

Written Ministerial Statement

Paul Givan MLA

Minister of Education

New Statutory Assessment Framework for Northern Ireland

15 April 2026

Introduction

Today marks an important moment for education in Northern Ireland. My Department has published two major documents that set a new direction for how we assess, understand and support pupil learning: the *Response to the Independent Review of Statutory Assessment* and the new *Policy Framework for Statutory Assessment*.

Together, these publications establish the foundations of a modern, coherent and aligned assessment system that supports learners, strengthens teaching and restores the system-wide insight that has been missing for far too long. These reforms form a central pillar of my wider TransformED strategy to build a world-class, equitable education system focused on high-quality teaching and learning.

Their publication is particularly timely following the recent publication of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report on *Assessing the Quality of Education in Northern Ireland*, which highlighted that key building blocks of educational quality -assessment, inspection and data -have weakened over an extended period.

The absence of system-level assessment data throughout primary school and Key Stage 3, and the long interruption to inspections during Action Short of Strike have created significant blind spots, especially for disadvantaged learners and children with Special Educational Needs. TransformED is explicitly designed to address these structural gaps, and the documents published today represent a major step in that direction.

Responding to the Independent Review of Statutory Assessment

We are today publishing the Department's full response to the Independent Review of Statutory Assessment, chaired by Tim Oates CBE. The Review found clear evidence that the previous system based on moderated teacher judgement and the Levels of Progression did not provide reliable information for pupils, parents, teachers or the wider system.

Participation had declined sharply, confidence had eroded and schools increasingly relied on commercial assessments which, despite significant cost, could not produce consistent national data.

The Review recommended a new statutory framework built on clear standards, close curriculum alignment, low-burden standardised assessments and strong early identification of need.

My Department accepts all ten recommendations, including the removal of Levels of Progression; the creation of a statutory assessment pathway; the development of optional adaptive assessments; the introduction of the Writing Repository; and major strengthening of assessment training in Initial Teacher Education and ongoing professional development. This represents the most significant update to statutory

assessment policy in more than two decades and aligns Northern Ireland with best practice internationally.

A new statutory assessment system

The new Statutory Assessment Policy Framework also published today establishes, for the first time, a clear assessment pathway from Year 1 to Year 10, providing reliable developmental information at each stage. It introduces a sequenced suite of low-workload, curriculum-aligned assessments, including:

- a Baseline Check in Year 1
- a Phonics Check in Year 2
- annual reading fluency checks in Years 3–5
- literacy and numeracy assessments in Year 4
- a multiplication check in Year 5
- literacy, numeracy and science assessments in Years 7 and 10

The framework includes dedicated assessments for Irish-medium education, ensuring full equity for immersion learners. It replaces, high-workload unreliable writing tests with a new Writing Repository that allows schools to benchmark writing standards with minimal burden.

A key innovation is the use of scaled scores, which replace the Levels of Progression and offer greater precision, clarity and comparability over time.

A new Record of Development and Education will create a single digital learner record from early years to Key Stage 3, reducing duplication and enabling earlier, more effective intervention.

Crucially, these new assessments are short, low-stakes and supportive. They require no revision or preparation, and many will be automatically marked to minimise workload. They will be designed to give teachers the information they need, while providing parents with clear, consistent and easy-to-understand updates about how their child is progressing.

Data from these assessments will not be used for high stakes accountability nor published at individual school level or used to create league tables. Rather our focus is to ensure high-quality information to support pupil learning and on the standards across the system as a whole.

Addressing the NIAO's findings on the quality of education

The reforms published today respond directly to the concerns raised by the NIAO. Northern Ireland has long lacked robust system-level attainment data, limiting our ability to spot early signs of underachievement or monitor progress across Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3. The new statutory framework will restore consistent,

comparable information across the primary and early post-primary phases, enabling more effective identification of inequalities, sharper targeting of support and improved long-term planning.

The Record of Development and Education will help close the significant information gaps highlighted by the Audit Office, while strengthened early assessment and accountability structures address core weaknesses in the current system. Together, these reforms rebuild the essential foundations required to assure educational quality.

The NIAO itself notes that TransformED introduces the data, inspection and oversight mechanisms Northern Ireland needs: they are the essential cornerstones of system improvement.

Implementation and Next Steps

To ensure successful delivery, my department will establish a formal Assessment Reform Programme, supported by twelve specialist workstreams and guided by an Assessment Board comprising the Department, CCEA, ETI, EA and international experts. CCEA will lead the technical development of the new assessments, supported by a resourcing and capacity review to ensure readiness for this expanded role.

Implementation will be phased to ensure clarity and stability for teachers, parents and pupils. The rollout of the new curriculum will begin in 2028-29 and continue over three years. The first statutory Year 4 assessments under the new model will take place in March 2030, followed by Year 7 and Year 10 assessments in March 2031. Other elements, including the baseline check, phonics check, multiplication check and the Writing Repository, will be introduced as schools and practitioners are ready and as technical quality assurance is completed.

Conclusion

The publication of these documents marks a decisive step forward for Northern Ireland's education system. They provide the clarity and coherence needed to rebuild confidence in assessment, strengthen early identification and intervention, restore meaningful system-level information published at system - level attainment only, reduce unnecessary workload and ensure that parents receive simple, uniform and accessible information about how their child is performing.

These reforms are a central element of TransformED. They address the weaknesses identified by the NIAO and set a new standard for what pupils, parents and educators should expect.

Northern Ireland now has the opportunity to build a statutory assessment system that is fair, modern and fit for purpose and enables teachers to teach, pupils to learn and the system to improve.

My Department looks forward to working with educators, parents and our delivery partners to ensure every learner benefits from the strong foundations established today.