insufficient. The Review recommends a core curriculum for assessment knowledge across Initial Teacher Education, induction and early-career development, with strengthened professional development for assessment leads.

## 10. Standards

- Maintaining stable standards will require scaled numerical scores, rigorous equating processes and a technical working group to ensure long-term comparability and public confidence.

Overall, the Review finds an urgent need for a coherent, equitable and technically robust statutory assessment system that supports teachers, strengthens early identification, reduces workload, improves system intelligence and drives improved outcomes for every learner in Northern Ireland.

## Proposed Statutory Assessment Pathway



## Way forward and implementation

The Independent Review of Statutory Assessment is a thorough, evidence-based consideration of the fundamental issues impacting assessment design and delivery in Northern Ireland. It sets out a compelling case for change and provides a strong platform for new arrangements for assessment.

The review contains 10 recommendations for change, which have been considered in detail by the Department of Education. This document sets out the Department's formal response to each of the individual recommendations in the report. All recommendations have either been fully accepted or accepted in principle by the Department, with analysis and commentary provided below.

**The Review is unequivocal: Northern Ireland needs a new statutory assessment framework to replace existing Key Stage arrangements. The Department accepts this conclusion and will now move at pace to design and deliver the new system.**

To oversee this work, the Department will establish a formal Assessment Reform Programme, led by an Assessment Board chaired by the Department. The Board will include representation from CCEA, ETI and EA, alongside international expertise in assessment design and standards. A dedicated Practitioner Working Group will also support this programme, which will be structured around twelve workstreams.

## Statutory Assessment - Workstreams

Computer Adaptive Assessment	Irish-medium Assessments	Year 4, 7 and 10 Assessments	System-Level Sample Assessments for 2026-7 to 2028-9
Professional Development, Guidance and Communications	Phonics Check	Legislative Framework	Multiplication Check
Baseline Check	Record of Development and Education	Writing Repository	Reading Fluency Check

CCEA, as the statutory body responsible for conducting assessment under Part VIII of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 and Article 9 of the 2006 Order, will be the Department's principal delivery partner in developing the new arrangements.

This is a radical change from previous arrangements for statutory Key Stage Assessment. To ensure CCEA can meet the technical demands of developing the new framework, the Department will immediately commission a capacity and resourcing review in regard to statutory assessment.

In parallel, the Department will ask CCEA to produce a detailed implementation framework, setting out the key operational steps required to deliver the main elements of the assessment programme.

Wider aspects of the programme including the new legislative framework, professional development and the new Record of Development and Education will be led by the Department.

### Timescales

The new statutory assessment system will be introduced in a carefully sequenced manner to align with the wider TransformED reforms and ensure system readiness.

- The current system-level sample assessments in literacy and numeracy for Years 4,7 and 10 will continue to operate until the end of the 2028–29 academic year, providing system-level insights during the transition period. As set out in response to Recommendation 2 below, the aim will be to move to the use of scaled scores and an expected standard rather than Levels of Progression for these assessments from 2026-7.
- The roll-out of the new curriculum will begin in 2028–29 and will be phased in over three academic years.
- The first new statutory Year 4 literacy and numeracy assessments under the new framework will take place in March 2030 (Year 2 of implementation of the new curriculum).
- The first new statutory Year 7 and Year 10 assessments in literacy, numeracy and science will take place in March 2031 (Year 3 of implementation of the new curriculum).
- The Department will, over the coming months, consider expert advice on the appropriate timescales for introducing the new baseline check, the Year 2 phonics check, the Year 5 multiplication check and the Writing Repository, ensuring each is introduced in a manner consistent with system capacity and high-quality technical development.

This structured, phased approach will ensure that the transition to the new statutory assessment framework is predictable, carefully paced and deliverable, while giving schools and practitioners the clarity and stability they need to plan ahead with confidence.

## Summary of Review Recommendations

No.	Recommendation
1	Introduce New Assessment Principles
2	A Focus on Pupil and System-Level Data
3	Remove Levels of Progression
4	Establish a New Statutory Assessment Pathway
5	Provide Optional Assessments
6	Develop Dedicated Irish-medium Assessments
7	Establish a Northern Ireland Writing Repository
8	Introduce a Record of Development and Education Northern Ireland
9	Establish an Education Reporting Unit
10	Strengthen Assessment in Teacher Education and Professional Learning

## Departmental Response to the Recommendations

### **Recommendation 1: Introduce New Assessment Principles**

**A set of guiding principles has been developed to underpin assessment policy in Northern Ireland. These principles reflect international standards and best practice in educational assessment. They must be regularly reviewed and updated to remain responsive to evolving policy, context and evidence.**

The Department accepts this recommendation.

The Review has provided a clear, coherent set of assessment principles to ensure that statutory assessment is robust, transparent and aligned with international best practice.

To ensure the principles actively guide the creation of the new assessment arrangements, they will be embedded in the design process from the outset. Every stage of developing the new pathway will begin with an explicit articulation of how the work aligns with the principles. Internal quality assurance processes will incorporate a standing check against the principles. There will also be training developed for practitioners on the assessment principles.

The Department will establish a structured review cycle to ensure these principles remain current.

## **Recommendation 2: A Focus on Pupil and System-Level Data**

**Assessment policy should prioritise the collection and use of pupil-level and system-level data to inform teaching and learning, and the development of system-level professional support and resources, rather than data being published or for school-level accountability purposes. This approach will create confidence in the new arrangements and support improvement without creating undue pressure on schools or learners**

The Department accepts this recommendation.

The Department accepts this recommendation and is committed to ensuring that assessment data is used first and foremost to improve learning and teaching, and to strengthen understanding at a system level.

In recent decades, a number of countries have introduced school accountability as a major objective of their domestic assessment programmes. In some cases, systems have incorporated penalties or rewards for schools depending on their 'performance. International examples include state assessment systems in the USA and national assessment programmes in Chile, England, Hungary and South Africa.

In some cases, the performance of schools is published in league tables, with the intention of driving improvement through market-style competition and parental choice.

However, international evidence demonstrates that these approaches often have unintended negative consequences. Where assessment results are used for high-stakes school accountability, teaching and learning can be distorted through teaching to the test. Teachers may narrow the curriculum, focus disproportionately on content that is tested and direct attention towards pupils who are closest to performance thresholds.

Such practices undermine broad, deep learning and can generate significant pressure for staff and pupils. In addition, between-school comparisons based solely on assessment scores rarely account for context or intake. Schools serving

disadvantaged communities risk being unfairly judged, while schools with more advantaged intakes can appear high performing regardless of value added.

The Department recognises that these high-stakes uses of assessment can narrow learning experiences, increase anxiety and reduce the effectiveness of assessment as a tool for improving outcomes.

**For these reasons, the Department will not publish statutory assessment outcomes at school level.**

This will ensure the tests remain low-stakes and that schools do not need to engage in excessive test preparation. There will be no pressure on schools focus on particular groups of pupils on the borderline of achieving government expectations, or to concentrate on particular types of question predicted to come up in the test.

Instead, our focus will be on using assessment information at pupil and system level, where it can have the most meaningful impact.

The Department wants teachers to use data diagnostically - to identify gaps, respond to pupils' needs and refine teaching practice - without fear that the information will be used punitively.

We also want parents to have access to good quality assessment information about their child that is widely understood and reported uniformly across the education system. This will help ensure that assessment supports learning rather than distorts it.

The Department will, therefore, develop guidelines that emphasise the developmental purposes of statutory assessment. This will make clear that statutory assessment is designed to help teachers and parents understand progress, inform teaching and guide planning and improvement priorities across the education system. Our aim is to foster a culture of confidence, openness and shared responsibility for pupil learning.

In addition, the Department will support schools to use statutory assessment outcomes for robust self-evaluation and internal benchmarking. Schools will be able to analyse their own data to understand patterns of progress, identify strengths and areas for improvement, compare their own performance over time and, where appropriate, compare to schools with similar contexts.

This will help ensure that assessment information becomes a practical tool for school improvement, guiding curriculum planning, sharpening interventions and supporting professional dialogue, rather than an instrument of external judgement.

Through this shift in emphasis, the Department seeks to create an environment where assessment is recognised as a constructive, reliable and fair component of the Northern Ireland education system that shows pupils' progress, supports early intervention and raises outcomes for all learners.

### **Recommendation 3: Remove Levels of Progression**

**The current Levels of Progression are not fit for purpose. They are too broad, subjective and open to interpretation. They also do not align with emerging international best practice. They should be removed to allow for a more coherent and effective assessment framework. Instead, assessments will use scaled scores to establish an expected standard.**

**Internationally, curriculum levels are increasingly not considered appropriate because they oversimplify learning into broad bands, masking gaps in understanding and attainment. They rely on imprecise best-fit judgments, meaning pupils at the same level can have very different strengths, making them unreliable for tracking progress and supporting learning.**

**Originally intended as formative tools, levels can become high-stakes accountability measures, distorting teaching priorities. They also fail to align neatly with what is taught, creating artificial thresholds that fragment progression. International evidence shows that high-performing systems avoid generic curriculum levels, instead using curriculum-based, concept-focussed assessment that supports depth of learning and coherent progression**

The Department accepts this recommendation.

The current Levels of Progression were designed to support an assessment system based on teacher-judgement of a range of assessment tasks. They do not have the confidence of teachers or parents and are not widely understood. They are also too broad and open to interpretation and do not, therefore, provide reliable information about pupil learning. As the Review highlights, teachers have consistently reported that the Levels lack clarity and precision, making it difficult to apply them consistently.

The Department also notes significant weaknesses with curriculum-levels more generally. Broad curriculum levels oversimplify learning into wide bands that mask important differences in understanding and attainment. Levels rely on imprecise

best-fit judgements, so pupils with very different strengths can be placed in the same level, making them unreliable for tracking progress or shaping next steps in learning.

Overall, the Levels of Progression no longer provide a suitable foundation for statutory assessment in Northern Ireland. They do not offer the precision, reliability or transparency needed to support individual learners, build public confidence or generate system-level understanding of progress.

For these reasons, the Department will replace the Levels of Progression with curriculum-aligned assessments using scaled scores, which offer a clearer, more objective indication of attainment relative to an expected standard. Scaled scores will indicate whether a pupil has met the expected standard for their year group, as well as their percentile ranking across the cohort.

In the new model, a panel of experienced teachers and assessment professionals, supported by detailed statistical information, will decide the level of performance that represents the expected standard for the age group in each subject creating a baseline standard.

As each year's test can be slightly harder or easier, a pupil's raw score will be converted into a scaled score to adjust for difficulty. The *expected standard* is not, therefore, simply a percentage or a fixed number of marks. It is a national benchmark set through a technical and carefully controlled process to make sure that "meeting the expected standard" means the same thing every year. Test design will also include elements such as common and anchor items

As part of the transition, the Department will work closely with CCEA to examine how the system-level sample assessments scheduled for 2026–27 to 2028-9 can move to scaled-score reporting, with an expected standard. rather than utilising Levels of Progression.

A detailed communication plan will be developed to support schools and parents to understand the new arrangements with clarity and confidence.

By moving away from broad, subjective levels and towards a more precise, transparent and internationally aligned model, the Department aims to rebuild trust in assessment and to ensure that statutory arrangements genuinely support teaching, learning and progression for every pupil.

## Recommendation 4 – Establish a New Statutory Assessment Pathway

A clear statutory assessment pathway should be introduced for pupils in Years 1 to 10, based on standardised assessments, which will significantly reduce workload for teachers compared with a system based on teacher-led assessments.

This pathway should include:

Year 1: Baseline check

Year 2: Phonics check

Year 3 to Year 5: Annual reading fluency check

Year 4: Literacy and numeracy assessments

Year 5: Multiplication check

Years 7 and 10: Literacy, numeracy and science assessments

If pupils reach the required standard in phonics in Year 2, then they will take short reading fluency checks in Years 3, 4 and 5. If they do not meet the required standard, then the phonics check is repeated annually. From the time the phonics standard is met, it is followed by three years of reading fluency checks.

The new framework is designed to provide reliable information for pupils, parents, carers, schools and policymakers on the key areas of literacy, numeracy and science.

These assessments will be closely linked to curriculum content and the Year 4, 7 and 10 assessments will use scaled scores to establish expected standards rather than broad curriculum levels.

The assessments proposed take account of curriculum reform, teacher workload and system readiness, with the need for carefully sequenced and phased introduction fully recognised.

The new framework can create a value-added measure for both primary schools linked to the baseline check, and at GCSE, value-added measures linked to prior attainment in Year 7 and Year 10, providing a benefit to schools in having a

consistent assessment baseline to inform pupil progress and school development planning.

Writing development in schools will also be supported by a statutory Writing Repository, details of which are provided in Recommendation 7 below

The Department accepts this recommendation.

The Department fully endorses the introduction of the statutory assessment pathway from Year 1 to Year 10 recommended by the Review.

This new framework represents a significant step forward for pupils, teachers and the wider education system. The pathway is rightly focussed on the key areas of literacy, numeracy and science. By providing a coherent sequence of standardised assessments, closely aligned to the curriculum, the pathway will ensure that assessment information is both reliable and meaningful, while substantially reducing the workload associated with previous teacher-led approaches.

*Benefits for Pupils*

The pathway is designed to support pupils' learning journeys by ensuring that the essential building blocks of literacy, numeracy and science are firmly established.

The Year 1 baseline check will give teachers an early, accurate insight into each child's developmental profile. At a point where early intervention has the greatest impact, this will enable teachers to identify strengths and emerging difficulties and to target support effectively.

The Year 2 phonics check reflects the strong evidence base showing that systematic phonics is a crucial foundation for reading. Mastery of phonics is strongly associated with later success in reading fluency and comprehension. By ensuring that every child achieves this threshold, and by repeating the check where necessary, the pathway supports every child to become a confident, independent reader.

Building on phonics, annual reading fluency checks in Years 3 to 5 provide clear, actionable information about how pupils develop fluency over time. Fluent reading is essential for accessing the wider curriculum. These quick, low-burden checks will

enable teachers to monitor development, identify pupils at risk of falling behind and provide timely intervention.

In mathematics, the Year 5 multiplication check will play a pivotal role in strengthening core numeracy. Fluent recall of multiplication facts is a cornerstone for mastery of fractions, algebra, multi-step problem solving and higher-order mathematical reasoning. Ensuring that every child has secured these essential facts provides a strong foundation for the demands of post-primary mathematics.

The inclusion of science assessments in Years 7 and 10 reflects the well-established importance of science and the Review's findings in regard to the long-term decline in Northern Ireland's international science performance. Assessing key scientific concepts at two critical transition points will deepen pupils' understanding of scientific enquiry, support progression into GCSE science and reinforce the value of STEM across our education system.

### *Benefits for Schools*

For schools, the introduction of standardised assessments will provide reliable data that teachers and leaders can use with confidence. The use of scaled scores in Years 4, 7 and 10 replaces broad curriculum levels with precise, comparable measures of attainment. This will allow schools to track pupil progress over time, evaluate the impact of teaching strategies and identify where additional support or pedagogical adjustment is required.

Crucially, the assessments are designed for diagnostic value, not accountability pressure. Teachers will be able to use the results to refine their practice and address areas of need. This supports a culture in which data is used constructively to enhance teaching and learning rather than defensively.

The pathway also strengthens schools' capacity for self-evaluation and benchmarking. With consistent assessment points at Years, 4, 7 and 10, schools will have access to high-quality data that they can analyse internally to understand their performance in context. Schools will be able to benchmark their outcomes against previous years, against similar schools or demographic groups, and against broader system trends. This will assist leaders in identifying strengths, diagnosing challenges, planning interventions and setting informed, realistic development priorities.

### *Benefits for the System*

At system level, the new pathway means Northern Ireland will have a coherent set of assessment data across the primary and Key Stage 3.

Standardised assessments at key points will generate reliable system-wide insight into literacy, numeracy and science standards. This will allow the Department to monitor trends over time, target resources more effectively and respond early to emerging issues.

The pathway also establishes a platform for sophisticated value-added measures. The Year 1 baseline check provides a stable starting point for understanding progress in the primary phase. Similarly, assessments in Years 7 and 10 will enable more robust value-added modelling in post-primary education, particularly when linked to GCSE outcomes. The Department will commission CCEA to develop an appropriate value-added measure, which will allow progress to be measured accurately and fairly.

### *Next Steps*

The phased introduction of the framework will ensure that schools have the time, training and support required for successful implementation. This includes alignment with curriculum reform, development of high-quality assessment materials and clear communication with teachers, parents and carers.

In accepting this recommendation, the Department confirms its commitment to a modern, coherent and equitable assessment system that strengthens learning for every child.

The new statutory assessment pathway will help embed the core foundations of literacy, numeracy and science; provide dependable information to teachers, parents and policymakers; reduce teacher workload; and enable schools to use data intelligently for self-evaluation and improvement.

This is a significant step in supporting the ambitions of TransformED and in ensuring that every learner in Northern Ireland benefits from high-quality, evidence-informed assessment throughout their educational journey.

### **Recommendation 5: Provide Optional Assessments**

**Alongside statutory assessments, schools should have access to a range of high-quality optional assessments, including:**

**Years 1–10: Optional use of CCEA Adaptive Assessments in literacy and numeracy potentially replacing current commercial assessments.**

**Years 2–10: Optional reading fluency checks, with frequency determined by the school, alongside the statutory fluency checks.**

**Year 8: Optional baseline checks in literacy, numeracy and science to be available to schools**

#### The Department accepts this recommendation

The Department recognises the value that high-quality optional, formative assessments can bring in supporting classroom practice, strengthening diagnostic teaching, and providing schools with flexible, curriculum-aligned tools that reduce reliance on commercial alternatives.

Many schools currently use commercial assessments for baseline and diagnostic purposes, often at significant cost and with variable alignment to the Northern Ireland Curriculum. This recommendation offers an opportunity to consolidate, improve and streamline the provision of optional assessments across the system

TransformED already commits to investing in upscaling and roll-out of CCEA's Computer Adaptive Assessments for literacy and numeracy as a free alternative to commercial assessments to inform effective formative and diagnostic assessment in schools. It sets out that the adaptive assessments in literacy and numeracy will be fully operational in schools by 2027-28 for Years 7-10 and by 2028 29 for Years 4-6.

Before system-wide deployment, it is essential that the tools are demonstrably fit for purpose, technically robust and responsive to the needs of teachers. Accordingly, the Department has asked CCEA to develop an action plan for a structured programme of development and quality assurance, which will include:

- **Ensuring fitness for purpose** through rigorous evaluation, including enhanced psychometric validation, usability testing and item-bank development aligned to the new curriculum.
- **Scaling development at the appropriate pace**, with phased release, pilots, teacher feedback loops and refinement to ensure that functionality, reliability and reporting meet system expectations.
- **Enhancing reporting and diagnostic capability**, ensuring schools receive clear, actionable information that supports targeted teaching and intervention.
- **Strengthening accessibility and technical stability**, ensuring the tools perform effectively across diverse school contexts, including rural, small and digitally constrained settings.

In parallel, the Department agrees that optional reading fluency checks should be available for all year groups. While statutory fluency checks will be concentrated in Years 3–5, optional fluency assessments will provide schools with flexibility to monitor reading development more frequently where pupils require additional support or where schools wish to evaluate the impact of literacy programmes.

The Department also supports the provision of optional Year 8 baseline assessments in literacy, numeracy and science. These will offer a consistent, NI-curriculum-aligned baseline for post-primary schools at the point of transition replacing, the commercial tools currently in use. The Year 8 baseline will support early identification of needs and informed grouping decisions.

To ensure smooth implementation, the Department will work with CCEA to:

- provide clear guidance for schools on when and how optional assessments should be used to support learning;
- ensure optional assessments complement statutory arrangements without creating duplication or unnecessary workload;
- support schools through professional learning and technical guidance;
- establish an appropriate governance and quality assurance framework for these assessments.

Through this approach, optional assessments will function as a flexible, high-quality suite of tools that support diagnostic teaching, promote consistency, reduce dependence on commercial products and enhance teachers' confidence in using data meaningfully without adding to workload or contributing to high-stakes accountability pressures.

## **Recommendation 6 – Develop Dedicated Irish-Medium Assessments**

**Specific linguistically appropriate statutory assessments should be promptly developed for Irish-medium schools. These should align with system-wide standards while respecting the distinctive features of Irish-medium education.**

The Department accepts this recommendation.

The Department acknowledges the clear evidence presented in the Review that current assessment arrangements do not sufficiently meet the needs of Irish-medium learners.

The Review highlights several longstanding challenges. In line with these findings, the Department commits to commissioning and funding the development of linguistically appropriate statutory assessments for the Irish-medium sector. These assessments will:

- align with system-wide standards while respecting the distinctive features of Irish-medium immersion;
- enable meaningful analysis of attainment and progression for Irish-medium pupils without compromising immersion pedagogy;
- support improved understanding of curriculum sequencing, language acquisition patterns and learning progressions within the sector.

To deliver this work, the Department will formally ask CCEA to lead the development and implementation of a dedicated Irish-medium assessment programme, including:

- the creation of a substantial item bank across literacy, numeracy and science;
- the development of Irish-medium equivalents to phonics, multiplication and other statutory checks;
- the design and validation of an Irish-medium baseline check;
- the integration of Irish-medium tests within the adaptive assessment platform;
- multi-stage trialling and statistical equating to ensure comparability with English-medium assessments;

This work will be taken forward in close collaboration with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG), school leaders, immersion practitioners, curriculum specialists, and linguistic experts in Irish-medium education. We will also draw on international expertise in bilingual and immersion assessment where appropriate.

The aim is to ensure that Irish-medium learners have access to assessment arrangements that are equitable, culturally and linguistically appropriate, technically robust and supportive of high-quality immersion practice.

### **Recommendation 7: Establish a Northern Ireland Writing Repository**

**As part of statutory arrangements, a Writing Repository should be created to allow schools to lodge examples of pupil writing. This low-workload initiative will enable schools to benchmark writing standards against other schools, including those in similar contexts, and encourage internal scrutiny of writing development.**

**Given their workload intensity, there will not be formal assessments of writing - rather this approach will provide a beneficial comparative tool, with minimal workload for teachers.**

**Schools will be required to submit no more than five short, unmarked samples, showing the range of writing quality in Years 4, 6 and 8. For other year groups, submissions are optional but encouraged**

The Department accepts this recommendation.

We recognise the value of a Northern Ireland Writing Repository as a low-workload, high-impact mechanism for strengthening writing standards across the system. The Review makes clear that formal, high-stakes assessments of writing are not appropriate given their workload intensity and reliability challenges.

Instead, a comparative, anonymised collection of pupil writing samples will offer a practical and meaningful way for schools to benchmark expectations, reflect on practice and track the development of writing across year groups.

To take this forward, the Department will formally request that CCEA establish and maintain a digital Writing Repository. This will include:

- designing and building a secure digital platform for the uploading and storage of writing samples;
- developing clear guidance for schools on the type, length and format of the unmarked writing samples to be uploaded;
- setting out the process for uploading the required samples in Years 4, 6 and 8, and the optional process for other year groups;

- ensuring the repository anonymises all pupil and school information prior to wider access;
- providing schools with access to a searchable, comparative bank of writing samples to support benchmarking, moderation practice and professional learning; and
- establishing appropriate governance and data-handling protocols.

This approach reflects the Review's emphasis on balancing utility with workload: requiring no more than five short, unmarked samples per school at key stages while enabling system-wide insight into the progression of writing.

The Department will work closely with CCEA to develop a clear timeline for implementation and to ensure that the repository is introduced with the necessary training, communication and technical support.

This will provide teachers with a valuable, practical tool to strengthen writing instruction, inform curriculum planning and promote consistent expectations across Northern Ireland.

### **Recommendation 8: Introduce a Record of Development and Education Northern Ireland**

**A digital record should be developed for every child and young person, integrating early developmental checks from 0-4 and all statutory assessment data.**

**The Record of Development and Education Northern Ireland will provide a robust, enduring record of progress for each child and young person, supporting smooth transitions between phases and reducing teacher workload associated with information gathering.**

**To ensure equity and inclusion for all pupils, there are also specific recommendations relating to the arrangements for pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Pupils with SEN should be entered for standard assessments within the statutory system wherever possible and where outcomes will enhance each young person's progression and personal development. Where entry is not possible, personal attainment should be recorded in the Record of Development and Education Northern Ireland and used for recognition, support and progression.**

The Department accepts this recommendation.

A unified Record of Development and Education will significantly improve transitions between educational phases and ensure that all professionals working with a child have timely and relevant information.

The Review highlights clear gaps in current practice, including inconsistent sharing of early developmental information, variable transition arrangements and unnecessary duplication of work.

A single, coherent digital record covering early developmental checks, statutory assessments and key contextual information will address these issues and support more equitable, timely and effective provision.

*Supporting Pupils Through Stronger Transitions*

International evidence shows that integrated child records improve continuity of support, reduce delays in identifying need and enable smoother transitions across early years, primary and post-primary education. High-performing systems such as Finland, Estonia and New Zealand use linked developmental and educational records to help professionals intervene early and plan effectively. The Review emphasises that early identification and robust information transfer are vital to improving long-term outcomes.

The Record of Development and Education will ensure that teachers, SENCOs and school leaders have reliable and up-to-date information, reducing information loss between phases and enabling earlier, more targeted support.

### *Reducing Workload and Improving Efficiency*

Teachers currently spend considerable time rebuilding pupil histories and repeating assessments when information is not transferred consistently. The Review makes clear that a well-designed digital record will reduce this workload, allowing teachers to focus on teaching, planning and supporting learners. The Record of Development and Education will provide a sustainable, system-wide tool that reduces duplication and improves efficiency.

### *Ensuring Inclusion and Supporting SEN Pathways*

The Department fully supports the Review's emphasis on inclusion. Pupils with Special Educational Needs should participate in statutory assessments wherever appropriate, and this will remain our expectation.

Where participation is not suitable, the Record of Development and Education will ensure that progress and achievements are still formally recorded, allowing every child to have a clear attainment profile to support planning and progression. This approach reflects international best practice, where comprehensive records help ensure equity for learners with diverse needs.

### *Working in Partnership with Health and Other Agencies*

The Record of Development and Education will combine early developmental information (0–4) with school-age assessment data. Its success will therefore depend on strong collaboration across sectors.

The Department will work closely with the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency, early years settings and other partners to ensure that developmental checks, health visitor information and early intervention data are securely and appropriately integrated. This reflects international models where education and health work together to support children's wellbeing and learning through connected systems.

### *Next Steps*

The Department will now begin detailed scoping to determine:

- the technical requirements for the digital record;
- governance, data-sharing and privacy arrangements;
- the phased implementation timeline;
- integration with statutory assessment data as reforms progress.

We will work closely with schools, early years providers, parents and carers and Health colleagues to ensure that the record is accessible, secure and genuinely useful.

### **Recommendation 9: Establish an Education Reporting Unit**

**An Education Reporting Unit should be created to manage and analyse assessment data in Northern Ireland. This unit will enhance early identification of pupil needs, improve collaboration across services and phases, and provide system-level intelligence to inform policy. It will ensure high-quality data is available at pupil, school and system levels, supporting equity and improved outcomes**

The Department accepts this recommendation in principle and the need for a unit of this style.

Northern Ireland requires a strengthened, coordinated capacity for the management, analysis and reporting of statutory assessment data. The Review makes clear that high-quality system intelligence is essential for monitoring standards, identifying emerging needs, and supporting evidence-informed policy. A dedicated function of this type will be central to ensuring that the new statutory assessment framework delivers meaningful insight at pupil, school and system levels.

At the same time, the Department does not consider that establishing a wholly separate organisation is necessary or proportionate. Instead, the Department will explore the most appropriate institutional location for this enhanced reporting function over the coming months. Our priority is ensuring that the chosen model provides:

- independence of analysis,
- technical and statistical expertise,
- timely, high-quality reporting, and
- strong alignment with curriculum, assessment and data systems.

## **Recommendation 10: Strengthen Assessment in Teacher Education and Professional Learning**

**The new statutory assessment framework should be supported by enhanced professional development and strengthened assessment components in Initial Teacher Education and early career professional development.**

**Assessment theory and practice should be embedded as part of the compulsory content within Initial Teacher Education and supported through ongoing professional development, particularly for early career teachers. This will further enhance teachers' confidence and competence in using assessment to improve learning.**

The Department accepts this recommendation.

Teachers' assessment literacy is fundamental to improving learning. High-performing jurisdictions such as Estonia, Hong Kong and Singapore demonstrate that assessment reforms only succeed where teachers have strong professional competence and consistent support to interpret assessment outcomes/

The Review highlights significant variability in teachers' prior training and confidence in assessment, with almost half of teachers reporting no meaningful assessment training during their Initial Teacher Education programme and many relying heavily on school-based expertise.

Strengthening teachers' assessment literacy, beginning in Initial Teacher Education and continuing throughout their careers, is essential both to the successful implementation of the new statutory assessment framework and to raising educational outcomes more broadly.

The Department will work with closely Initial Teacher Education providers, EA, sectoral bodies and CCEA to embed assessment more deeply into teacher education and ongoing development.

### *Initial Teacher Education*

The Department commits to making assessment theory and practice a compulsory and core element of all Initial Teacher Education programmes in Northern Ireland. The

new core content framework for Initial Teacher Education will ensure that every beginning teacher, regardless of institution, develops:

- A secure understanding of the principles of high-quality assessment;
- The ability to interpret and use statutory assessment outcomes;
- Confidence in formative, diagnostic and summative assessment practices;
- The ability to use assessment to address learning gaps and plan next steps.

### *Continuous Professional Development*

The Department will also commission the development of a suite of professional learning modules on assessment for teachers at induction, early career stage and for experienced teachers, including assessment leads.

As recommended in the Review, continuous professional development must build on Initial Teacher Education foundations, deepening teachers' understanding of assessment constructs and strengthening their capacity to use assessment information accurately and ethically. We will also explore accreditation pathways so that assessment leads can obtain appropriate recognition.

### *Developing system-wide confidence and coherence*

By embedding assessment literacy throughout the professional learning continuum, the Department aims to establish long-term coherence across curriculum, assessment and pedagogy - an approach strongly supported by international evidence.

In accepting this recommendation, the Department affirms its commitment to ensuring that every teacher has the knowledge, confidence and resources to use assessment effectively. As the Review makes clear, assessment must be understood as a pedagogical tool, not an administrative burden; a means of improving learning, not merely measuring it.

By embedding assessment within Initial Teacher Education, induction and continuing professional development, we will create a system in which teachers are equipped to interpret evidence with sophistication, act on it purposefully and support every learner to make meaningful progress.

## Conclusion

The Department of Education recognises the importance of the Independent Review and welcomes its clarity, depth and ambition. The Review presents a strong, evidence-based case for change.

Across its ten recommendations, the Review outlines a clear and coherent vision: an assessment system that identifies needs early, supports learner progression, reduces unnecessary workload, promotes equity, and provides reliable information to inform teaching, school improvement and wider system decisions.

The Department accepts the Review's findings and is committed to working collaboratively across the education sector to implement the recommendations in a phased, well-supported and robust manner.

The programme of work ahead is substantial and transformational. Key elements will include developing new statutory assessments, creating a Record of Development and Education for every child, establishing a Writing Repository, producing tailored Irish-medium assessments, strengthening teacher training, and putting in place high-quality reporting arrangements.

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. Reform on this scale succeeds only when it is shared, understood and supported. The Department is committed to collaboration, transparency and strong engagement throughout.

Northern Ireland now has a significant opportunity to create a statutory assessment system that is fit for purpose, strengthens teaching, enables early intervention, supports equity and improves outcomes for every child.