



Department of
Education
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Transform**ED**

Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028

An entitlement to excellence and equity

Overview





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Ministerial Foreword

Education sits at the heart of our social, cultural and economic wellbeing. A modern, coherent curriculum is essential if we are to equip young people in Northern Ireland with the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to thrive. Our current curriculum framework is now over 20 years old and has significant structural weaknesses: it lacks clarity on what should be taught, when it should be taught, and how learning should progress over time. The new Northern Ireland Curriculum responds to these issues with clarity and purpose.

My Department's TransformED NI Strategy aims to build an education system defined by excellence and equity. Excellence requires coherent, carefully sequenced content that builds securely over time, whilst equity requires that this entitlement is guaranteed, regardless of background or starting point, so that learners have access to powerful knowledge and develop the skills needed to participate fully in society, the economy and civic life.

This new curriculum has been designed for Northern Ireland by practitioners from across our education system, working closely with academics and international experts in curriculum design. I want to pay tribute to the members of the Taskforce Advisory Committee, the Subject Working Groups and all those across the education sector who have contributed their expertise, insight, time and energy to this work. Their dedication and expertise have been vital.

The new Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028 is not simply a set of documents. It signals a new entitlement for children and young people across Northern Ireland. An entitlement to a well-sequenced and coherent curriculum, to rich powerful knowledge and in turn to high-quality teaching. It aims to provide teachers with clarity while respecting and supporting their professional judgement.

Through this consultation, we want to further refine and enhance the new Northern Ireland Curriculum. Your views are vital to this process, and I would encourage you to respond to the consultation. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to introduce a curriculum that is clear, coherent and connected. One that raises aspirations, strengthens outcomes and sets a firm foundation for the future of teaching and learning in Northern Ireland.

Paul Givan MLA
Minister of Education



Foreword from Taskforce Chair

Over the past year, I have had the immense privilege of chairing the curriculum taskforce that has built the proposed new curriculum for Northern Ireland. Several features of the process have filled me with enormous gratitude, admiration and hope.

First and foremost, I pay tribute to the Subject Working Groups and their Lead Drafters. It is one thing for a teacher to plan their own teaching, but quite another to sequence a curriculum for 4 to 14-year-olds, for use right across a jurisdiction. Nearly 100 Northern Ireland teachers have put in vast time, care and commitment, fitted into busy professional lives, and displayed boundless patience, open-mindedness and readiness to listen to one another. Their passionate determination is for the children of Northern Ireland to have a curriculum of world-leading quality. Their Lead Drafters have led with exceptional subject expertise, and with commitment to collaborative effort, ensuring that the curriculum is made by and for Northern Ireland teachers.

Heartfelt thanks are due also to the Taskforce Team in the Department and the Taskforce Advisory Committee – for their relentlessly high intellectual standards, wide knowledge, generosity with time and unstinting attention to detail.

Crucial help has come from many more professionals, too. We are indebted to the experts who have worked on the set of Capabilities that define the intended impact of the curriculum on Northern Ireland's young people, to the advisers who have supplied specialist input and reviews, and above all, to the scores of teachers and school leaders who have supplied insightful feedback on interim drafts.

Last and far from least, I want to thank Lucy Crehan, deputy taskforce chair and author of the Strategic Review, for her great wisdom, grounded in wide international expertise and relentless commitment to the flourishing of children and young people everywhere.

Knowledge is truly the 'the wing to heaven'. When young people share common knowledge – its vocabulary, ideas, frames of reference and ways of reasoning together – they experience true inclusion. The world's great conversations, in which each has every right to belong, become theirs to enjoy, challenge and renew.

Dr Christine Counsell OBE
Chair Northern Ireland Curriculum Taskforce



Chapter 1: Overview

Introduction

The proposed statutory Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028 is presented across a suite of documents for consultation, as follows:

- **Overview paper** (this document) explains the background to reform, the need for curriculum reform and gives an overview of the structure of the new Northern Ireland Curriculum.
- **Subject frameworks** set out the vision for each subject and the statutory content that will secure pupils' progression in that subject .
- **The Capabilities** outlines the overarching capabilities (emergent qualities and attributes) that children and young people will develop as a result of learning the new curriculum.

A short guide to the new Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028 is also available.

Purpose of this document

This document introduces the proposed new Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028 and sets out the case for reform, the principles underpinning the new framework, and the structure of the proposed statutory content for Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3.

It is intended to provide a clear and coherent explanation of how the curriculum has been designed, including the evidence base, educational rationale and key design features that inform the proposed approach.

The document should be read alongside the Subject Frameworks and Capabilities documents.

A central purpose of this document is to support informed engagement with the consultation process. It is intended for a wide range of stakeholders, including teachers, school leaders, parents and learners.

Responding to the consultation

The consultation period on the new curriculum will be from **16 June 2026 to 30 September 2026**.

The Department welcomes all responses to refine and strengthen the design of the new Northern Ireland Curriculum. You can respond at Citizen Space or directly to the Department (curriculumconsultation@education-ni.gov.uk).

Following consultation, the content and structure of the new curriculum will be reviewed and updated in light of the evidence provided by stakeholders. The Department then intends to lay the legal regulations for the new curriculum during autumn 2026, with first teaching scheduled from September 2028.

Curriculum structure

A central feature of the new Northern Ireland Curriculum is that the fundamentals of subjects are strongly emphasised. The curriculum is organised around the distinctive knowledge, practices and ways of thinking that originate in subject disciplines. It provides a clearly defined sequence of knowledge and skills for each subject that children are to be taught at each key stage.

This emphasis on subjects is sometimes known as a domain-led curriculum, as each subject corresponds to a recognised domain (such as history, science, mathematics or the arts) through which pupils gain access to specialised, structured knowledge that cannot be acquired incidentally.

This new structure is a marked and intentional move away from broad Areas of Learning which are a central feature of the current curriculum. Broad Areas of Learning are often introduced with good intentions such as promoting integration, flexibility and real-world relevance. In practice, however, they are frequently ineffective. Teachers may struggle to ensure progression in core concepts. Essential foundations of knowledge get missed out. As a result, teachers of later year groups cannot be confident that pupils will arrive with the vocabulary and knowledge necessary to move on and learners risk gaining *surface-level understanding* rather than deep mastery.

Broad Areas of Learning lack the natural coherence of subjects and therefore lack defined progression pathways. This results not only in gaps but in repetition of topics across different stages of learning. By contrast, subjects are built on well-established and well-structured bodies of knowledge, each with its own distinctive methods of thinking.

A domain-led curriculum does not reject connections between subjects. On the contrary, meaningful connections emerge naturally when subjects are taught rigorously and coherently. In fact, cross-curricular connection is strengthened, not weakened, by secure subject foundations, because pupils have the knowledge required to make meaningful connections across subjects.

Skills are extremely important, but developments in cognitive science over the last two decades have highlighted that progress in skills is severely impeded by lack of attention to knowledge. Secure background knowledge transforms pupils' ability to read, interpret and analyse. Attempting to organise curriculum around generic themes or transferable skills risks detaching learning from the knowledge that gives it meaning.

Digital technology exemplifies the change in the new curriculum. The new curriculum treats digital technology as a core element of learning from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3, not an add-on, cross-curricular skill, nor a pedagogical device. The new curriculum aims to support all pupils to develop a deep, systematic understanding of the digital world so they can navigate, shape and critically evaluate the technologies that underpin modern society. This requires core domain knowledge in digital technology.



Overview of the new Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028

Each subject framework within the new curriculum consists of two components:

- **a succinct vision statement**, articulating the educational purpose and value of the subject;
- **a curriculum entitlement**, expressed as short, precise content statements, organised into subjects and sequenced across key stages.

The table below sets out the proposed structure of the new Northern Ireland Curriculum, including the subjects, phases of study and key design considerations. It provides an overview of how the curriculum is organised across Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3.¹ This consultation seeks your feedback on both the proposed structure and the underlying approach to curriculum design, including the balance of subjects, the organisation of content and the coherence of progression across phases. Your views will help to refine the final curriculum structure.

Subject	Stage	Key design explanations (where applicable)
Art and Design	Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3	
Digital Technology	Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3	Digital Technology is a new subject at all curriculum stages from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3.
English and Drama	Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3	The English framework currently sets out learning entitlements by key stage for both Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3. For Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, however, the learning entitlements are set by year group to provide further support and structure for schools during this critical period of early literacy.
Geography	Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3	
History	Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3	
Home Economics	Key Stage 3 only	

¹ A Key Stage 4 and post-16 enrichment curriculum will be developed as future workstreams.

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Subject	Stage	Key design explanations (where applicable)
Language and Cultural Awareness	Key Stage 2 only	<p>Language and Cultural Awareness is included as an optional curriculum subject at Key Stage 2 to give schools a framework for providing pupils with a positive first experience of language learning and to broaden their awareness of different cultures.</p> <p>The language and cultural awareness framework is designed to have specific synergy with the English curriculum. It builds directly on the foundation set by English by developing pupils’ awareness of how languages work across different contexts, using similar concepts, such as parts of speech, sentence structure, figurative language and meaning, but exploring them through multiple languages. This is intended to reinforce rather than duplicate.</p>
Mathematics	Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3	<p>The structure of the Mathematics framework is different from other frameworks insofar as it breaks down learning entitlements by year group at primary level rather than by key stage. This reflects the hierarchical nature of mathematics and the need for clarity about what concepts should be secured in what order.</p>



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Subject	Stage	Key design explanations (where applicable)
Modern Languages	Key Stage 3 only	<p>The Key Stage 3 Modern Languages curriculum is designed as a tightly structured programme that develops beginner proficiency in a single core modern language through a clear and cumulative model of learning. At its centre are phonics, vocabulary and grammar, which provide the essential building blocks of language. These are then applied through listening, reading, speaking and writing, ensuring that pupils use their knowledge in meaningful communication rather than treating skills as separate or discrete elements.</p> <p>The draft word lists that accompany the curriculum define a set of high-frequency vocabulary that pupils are expected to learn when studying a core language. The lists are sequenced and cumulative, requiring regular revisiting so pupils secure, retain and confidently use vocabulary over time. This structured approach reflects established evidence from language acquisition and cognitive science, which highlights the importance of repeated exposure, retrieval practice and coherent progression in building long-term linguistic competence.</p> <p>Schools of course have the flexibility to offer additional languages; however, the curriculum places clear emphasis on securing proficiency in one core language. Evidence from international research in language learning indicates that learners make stronger and more sustained progress when instructional time is concentrated on developing depth of knowledge. Establishing secure foundations in phonics, grammar and core vocabulary enables pupils to develop fluency, confidence and transferable language learning strategies that can support the study of additional languages later.</p> <p>It is recognised that, where schools offer more than one language at Key Stage 3, these additional languages may not be allocated the same volume of curriculum time as the core language.</p>
Music	Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3	

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Subject	Stage	Key design explanations (where applicable)
Physical Education	Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3 ²	
Personal, Social, Citizenship and Careers (PSCC)	Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3 ³	<p>Personal, Social, Citizenship and Careers is a new subject area replacing Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) at primary and Learning for Life and Work (LLW) at Key Stage 3.</p> <p>PSCC is an applied subject which draws on a range of disciplines and complements traditional subject-based study. It is research-informed, grounded in established disciplines including psychology, neuroscience, health science, sociology, political and civic studies, ethics, economics, and career development theory.</p>
Science	Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3	<p>Science at Key Stage 3 is split into Biology, Chemistry and Physics, underpinned and enveloped by the <i>nature, practices and norms of science</i>, which focus on the fundamental ways in which scientific knowledge is generated, tested and validated.</p> <p>Nature, practices and norms of science is not an isolated strand to be taught separately: these ideas can be applied through the lenses of the three subject-specific areas at this key stage in order to build and deepen pupils' understanding of how science is conducted, and to begin to use some of these approaches for themselves.</p>
Technology and Design	Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3	<p>At primary level, it is intended that Science, Technology and Design will ultimately be structured as one subject but to show clarity of progression to post-primary and encourage focused subject-based feedback, they have been presented as two subject frameworks in this consultation.</p>

2 PE will continue to be compulsory until KS4, and curriculum entitlements for KS4 will be published at a later stage.

3 Like LLW in the current curriculum, PSCC will continue to be compulsory until KS4, and curriculum entitlements for KS4 will be published at a later stage.

Special schools

The Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum⁴ found that the current curriculum does not adequately support pupils in special schools. Although designed as a universal framework, it is structured around age-related expectations and a linear model of progression that does not reflect how many pupils with severe, or profound and multiple learning difficulties develop. As a result, much of the curriculum content can be inaccessible or irrelevant for these learners.

Given the increasingly diverse and complex profiles of pupils attending special schools, designing a single national curriculum for all schools that fully meets the needs of these learners is inherently challenging. In practice, teachers are required to make significant adaptations or develop alternative approaches, leading to, increased workload and variation in practice.

The Department recognises that similar challenges may arise within the new curriculum, even with adjustments to pace. It is, therefore, not intended that the new framework will be statutory for special schools. Instead, it will serve as a flexible guide to inform planning and curriculum development across the sector and will be used to support students within special schools where appropriate. However, this in itself is not sufficient to meet the needs of the special school sector.

To address these issues, the Department has commissioned Professor Noel Purdy OBE to lead the development of a bespoke curriculum framework specifically for use by special schools. Professor Purdy will be supported by a practitioner advisory group, which will shape the new curriculum content.

This represents an important and timely opportunity to create a world-leading special school curriculum framework for Northern Ireland that places meaningful, life-enabling and developmentally appropriate learning at its heart for pupils across the full range of special school contexts.

Irish-medium education

Similarly, the Strategic Review found that the current statutory curriculum does not adequately meet the needs of pupils educated through the medium of Irish. Irish-medium schools must simultaneously interpret broad curriculum expectations and adapt them to the distinct linguistic and developmental pathways associated with immersion education. This again creates an increased burden on teachers and risks variability in pupil entitlement. There is therefore a clear system-level need to provide greater structure and clarity through bespoke curriculum work for Irish-medium education.

The new Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028 establishes a knowledge-rich, coherent and specified entitlement, with curriculum content appropriately sequenced to support

4 A Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. A Foundation for the Future: Developing Capabilities Through a Knowledge-Rich Curriculum in Northern Ireland. Lucy Crehan (June 2025)

cumulative learning over time. In this context, bespoke Irish-medium strands provide a necessary extension to ensure that progression is articulated in ways that reflect immersion contexts.

Crucially, Irish-medium strands will preserve the full ambition, content and intellectual demand of the statutory curriculum but adapted to reflect the need to sequence and present knowledge in ways that are compatible with immersion pedagogy and language acquisition. For example, the development of literacy in Irish requires sustained emphasis on oral language acquisition and comprehension throughout the curriculum. This may necessitate adaptation to trajectory or pace across subjects such as mathematics, science, history and geography.

The Department will work closely with Irish-medium practitioners and academics over coming months to develop the new curriculum strands.

Next steps

This consultation is the first stage of curriculum development in Northern Ireland. It is essential that the core content which will form the curriculum framework between Foundation Stage and Key Stage 3 is established and agreed.

This will provide the core spine to underpin wider policy work on further curriculum strands, particularly for Irish-medium and special schools, and the development of resources and professional development materials to support current implementation.





Chapter 2: What is curriculum?

Curriculum is the central organising structure of an education system. It defines the essential knowledge, skills and experiences to which pupils should be entitled and that shapes how learning is sequenced and organised across each year of education.

A well-designed curriculum provides coherence, equity and purpose, ensuring that children, regardless of background, have access to the content and experiences they need to thrive academically, socially and personally.

This chapter explains what curriculum is, outlines the different levels at which curriculum operates, describes current curriculum arrangements in Northern Ireland, and sets out why meaningful reform requires a new statutory framework.

The purposes of a national curriculum

Curriculum answers the question: *What should young people learn, when and why?*

A national curriculum is a centrally agreed framework that sets out the overall vision, principles, and guidelines for an education system, defining the knowledge, skills and learning experiences that pupils are expected to access at each stage of compulsory education.

Its core purpose is to ensure equity in education by providing clear and consistent expectations for what should be taught across schools, supporting progression in learning, and preparing young people with the knowledge, skills and capabilities needed for life, work and further study.

It must also be said that the curriculum is not intended to accommodate every interest, concern or priority that may arise at a particular moment in time. Its purpose is to identify the core body of knowledge that is judged essential for intellectual development and future participation in society.

This necessarily involves prioritisation. A curriculum that tries to include everything of potential value ultimately fails to secure what matters most. When curriculum design is driven by responding to every societal issue, coherence begins to weaken and the curriculum risks becoming overcrowded. This, in turn, can lead to overload and increased workload pressure for both teachers and pupils.

Curriculum design requires careful decisions about what knowledge is foundational. Not all worthwhile educational experiences need to be embedded in the statutory curriculum itself. For these reasons, the curriculum should not be treated as a vehicle for responding to short-term concerns or isolated issues, however well-intentioned.

By maintaining a clear focus on core knowledge and progression, the curriculum can remain manageable, coherent and genuinely empowering, ensuring that young people gain deep understanding rather than a superficial encounter with too many competing demands.

The key purposes of a national curriculum framework are summarised below.

Purposes of a national curriculum framework

Providing a common educational vision

A national curriculum framework defines each state's aspirations for its young people setting out a clear and purposeful direction for education.

The Department has accepted the recommendation of the Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum that the new Northern Ireland Curriculum should be *purpose-led*.

This means it is designed in pursuit of a clear vision and articulates how the content of the curriculum aligns with broader educational goals and the needs of society, supporting pupils to develop capabilities that enable them to flourish in life, work and civic participation.

A guaranteed entitlement

A national curriculum framework creates a consistent structure for what is taught at different stages of compulsory education. It guarantees pupils a shared entitlement to the knowledge, skills and experiences they should receive throughout their education. This ensures that learners are taught from a common body of content that is academically and culturally significant.

Such an entitlement is essential for equity, as without such a framework there would be wide variations in what pupils learn.

Structured progression and sequenced learning

A national curriculum framework also ensures that learning is carefully structured and logically sequenced so that pupils make meaningful progress over time (vertical coherence).

It should organise knowledge and skills in a way that builds from simple to more complex concepts, allowing learners to deepen their understanding at each stage of their education.

By setting clear expectations for progression, the curriculum helps avoid gaps or unnecessary repetition in learning, ensuring continuity across year groups and educational phases.

Setting assessment and evaluation standards

Another important function of the national curriculum framework is to define learning outcomes and establish standards for assessment.

It specifies what learners should know, understand, and be able to do at each stage of their education. This guidance helps shape the design of assessments at school and system level. By providing clear benchmarks, the framework enables educators to measure pupils' progress accurately and consistently.

Guides the development of more detailed school curricula

The framework guides development of detailed curricula, syllabuses and learning materials. Notably, it is a key reference point for schools as they create coherent and meaningful learning programmes.

Levels of curriculum making: national, school and classroom

Curriculum making operates at three interconnected levels – national, school and classroom – each playing a distinct role in shaping learners' educational experiences.

National level (macro level)

The national or statutory curriculum framework, described above and which is subject to this consultation, sets out the overall vision, aims, content and expected learning outcomes for pupils across the education system. It establishes what should be taught, why it is important, and the standards pupils are expected to reach.

By articulating explicitly what must be taught, the statutory curriculum also promotes equity, reducing unnecessary variation between schools and helping to ensure a common educational entitlement.

Clarity at this macro level underpins alignment across the education system, enabling curriculum, assessment and professional development to work coherently towards shared goals.

It remains broad, however, providing an overarching framework rather than exactly specifying all teaching content, or schemes of work.

The proposed new Northern Ireland Curriculum framework, therefore, provides the legal foundation for curriculum content across schools. It plays a central role in defining what pupils are entitled to learn and sets out the essential knowledge of each subject by clearly identifying the core ideas, concepts and vocabulary that pupils must encounter, organised into concise subject-specific categories.

Progression is built directly into this framework: the curriculum itself functions as the progression model, with secure mastery of specified knowledge at each stage providing the foundation for access to more complex material later on.

School level (meso level)

At the school or meso level, leaders and teachers interpret the national framework by building the more detailed learning journeys that enact the curriculum in practice and seeking opportunities to make it work well in their specific context. Schools design their own curriculum plans and schemes of work, making decisions about how subjects are organised, how time is allocated, and how progression is structured across year groups. They consider the needs, interests and backgrounds of their pupils, choosing texts, resources and case studies, and ensuring lessons and lesson sequences are coherent, dynamic, rigorous in their interpretation of subject content and accessible.

This level bridges policy and practice, translating national expectations into a coherent, whole-school curriculum.

While the new curriculum framework for Northern Ireland will be more specific than the existing Minimum Content Orders, schools will retain significant flexibility in selecting materials and designing their curriculum.

Classroom level (micro level)

At the classroom or micro level, teachers bring the curriculum to life through daily teaching and learning activities. They make moment-to-moment decisions about pedagogy, resources, questioning and assessment to meet the needs of individual learners.

Teachers adapt lessons based on pupils' prior knowledge, pace of learning and interests, ensuring engagement and understanding. This level is where the intended curriculum becomes the experienced curriculum, as pupils interact directly with content and develop their knowledge and skills.

The role of the statutory framework

It is important to emphasise that this new statutory curriculum is a broad system-level framework at the macro level, which will guide curriculum making at school and classroom levels. Classroom resources, schemes of work and lesson plans will also provide support for schools and teachers.



Chapter 3:

Background to curriculum reform

Curriculum reform is one of the most important long-term responsibilities of any education system.

In Northern Ireland, curriculum reform has always reflected wider social, political and economic changes. The current programme of renewal, driven by the findings of the Strategic Review, builds on this long history responding to new evidence about how children learn and what they need to succeed.

This section provides an extended historical overview of curriculum reform in Northern Ireland, from the introduction of the first statutory curriculum in the late 1980s to the present day. It explains how the system has evolved, why concerns have emerged about the current curriculum, and why the Department of Education has taken forward a comprehensive redesign of the curriculum for the next generation of learners.

Early beginnings: the 1989 statutory curriculum

Northern Ireland's first statutory national curriculum was introduced in 1989. This major reform reflected broader UK-wide changes and aimed to ensure that all pupils received a broad and balanced education. The 1989 curriculum emphasised subject coverage and aimed to reduce inequalities in access to key areas of learning, but it was widely seen as overly prescriptive.

Schools were expected to follow detailed programmes of study and concerns soon emerged that the framework lacked flexibility for teachers and placed heavy demands on classroom time.

The early 1990s, therefore, saw continued debate about the balance between national expectations and school autonomy. Over time, pressure grew for a more streamlined and flexible model that would reduce prescription and give teachers greater professional control.

In response, a revised statutory curriculum was introduced from September 1996 which reduced the curriculum's content. However, this updated curriculum continued to face criticism as being overly prescriptive.

The introduction of the 2007 curriculum

In early 1999, the Minister of Education accepted a recommendation from CCEA that the curriculum and assessment arrangements for Northern Ireland should be reviewed once more. After a significant period of research, consultation and development, the current curriculum was introduced in 2007, with implementation phased over three academic years.

The 2007 curriculum sought to simplify statutory requirements and give teachers more freedom in how they organised learning. The revised curriculum moved to a lighter, framework-style model, giving schools greater responsibility for interpreting and designing curriculum provision.

It reduced content to high-level "minimum content" statements and placed strong emphasis on cross-curricular skills (communication, using mathematics, using ICT) and on broad areas of learning.

Subjects were largely retained within areas of learning, but repositioned as vehicles for broader skills, including thinking skills, personal capabilities, citizenship, employability and learning for life and work. The emphasis shifted from the teaching of content to process, connectivity and progression, encouraging cross-curricular links and assessment for learning.

The intention was to promote creativity, flexibility and skills that cut across traditional subjects. However, as the Strategic Review later documented, this shift created significant structural weaknesses. The 2007 framework offered very little detail about the specific knowledge pupils should acquire and virtually no guidance on sequencing learning over time. As a result, schools were required to interpret broad statements without clear expectations.

Early warning signs (2015)

As early as 2015, there were warning signs regarding the implementation of the 2007 curriculum in relation to the delivery of science within The World Around Us Area of Learning at primary phase.

An Education and Training Inspectorate evaluation⁵ found that science was the weakest and least consistently delivered subject within The World Around Us across primary schools. The report commented that whilst the integrated nature of the area of learning was intended to support connected enquiry, in practice science knowledge and skills were often underdeveloped or diluted, particularly when compared with history and geography. In many schools, science learning lacked sufficient depth and progression, with pupils engaging in activities without developing secure scientific understanding.

5 An evaluation of the implementation of The World Around Us in primary schools (2015)

A particular concern identified was limited teacher confidence and subject knowledge in science. Inspectors reported that many teachers were more comfortable delivering social and environmental topics than scientific concepts, leading to a reliance on surface-level activities rather than structured scientific enquiry.

The report also highlighted weaknesses in planning and progression for science. In weaker practice, science coverage was opportunistic and theme-driven rather than systematic, with insufficient attention to building conceptual understanding over time. ETI noted that pupils often repeated similar activities across year groups, suggesting poor continuity and limited progression in scientific learning.

These early findings, such as gaps in learning, repeated content, lack of progression or vertical coherence, were later found at a wider scale through the 2025 Curriculum Review.

CCEA Curriculum Monitoring Programme (2019)

In 2018–19, CCEA initiated a Curriculum Monitoring Programme to gather the views and experiences of teachers and other stakeholders on curriculum, assessment and qualifications to inform CCEA’s future planning and support.

The Curriculum Monitoring Programme 2018–19 Report⁶ acknowledged that the aims and principles of the Northern Ireland Curriculum remained broadly accepted but identified a growing misalignment between curriculum intent and curriculum experience.

While the curriculum framework was designed to promote flexibility and skills-based learning, the openness of the framework had resulted in uneven implementation across the education system.

The lack of prescription had led to gaps in provision and conversely also to repetition, leading to significant weaknesses in progression and continuity. Variability in teacher confidence, subject interpretation and leadership capacity meant that pupils’ curriculum experience differed significantly depending on school context.

Renewed focus on curriculum: Independent Review of Education (2023)

In 2023, the Independent Review of Education⁷ recommended major changes across Northern Ireland’s education system, including fundamental curriculum renewal. Chaired by Dr Keir Bloomer, a co-author of Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence, the Review examined every aspect of the education system but identified curriculum design as one of the most powerful levers for improving attainment, equity and long-term outcomes. Its central message was unambiguous: *a modern curriculum must be grounded in how children learn*.

6 CCEA (2020) CCEA Curriculum Monitoring Programme 2018–19 Report

7 Independent Review of Education (2023) Investing in a better future: The independent review of education in Northern Ireland

Drawing on extensive evidence from cognitive science, the Independent Review Panel highlighted that learning depends on the gradual, cumulative building of secure knowledge. As working memory is limited, pupils can only reason, problem-solve and think critically when they possess strong background knowledge stored in long-term memory. Without this foundation, even apparently simple “skills-based” tasks become overwhelming.

The Review recommended modernising and strengthening the curriculum with a continuous process of review and reform, alongside sustained investment in curriculum advice and support.

Crucially, the Panel argued that curriculum reform must proceed alongside reforms to assessment and qualifications, ensuring alignment between what pupils learn, how they are taught and how learning is recognised.

Curriculum reform in other countries: the global shift toward *knowledge-rich* approaches

Across the world, a number of high-performing education systems have increasingly recognised that a well-designed, knowledge-rich curriculum is one of the most powerful drivers of pupil achievement, equity and long-term opportunity.

Over the last two decades, a clear international pattern has emerged: countries that define essential knowledge clearly and sequence it deliberately are improving outcomes and closing attainment gaps.

Conversely, jurisdictions that rely heavily on vague, competency-based curricula, with minimal specification of knowledge, are experiencing stagnation or decline in literacy, numeracy and wider attainment.

What is a knowledge-rich curriculum?⁸

Cognitive science shows that pupils learn by building knowledge into long-term memory, forming mental structures (schemas) that allow them to recognise patterns, make meaning through connections, and think more efficiently. Wide-ranging, connected knowledge is also the essential foundation for a wide vocabulary, enabling confident, fluent recognition and expression. Because working memory is limited, pupils need relevant, well-organised background knowledge to become secure and its retrieval to become instantaneous and automatic, so that they can access more complex tasks such as analysing, problem-solving or evaluating.

In practice, a knowledge-rich curriculum means one that is coherent, connected, progressive and well-sequenced. It specifies what pupils should learn and when, in what order and to what depth, ensuring that new content builds logically on what has come before. Knowledge

⁸ [The value of a knowledge-rich curriculum – an essay collection. \(Civitas 2026\)](#)

is appropriately revisited and strengthened over time, supporting retention and deep understanding. Teachers are given clarity about curricular priorities, reducing the burden of deciding content and enabling them to focus on high-quality teaching.

This approach is particularly important for equity. Pupils do not arrive at school with equal access to vocabulary, background knowledge or cultural capital. When curricula rely heavily on inference, discovery or loosely defined “skills”, advantaged pupils are better positioned to succeed because they can draw on prior experiences and learning from outside school. By contrast, a knowledge-rich curriculum levels the playing field by making powerful knowledge explicit and available to all learners, rather than leaving it to chance.

A knowledge-rich curriculum directly supports inclusion and ambition. Secure knowledge gives pupils confidence and capability, enabling creative thought, meaningful discussion and deep engagement with complex ideas.

What high-performing countries have done

International evidence consistently shows that systems with clear, content-rich curricula achieve higher standards and have narrower attainment gaps.

Singapore remains one of the most consistently high-performing systems in the world. Singapore scores at the top of PISA⁹ and TIMSS¹⁰ across reading, mathematics and science, with rising trends over time. Its curriculum is centrally designed, coherent and explicitly built around deep mastery of essential knowledge, especially in mathematics, languages and science. Content is sequenced through a carefully constructed “spiral curriculum” that builds conceptual understanding over time.^{11,12} Although Singapore has incorporated more competences in recent years, the system remains fundamentally knowledge-led.^{13,14}

Estonia has become Europe’s highest-performing education system. Estonia performs far above the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average in reading, maths and science, with particularly strong results for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Its national curriculum blends competences with a clear core of subject knowledge in languages, mathematics, sciences and humanities. Estonia places particular emphasis on structured content, digital literacy grounded in conceptual knowledge, and consistent progression across schools.

9 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is created by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). PISA measures 15-year-olds’ ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges. PISA draws on content that can be found in curricula across the world and focuses on pupils’ application of their knowledge and skills, and their ability to examine, interpret and solve problems. Importantly, it does not prescribe a particular type of curriculum. It is the only international education survey of its kind.

10 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

11 Kaur, B. (2021). *A Look at Singapore Mathematics Education Through the PISA and TIMSS Lenses*. Springer.

12 Singapore MOE analyses in *International Benchmark Studies – TIMSS, PISA and TEDSM*. Springer (2019).

13 Deocades & Escarlos (2025). *Systematic Review of Singapore’s Educational System*.

14 OECD. *PISA 2022 Country Note: Singapore* (2022).

England has improved its international standing in reading, maths and science over the past decade following major curriculum reform between 2010 and 2014, which made the national curriculum more explicit and coherently sequenced.

Portugal made one of the most dramatic improvements ever recorded in PISA and TIMSS between the mid-2000s and 2015. Researchers, including former education minister Nuno Crato, attribute this to clear curriculum expectations, a focus on essential knowledge, structured instruction, regular assessment, and increased curriculum coherence. During this period, Portuguese pupils surpassed many traditionally high-performing countries, including Finland, in mathematics.¹⁵

However, Portugal's reform trajectory also demonstrates the fragility of progress; as curriculum principles became less focused and more competency-oriented in subsequent years, improvement slowed and, in some areas, reversed.

Canada, while diverse across provinces, has achieved high levels of overall performance and equity, particularly in jurisdictions such as Alberta and Ontario. A key feature of Canadian high performance has been a long-established commitment to strong subject curricula, clear progression in literacy and mathematics, and well-designed teacher education systems. Canadian provinces with the clearest curriculum structures, such as Alberta, tend to perform most strongly in international assessments.¹⁶

Finland also demonstrates the importance of curriculum coherence and system alignment. As Tim Oates' analysis makes clear, Finland's rise to international prominence was not due to autonomy or minimal curriculum specification but rather to decades of highly centralised, rigorous, and coherent system reform from the 1970s to the 1990s.¹⁷ Finland successfully transitioned to a fully comprehensive system through meticulous central implementation, strong curriculum control, and aligned teacher training. This "wholesale, coherent system change" created the foundations for strong performance. However, Finland's PISA scores have declined steadily since 2006, in reading, maths and science, coinciding with a transition towards more diffuse competency-based approaches.

What happens when systems rely too heavily on competences?

There have also been examples of countries trending towards increased curriculum flexibility. The current Northern Ireland Curriculum is one such example, but similar trends have occurred in Scotland, New Zealand and Wales.

In these systems, national curriculum frameworks deliberately reduced prescription in favour of generic competences, transferable skills and professional autonomy, with the intention of

15 Crato, N. (2020). *Curriculum and Educational Reforms in Portugal: Why and How Students' Knowledge and Skills Improved*. Springer.

16 Sahlberg, P. (2017). *PISA in Finland: An Education Miracle or an Obstacle to Change?* (includes comparative insights on Canada and Finland).

17 Oates, T. *Finnish Fairy Stories – Cambridge Assessment*. (Clarifies 1970s–1990s centralisation, curriculum control, teacher training alignment).

giving teachers greater freedom to design learning and to emphasise the development of 21st century skills.

However, evidence from international assessments and system evaluations suggests that prioritising broad competences without explicit specification of core knowledge has created significant challenges. Countries that moved furthest in this direction, notably Scotland and New Zealand, experienced declines in international performance, particularly in literacy and numeracy. Wales, which introduced its new curriculum framework in 2022, is already reporting difficulties with progression across primary–secondary¹⁸ transitions and growing inconsistency between schools.¹⁹

These patterns are evident despite very different national and cultural contexts, indicating that the issues are structural rather than contextual. In each case, curriculum design shifted strongly towards inquiry-led learning, local autonomy and flexible competences, with limited specification of knowledge. Over time, this resulted in fragmented provision, weak progression, declining core outcomes and widening inequities between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent peers.

System responses increasingly acknowledge these shortcomings. In Scotland, a major academic study by the University of Stirling highlighted the gap between teacher practice and the aims and philosophy of the curriculum; progress in implementation was variable and there were tensions between the big ideas of the curriculum and the finer detail of its experiences and outcomes. Recent work led by Education Scotland has aimed to clarify and strengthen the role of knowledge in the curriculum.²⁰

Similarly, New Zealand has launched a major curriculum refresh grounded explicitly in knowledge-rich and science-of-learning principles, signalling a clear move towards greater clarity, coherence and equity.

The Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum (2024–2025)

In October 2024, the Minister of Education commissioned an independent Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, led by internationally renowned education consultant Lucy Crehan.

The Review drew on international evidence, system data, cognitive science research, and extensive engagement with teachers and school leaders. It examined past reviews, analysed performance trends and evaluated how curriculum expectations were being interpreted in practice. It was one of the most comprehensive examinations of curriculum ever undertaken in Northern Ireland.

18 <https://estyn.gov.wales/improvement-resources/thematic-report-transition-and-pupil-progression/>

19 <https://senedd.wales/media/c2sjtv5b/cr-ld16588-e.pdf>

20 Education Scotland (2024). Curriculum Improvement Cycle: A case for change. P24.

When the Review's final report, *A Foundation for the Future*, was published in June 2025, it reached a clear conclusion – the current curriculum is no longer fit for purpose. It identified five fundamental principles that should underpin a new framework: *purpose-led, knowledge-rich, continuous and coherent, specific and focused, and inclusive and flexible*.

The Review highlighted that the 2007 curriculum's lack of specificity had led to inconsistency across schools, greater workload for teachers, and patchy progression for pupils. It stressed the need for a new statutory curriculum framework that sets out clear, sequenced content and provides a shared entitlement for pupils.

The Department of Education's response (2025)

Shortly after the publication of the Strategic Review, the Department of Education issued its official response, accepting the majority of the recommendations and committing to a major programme of curriculum reform.

The response emphasised that curriculum reform would form a central pillar of TransformED Northern Ireland, the Department's strategy for educational excellence.

TransformED focuses on curriculum, assessment, qualifications, teacher professional learning, school leadership and tackling educational disadvantage. Curriculum reform is foundational to the programme, as clear and coherent curriculum content is the foundation for all other reforms.

Establishment of the Curriculum Taskforce

To lead the reform process, the Department established a Curriculum Taskforce Advisory Committee in August 2025. The Taskforce was chaired by experienced curriculum expert Christine Counsell, with Lucy Crehan as Deputy Chair. It brought together expertise in curriculum design, classroom practice, academic research and educational evaluation. Its role was to oversee the development of a modern, coherent and knowledge-rich curriculum.

A Taskforce Advisory Committee oversaw the programme of curriculum reform, providing assurance, challenge and strategic direction. Subject Working Groups (SWGs), made up of Northern Ireland teachers, academics and subject specialists, developed statutory curriculum frameworks for each subject.

All SWGs operated to a shared set of curriculum principles and drafting guidance. A common drafting language ("Pupils should learn...") was used to ensure consistency, while allowing appropriate variation to reflect differences in subject structure.



Chapter 4: The need for a new curriculum

Northern Ireland's statutory curriculum is nearly 20 years old. It was intended to reduce prescription, encourage professional autonomy and place skills at the heart of learning. While well-intentioned, the framework does not deliver the clarity, consistency or progression that a modern education system requires.

In the years since 2007, the education landscape has changed dramatically, societal expectations have evolved, the labour market has shifted and new research from cognitive science has reshaped understanding of how children learn.

The Strategic Review of the Curriculum (2025) confirmed what practitioners, school leaders and policymakers have increasingly recognised – the current curriculum is not fit for purpose. Its lack of specificity, coherence and progression is impeding learning, increasing workload, and widening inequality.

Structural weaknesses in the current curriculum

Lack of specificity

The 2007 curriculum is characterised by extreme brevity. It sets out very short content within broad learning areas but offers little or no guidance on the essential knowledge that pupils should acquire at each key stage.

This structural vagueness is most evident in broad, multi-discipline Areas of Learning such as The World Around Us at primary which encompasses history, geography and science. Yet at each primary key stage the statutory content is reduced to only a handful of bullet points. Crucially, there is no indication of key historical periods, foundational scientific concepts, or core geographical knowledge that pupils should develop throughout their primary school education.

Similar issues arise in the arts, where, at Key Stage 2, the entirety of what pupils are expected to learn over three years of schooling is encapsulated in only three bullet points for music, and for art and design only six. The current curriculum does not describe the vocabulary, techniques or conceptual progression needed for mastery.

This lack of specificity is a critical issue. Without clearly identified content, teachers are left to determine what should be taught, how it connects to prior and future learning, and what pupils should know by the end of each stage.

In practice, the curriculum's intended flexibility has driven significant teacher workload and has been a significant design flaw. This flexibility has created a system in which individual schools and teachers carry responsibility for decisions that should be settled at a system level to ensure a platform for consistency and fairness.

Poor content selection

The current Northern Ireland Curriculum includes twelve "Key Elements", covering a broad range of personal, social and economic themes such as personal understanding, media and ethical awareness, employability, economic awareness and education for sustainable development. These are used to shape content at Key Stage 3 and inform primary curriculum design.

In practice, their use led to subject content being included based on weak or indirect links to these themes, rather than clear disciplinary coherence.

Weaknesses in coherence and progression

A curriculum must not only specify what is to be learned, but also how learning builds over time. The lack of specificity described above contributes in turn to further significant weaknesses in the current curriculum, including an absence of the vertical coherence needed to ensure meaningful progression. Essential content is not clearly sequenced so learning often becomes fragmented and repetitive. Pupils may revisit some topics unnecessarily while at the same time failing to secure the foundational knowledge required for later success.

Schools report that they cannot reliably assume what pupils have previously been taught, particularly following transition points. Teachers can frequently find themselves reteaching content that should have been secured earlier in a pupil's educational journey.

Failure to connect knowledge and skills

The current curriculum is based on a philosophy that emphasised cross-curricular skills and generic competences. While these aims are valuable, the framework significantly underestimates the central role of subject-specific knowledge as the foundation on which such skills depend.

As the current curriculum does not specify essential content with any precision, skills are often taught in isolation. Pupils may be asked to “evaluate”, “analyse” or “apply”, but may lack the substantive knowledge that gives such cognitive processes meaning. Without a clear, shared base of knowledge, the curriculum’s aspiration to cultivate confident, capable thinkers is undermined by its own vagueness.

There is a disconnect between the curriculum’s skill-focused vision and the absence of defined subject content. This means that the statutory curriculum is not designed to support pupils to develop the intellectual foundations required to use skills effectively, leaving schools to fill the gap. This has been one of the most persistent and damaging weaknesses of the 2007 framework.

Disregard of schema theory

Schema theory provides a powerful explanation of why knowledge must be central to curriculum design. Schemas are the mental structures through which individuals organise, store and retrieve information. They act as interconnected networks of ideas held in long-term memory. When pupils encounter new material, they interpret it by linking it to these existing structures. The richer the schema, the more readily pupils can absorb new knowledge and engage in more complex tasks.

In a curriculum without clearly sequenced content, schemas develop unevenly or inadequately. Pupils with extensive prior knowledge, often gained outside school, build strong schemas, enabling them to learn more efficiently. Others, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, struggle to connect new ideas to limited prior knowledge. This widens the attainment gap and creates a cumulative disadvantage over time.

As the current curriculum does not specify what knowledge should be taught, or in what order, it does not support pupils’ schemas to grow systematically. Learning can become fragmented, transitions between stages inconsistent, and teachers cannot rely on shared foundations when introducing new concepts.

Outdated and incomplete content

Over time, parts of the curriculum have become outdated. In particular, provision of digital education remained too limited in scope and depth, while emerging technologies are largely absent from the curriculum framework.

Further, the lack of clarity in the current curriculum regarding key concepts and knowledge has contributed to curriculum overload, an issue consistently reported by teachers in Northern Ireland. This occurs when schools introduce new content in response to emerging societal demands without making corresponding adjustments to existing curriculum areas.

As a result, teachers are often required to move through content at undue pace, encouraging a 'tick-list' approach to coverage rather than deep learning. This can lead to what is often described as a 'mile-wide, inch-deep' curriculum, where pupils encounter many topics but do not have sufficient time to explore, understand and master them. The OECD is clear that pupils need to learn in greater depth rather than more content; focus, rigour and coherence are key to addressing curriculum overload.

Examples of current lack of clarity

Lack of clarity is the fundamental weakness of the current curriculum. This is the fundamental flaw that underpins a range of challenges, including issues with sequencing, progression, variability and overload. This lack of clarity can be seen across the curriculum and has significant consequences. Some examples to illustrate this are explored below.

Foundation Stage

Mathematics: number sense and place value

Foundation Stage mathematics emphasises "exploring number" and "developing mathematical language", but stops short of specifying which numbers, which relationships, or which representations pupils must secure. This is problematical because number sense is foundational for all later mathematics and can result in inconsistent readiness for Key Stage 1 arithmetic.

World Around Us: scientific vocabulary

The current World Around Us Area of Learning encourages exploration of materials, living things, and environments, yet provides little clarity about which concepts or terms must be known. As a result, pupils may "explore materials" without ever securing vocabulary such as *hard, soft, living, non-living*, which means there is no assurance that pupils secure the language which serves as the gateway to scientific thinking.

Moreover, it leads to inefficiency because teachers of later key stages and phases have no assurance of what has already been taught. They must lose time establishing what has been taught and the patchy nature of that prior experience means that science teaching cannot build on firm foundations. This disproportionately disadvantages pupils of low prior attainment. Children with significant gaps will see the effects of those gaps compounded.

Key Stage 1

English: reading comprehension and grammar

Key Stage 1 English prioritises enjoyment and engagement but is vague about what grammatical knowledge pupils should reliably acquire. Terms such as noun, verb, or sentence are not consistently required. Without securing the foundational concepts with precision, pupils' reading and writing are more laboured since their working memory is occupied with the mechanics of English, rather than the opportunities that embedding these concepts to long-term memory affords creativity.

World Around Us: chronology and place

In Key Stage 1, World Around Us covers history and geography concepts implicitly, but without specifying any historical periods, chronological sequences (past/present) or core locational knowledge. The consequence is that pupils may reach Key Stage 2 without a stable sense of time or place.

Key Stage 2

English: vocabulary development

Vocabulary growth is mentioned repeatedly in Key Stage 2 English, yet the curriculum does not specify tiers of vocabulary, genres, or domains through which vocabulary should be expanded.

Art & Design (historical and cultural knowledge)

In Key Stage 2, Art and Design encourages pupils to "study artists" or "draw inspiration from different cultures", yet does not specify which artists, periods, or traditions pupils should learn about. This lack of minimum entitlement leads to variation with some pupils encountering rich artistic traditions, while others may not go beyond isolated projects.

Mathematics: fractions and proportional reasoning

Key Stage 2 mathematics includes fractions, but without a clear sequence or depth expectation. Schools interpret this differently, leading to fragile understanding. Successful systems carefully sequence fractions knowledge. Without such clarity, Key Stage 3 mathematics risks becoming remedial rather than developmental.

World Around Us: scientific concepts

In the science component of World Around Us at Key Stage 2, topics such as forces or ecosystems are encouraged, but not defined in terms of core concepts. This vagueness weakens transition to Key Stage 3 science, where teachers cannot assume understanding of core concepts.

Key Stage 3

English: disciplinary reading

Key Stage 3 English assumes pupils can already access complex texts, yet due to earlier vagueness, this is often not the case. Without a shared body of literary and linguistic knowledge from Key Stage 2, Key Stage 3 may stall.

Mathematics: algebraic readiness

Key Stage 3 mathematics presumes fluency with arithmetic and proportional reasoning. Current Key Stage 2 vagueness means this cannot be relied upon. For instance, algebra success depends on specified prior knowledge, not generic “problem solving”.

Music (disciplinary progression)

At Key Stage 3, music often aspires to analytical listening or composition, but teachers cannot rely on shared prior knowledge. Pupils may not recognise notation, structure or historical conventions. The consequence is that Key Stage 3 must often reteach foundational musical ideas instead of extending them.





Chapter 5: Principles of the new curriculum

The new Northern Ireland Curriculum is grounded in the five core principles established through the Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. These principles define both the purpose and the design of the new framework and ensure that the curriculum is ambitious, coherent and inclusive.

The draft framework has been developed explicitly to reflect these principles. This chapter sets out each principle in turn and explains how it is realised in the structure and content of the new Northern Ireland Curriculum.

Principle 1: Purpose-led

The Strategic Review was clear that curriculum content must be shaped by a clear educational purpose. The purpose of the new Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028 is to equip young people with the knowledge, skills and experiences that give them real opportunities and enable them to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives. The new aim and objectives which define the purpose and direction of the new Northern Ireland Curriculum are set out in more detail in Chapter 7.

The new curriculum is purpose-led in two closely connected ways.

Firstly, there is a clear overarching aim and objectives for the curriculum as a whole. In turn, each subject begins with a clear vision statement that articulates why that subject matters and what it contributes to pupils' intellectual, cultural and personal development. These statements ensure that curriculum content is selected and sequenced with intent, rather than driven by coverage or activity.

Secondly, the framework explicitly connects subject learning to the development of *capabilities*. Capabilities are not treated as generic skills to be taught or assessed separately. Instead, they

are understood as the qualities and attributes that emerge from the sustained teaching of a knowledge-rich curriculum across subjects. For example, capabilities for language and communication arise from cumulative reading, writing, speaking and listening across the curriculum, grounded in rich vocabulary and structured knowledge. Capabilities for reasoning and problem-solving arise from opportunities to reason within real subject contexts, not from generic skills instruction.

By anchoring capability development in subject knowledge, the framework avoids the well-documented problems associated with “skills-first” or “transferable skills” curricula, which often lead to confusion, excessive auditing and diluted subject content. In the new curriculum, knowledge is primary, and capabilities emerge through knowledge taught well.

This approach connects daily classroom teaching to the wider aim and objectives of the curriculum without distorting subject content or increasing workload through additional tracking or auditing.

Principle 2: Knowledge-rich

A central principle of the new Northern Ireland Curriculum is that it is knowledge-rich. It reestablishes knowledge as the foundation of learning, recognising that secure, well-organised knowledge in long-term memory is the necessary foundation for understanding, reasoning, creativity and application across all subjects. Without this foundation, pupils struggle to make sense of new ideas, to connect learning over time, and to participate meaningfully in more complex tasks.

In the draft framework, knowledge is treated as a shared entitlement. Across all subjects, essential concepts, ideas and vocabulary are specified clearly within staged “pupils should learn” expectations.

This matters for equity. Pupils who have limited access to books, cultural experiences or prior background knowledge depend on school to build powerful knowledge systematically. A knowledge-rich framework makes explicit what pupils should encounter and learn, reducing variation between schools and strengthening consistency across the system.

A knowledge-rich curriculum also supports high-quality teaching practice. Clear specification of content reduces planning burdens and enables teachers to focus their professional judgement on how best to teach, explain and support learning rather than on deciding what to include.

This supports sustainability. Teachers are not required to invent progression models or fill systemic gaps. Instead, they work within a shared framework that supports clarity, continuity and professional collaboration.

The draft framework is explicit about what a knowledge-rich curriculum is not.

It is not:

- a prescriptive teaching script;
- an over-reliance on rote learning;
- a diminishing of creativity or application;
- a collection of disconnected facts, trivia, or information presented without meaningful context or coherence; or
- a disregard for local context.

The knowledge-rich principle underpins the entire draft framework. It restores coherence, strengthens entitlement, supports equity and enables purposeful learning that leads to the capabilities the curriculum seeks to develop. It represents a deliberate shift from vagueness to clarity, from fragmentation to structure and from uneven provision to shared ambition for learners.

Principle 3: Continuous and coherent

The Strategic Review highlighted that learning must build coherently over time, and that progression should be deliberately designed rather than assumed. Under the existing curriculum, weak sequencing and high-level expectations often resulted in fragmented learning, repetition without progression, and gaps that widened as pupils moved through the system.

The draft curriculum framework addresses this by organising each subject around stable, subject-specific structures that reflect how knowledge is built and understood within that discipline. Rather than presenting content as a series of disconnected topics, subjects are designed so that learning is cumulative: foundational ideas are introduced early and then revisited, applied and extended with increasing depth and sophistication across Foundation Stage and Key Stages 1, 2 and 3.

This approach makes progression explicit. Teachers and pupils can see how new learning connects to what has gone before, and how earlier knowledge supports later understanding. It also ensures that learning time is used purposefully, with concepts developing across years rather than being introduced only once or revisited superficially.

A continuous and coherent structure also strengthens transition points within the system. When progression is clearly mapped, teachers at later stages can rely on prior learning with greater confidence, reducing the need for extensive reteaching. This, in turn, lowers the risk of curriculum narrowing, where time is taken from broader learning to compensate for insecure foundations.

By designing progression into the curriculum itself, the framework supports continuity, long-term understanding and sustained learner confidence.

Principle 4: Specific and focused

Another core principle identified in the Strategic Review is that curriculum expectations should be specific and focused. Excessive breadth, vague statements and overgeneralised outcomes weaken teaching and learning by obscuring priorities and overloading curriculum time.

The draft framework responds by setting out clear, focused content expectations, framed consistently as “pupils should learn”. These statements identify the essential knowledge, concepts and vocabulary that pupils are entitled to secure, rather than broad experiences or loosely defined outcomes.

This disciplined focus helps ensure that curriculum time is spent building depth of understanding in what matters most. It avoids unnecessary duplication and reduces the risk that teachers feel compelled to rush through content to meet overextended expectations. Instead, it supports deliberate teaching, consolidation and application.

Clarity and focus also reduce workload. When expectations are explicit, teachers do not need to infer priorities or design content frameworks from scratch. Planning can centre on how best to teach, explain and support learning, rather than on determining what should be included or omitted.

Importantly, being specific does not mean being inflexible. The framework defines what must be learned, not how it must be taught or exemplified. Schools retain professional autonomy to select contexts, materials and teaching approaches that best meet their pupils’ needs, within a clear and common entitlement.

By combining focus with flexibility, the draft curriculum promotes depth, coherence and sustainability, strengthening learning outcomes while supporting professional judgement.

Principle 5: Inclusive and flexible

The Strategic Review made clear that the new curriculum must be both inclusive and flexible. As set out in Chapter 1, the Department has commissioned the development of a bespoke special school curriculum. However, learners with special educational needs (SEN) are of course a wide and diverse group, and the vast majority of children and young people with SEN are educated in mainstream provision, either in specialist provision or mainstream classes.

The draft framework aims to support inclusion through clarity, coherence and strong foundations, combined with principled flexibility in how learning is accessed and supported.

Many pupils experience barriers because teaching lacks sequencing or structure. When foundational knowledge is weak or inconsistent, pupils with additional needs are disproportionately affected. Gaps compound over time, cognitive load increases, and disengagement follows.

A clearly specified, sequenced curriculum reduces these risks. It does this by:

- lowering cognitive load by building familiarity and schema;
- supporting vocabulary development and comprehension;
- preventing small gaps from widening into long-term disadvantage; and
- enabling earlier identification of genuine learning needs, rather than misattribution of difficulties.

By prioritising secure knowledge and coherent sequencing, the curriculum reduces unnecessary working-memory demands. When pupils no longer have to decode unfamiliar content constantly, they can focus their cognitive resources on thinking, understanding and applying ideas. This is particularly beneficial for pupils with difficulties in processing, attention or language.

In addition, the mastery-focused pace of the new curriculum will support children and young people with SEN by prioritising secure understanding of core knowledge rather than coverage and building in time for repetition, scaffolded support, and consolidation.

While the curriculum is clear about entitlement, it also preserves flexibility in ways that matter. Two forms of flexibility are explicitly protected:

- **Contextual flexibility** allows schools to choose examples, texts and contexts that reflect their pupils, communities and cultures. This ensures representation and opportunity to use the local resources, such as the geographical and historic environment, as well as literary and artistic resources with local resonance, without altering the underlying knowledge to be learned.
- **Pacing flexibility** allows teachers to adjust the rate at which content is taught in response to pupils' prior learning and confidence. Teachers can revisit, rehearse and consolidate learning as needed.

These forms of flexibility are essential for meeting diverse needs while maintaining shared expectations.

Adaptations may be necessary in some circumstances, such as:

- significant gaps in prior learning arising from legacy effects of the lack of clear entitlement and progression in the existing curriculum;
- specific learning difficulties requiring extended practice;
- temporary emotional or mental health pressures;
- sensory or physical needs;
- newcomer pupils; or
- sensory or physical access needs.

Adaptations, however, should be purposeful and time-limited. They should be made to enable access to the same curriculum, not to replace it with something narrower or easier. Some pupils may take longer to reach certain goals in some subjects, but the aim of any adaptation should be to set them on that longer-term road of access to the full entitlement.

This distinction is critical. Over-adaptation can fragment learning, increase teacher workload and unintentionally reduce long-term opportunity. Inclusion means including children in common knowledge and its common vocabulary, so that they can be included in the conversations of the classroom and, ultimately, the conversations of society.





Chapter 6:

Understanding the new curriculum

It is important that there is a shared understanding of how the new Northern Ireland Curriculum should be read and applied within the education system. This includes understanding the intention and benefits, as well as having clarity on what the curriculum is and what it is not.

The new curriculum sets out a common entitlement to learning and defines the knowledge, concepts, vocabulary and experiences pupils should encounter as they progress. It is intentionally ambitious to reflect what pupils are capable of learning when knowledge is carefully sequenced and revisited over time.

The new curriculum is of course distinct from qualifications. While qualifications certify achievement at specific points, the curriculum is concerned with learning as a cumulative process over years.

When reading the new curriculum it is important to also understand that it is intended to provide diversity but also flexibility at a school level; as such, the examples included are illustrative, not prescriptive.

Finally, the new curriculum will be a living framework. It will be refined over time in light of evidence and evaluation, supporting continuous improvement without the disruption of frequent large-scale reform.

The intention of the new curriculum

The new Northern Ireland Curriculum is intended to provide a secure foundation for educational excellence and equity. It does this by offering pupils a shared entitlement to essential knowledge and supports teachers through clarity and structure.

Replacing vagueness with minimum entitlement

The new curriculum addresses the current vagueness of entitlement directly by introducing a consistent structure across all subjects:

- a purpose-led vision statement;
- clearly defined subject-specific categories grounded in disciplinary thinking; and
- explicit, stage-by-stage content statements framed as “pupils should learn...”.

As a result, entitlement is no longer left to interpretation at school or classroom level.

What pupils are entitled to know, understand and do is clearly specified within the statutory curriculum framework.

Restoring coherence and cumulative progression

The new curriculum restores coherence by organising learning around stable disciplinary frameworks that make explicit how knowledge is structured and developed within each domain.

Rather than listing disconnected topics or generic skills, or tenuous links to broader overarching themes, subject content in the new curriculum is shaped by coherent organising ideas that explain how understanding is constructed within the discipline. These frameworks are populated with clearly specified content, including foundational concepts and key vocabulary.

Knowledge is treated as cumulative by design. Early learning establishes essential foundations that are deliberately revisited, extended and deepened across key stages. Progression is therefore no longer assumed or implicit but intentionally structured into the curriculum.

Ensuring equity through knowledge-rich design

Across the new curriculum, the most significant advance is the move towards equity through clarity. By specifying minimum content to which pupils are entitled:

- variation in curricular coverage is reduced;
- teachers can plan with shared expectations and greater confidence; and
- progression across key stages becomes coherent and reliable rather than variable.

This approach reflects the principle that flexibility must rest on a secure entitlement, not replace it. The new curriculum defines clearly what must be taught. In doing so, it aligns Northern Ireland’s curriculum with evidence from high-performing systems that excellence, creativity and inclusion depend not on vagueness, but on the cumulative acquisition of shared knowledge.

Reduced teacher workload

The new curriculum means that teachers will no longer be required to interpret ambiguous statutory requirements. The new curriculum aims to reduce the burden of planning, minimise duplication, and provide clarity about priorities. This will enable teachers to dedicate more time to focusing on high-quality teaching and supporting pupils' learning and progress.

In addition, the Department will provide exemplar curriculum resources and invest in teacher professional learning to further support teachers.

System coherence and stability

The new curriculum is designed to strengthen the entire educational ecosystem. Its clear content will align assessment, resources, teacher professional development and in turn the content of qualifications specifications at GCSE and A level.

Reading the new curriculum

When reading the new curriculum, it is important to understand its purpose and scope – both what it is and what it is not – and the rationale underpinning its design.

<p>The curriculum sets out statutory entitlements</p>	<p>The new curriculum, once agreed and finalised, will become the legal framework for grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland (excluding special schools). Its purpose is to define common curricular entitlements: the essential knowledge, concepts, vocabulary, practices and experiences that pupils in Northern Ireland should encounter as they progress through each subject.</p> <p>The framework operates deliberately at the national or macro level. It is not a scheme of work, teaching manual, nor a school-level curriculum. Its focus is content rather than pedagogy.</p>
<p>The curriculum is not a qualifications specification</p>	<p>Curriculum and qualifications serve distinct but complementary purposes within an education system.</p> <p>The curriculum defines what pupils are entitled to learn over time. It sets out a planned, coherent and sequenced body of knowledge, concepts and skills that pupils should encounter throughout their education. By contrast, qualifications are formal certifications that recognise a learner’s achievement at a specific point in time. They are awarded following assessment and indicate the knowledge, skills and understanding a pupil has demonstrated, typically at the end of a course of study (for example, GCSEs or A levels).</p> <p>The new Northern Ireland Curriculum defines the entitlement to learning from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3. It establishes the knowledge, concepts, skills and experiences that pupils should encounter, and how this learning is sequenced across different stages of education. Its primary purpose is to ensure coherence, progression and equity, providing a shared foundation for teaching and learning across schools. It operates at a system level and is concerned with learning as a cumulative, developmental process.</p> <p>A qualification specification, by contrast, sets out the detailed requirements for a qualification. It defines the content to be taught, how learning will be assessed, and the standards pupils must meet to achieve the qualification.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>continued</i></p>

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	<p>Typically, a specification includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the subject content and scope of study; • assessment methods (for example, written examinations, coursework or practical assessment); • assessment objectives and mark schemes; and • grading criteria and performance standards. <p>This distinction is important when reading the new statutory curriculum. While the statutory curriculum is broad and long-term, focused on what pupils should learn and how their knowledge develops over time, qualification specifications are narrower and time-bound, focused on what is assessed and how attainment is judged.</p>
<p>The curriculum must set ambition</p>	<p>The new curriculum sets high expectations for learners, embodying what pupils are capable of learning. Cognitive science shows that prior knowledge, not innate intelligence, is the strongest predictor of future learning. When pupils struggle, it is more likely to reflect gaps in knowledge or poor sequencing than limitations in capacity.</p> <p>This stands in direct contrast to low-ambition narratives, often justified by references to cognitive ability measures or assumptions about fixed potential. Such approaches risk normalising lowered expectations and narrowing entitlement, particularly for pupils from more disadvantaged backgrounds.</p>
<p>Examples are illustrative and provide diversity</p>	<p>As part of the new curriculum framework, subjects include a range of examples such as lists of texts, artists, movements, contexts or case studies. Such examples are identified by “(e.g...)” and are provided to clarify scope, ambition and intent.</p> <p>These examples also ensure diversity is designed into subject frameworks. Pupils should encounter diverse peoples, places, histories, cultures and traditions, beyond their immediate experience.</p> <p>However, examples should not be interpreted as mandated content or as exhaustive lists. Their function is to support clarity, diversity and avoid ambiguity, while preserving professional judgement at school level in selecting specific materials and resources.</p>

OVERVIEW

<p>The statutory curriculum is designed primarily to be used by practitioners and other educational professionals</p>	<p>Subject frameworks are written to provide an appropriate framework for practitioners and professionals across the education system. Precision, concision and conceptual clarity are therefore essential.</p> <p>The goal is to create a document that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is unambiguous in its expectations; • supports coherence across phases and subjects; and • provides a secure foundation for later guidance, resources and professional learning. <p>The framework is a promise to future teachers and pupils, defining a powerful minimum that enables both excellence and equity at scale.</p>
<p>Capabilities emerge through teaching the curriculum, not by being taught directly</p>	<p>The new curriculum is designed so that capabilities are developed through sustained learning across subjects, rather than treated as discrete outcomes to be taught separately.</p> <p>Attempts to teach capabilities directly, as generic or transferable skills, risk misunderstanding how learning develops. Research and professional experience consistently show that capabilities are highly dependent on domain-specific knowledge. For example, critical thinking arises through learning how evidence is evaluated in history, how arguments are constructed in English, how models are tested in science, or how problems are solved in mathematics. Detaching such capabilities from subject content can lead to abstraction, superficial coverage and unnecessary additional demands on teachers, without improving learning outcomes.</p> <p>Capabilities such as reasoning, communication, creativity, civic participation or self-regulation do not exist independently of knowledge. They emerge gradually through engagement with the content, methods and purposes of disciplines, as pupils learn how ideas are generated, tested, communicated and refined within different subject traditions.</p>



Chapter 7: Curriculum purpose

The aim and objectives define the purpose and direction of the new Northern Ireland Curriculum.

In line with the Strategic Review and the Department of Education's response, the curriculum is explicitly purpose-led. This means that all aspects of the curriculum must be aligned with a clearly articulated aim and objectives.

Together, they establish what young people should know, become and be able to do as a result of their education.

The role of aims and objectives

Aims and objectives perform a central function within a well-designed curriculum. They provide:

- **clarity of purpose** by defining the educational vision for young people;
- **coherence across the education system** by aligning curriculum content, teaching and assessment; and
- **a basis for decision-making**, guiding the selection and sequencing of knowledge and experiences.

The aim and objectives of the new Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028 are closely connected to the Capabilities. The Capabilities acts as a bridge between the high-level aim and objectives of the curriculum and the content of each subject. Capabilities describe the emergent qualities and attributes that we wish young people to develop as a result of the new curriculum content.

Current position

The aim of the current Northern Ireland Curriculum is to “empower young people to achieve their potential and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives”.

The objectives are to provide learning opportunities for each young person to develop as:

1. an individual to achieve personal fulfilment and individual wellbeing through living a successful life;
2. a contributor to society to be concerned for the wellbeing of others as well as themselves, in their own society and beyond it; and
3. a contributor to the economy and the environment to appreciate how employment will impact on the economic choices they make and how they, in turn, impact individually and collectively on the environment.

It should be noted that this aim and these objectives are not statutory and are not included in the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

The Strategic Review recommended that the aim and objectives of the statutory curriculum should be updated, specifically highlighting concerns about the current curriculum aim, ‘to empower young people to achieve their *potential*’. While this is well intentioned, the phrase “achieve their potential” can unintentionally imply that each young person has a fixed, pre-determined level of ability or achievement.

This can be problematic because it risks reinforcing the idea that there are natural limits to what some pupils can achieve. In practice, such an assumption may lead to lower expectations, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who experience difficulties in learning. If educators, systems or policies implicitly accept that some pupils have “limited potential”, it can influence decisions about curriculum access, challenge and ambition.

Attainment is not fixed, but highly influenced by access to knowledge, the quality of teaching, and the opportunities pupils are given to learn and practise. In this context, expectations should be based on what pupils are capable of achieving with the right support, rather than assumptions about inherent limits.

For this reason, the Review recommended replacing language that may imply fixed potential with wording that reflects a more ambitious and inclusive view of learning. It stressed that the curriculum aim should emphasise that young people develop their capabilities through access to a rich, well-sequenced body of knowledge and meaningful learning experiences. It should promote high expectations and reinforce the idea that education expands what learners are able to know, do and become, rather than simply helping them reach a pre-defined level.

Proposed approach

The revised aim and objectives of the Northern Ireland Curriculum must continue to reflect the central role of education in preparing children and young people for life, work, and citizenship.

At the same time, they should articulate a clear and ambitious vision that reflects the recommendations of the Review and reject any ceiling on ambition or potential. It is also important that knowledge is recognised as the essential foundation for capability, understanding and informed action.

It is, therefore, proposed that the aim of the new curriculum should be as follows.

To support young people to develop their capabilities by equipping them with the knowledge, skills and experiences that enable them to have genuine choices and empower them to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives.

This aim places strong emphasis on agency, ensuring that learners are empowered to make meaningful choices and to shape their own futures. Crucially, it establishes a system that holds high expectations for children and young people and explicitly challenges any narratives regarding fixed potential.

It is proposed that the objectives of the new curriculum should be as follows.

To support each young person to develop as:

- an individual
- a member of society
- a contributor to the economy
- a steward of the environment
- a lifelong learner

within a system that expects excellence and places no limit on what young people can achieve.

These objectives articulate a balanced conception of education, encompassing personal, social, economic and intellectual development. Unlike the current curriculum objectives, they explicitly reference the importance of lifelong learning. The objectives seek to ensure that the curriculum supports both individual development and participation in wider society. A

curriculum that actively nurtures personal development, civic responsibility and employability equips learners to thrive within their communities and contribute confidently on a global stage.

The inclusion of the phrase *“within a system that expects excellence and places no limit on what young people can achieve”* is critical in setting the tone and ambition of the curriculum.

This statement also underlines the responsibility of the education system itself. It places an obligation on schools, policymakers and educators to create the conditions in which learners can succeed through high-quality teaching, appropriate support and access to rich and meaningful learning experiences.





Chapter 8: Next steps and implementation

Whilst developing the core statutory content for Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3 has been the immediate priority, it is only the first step of wider curriculum reform.

Alongside this consultation, detailed work on several further workstreams will begin. These include publishing the Northern Ireland Pedagogical Principles to support teaching grounded in evidence and cognitive science, consultation on a revised Religious Education syllabus, and producing specific frameworks for special schools, Irish-medium provision, early years and Key Stage 4 and post-16 enrichment.

Implementation of the new curriculum will be phased, beginning with preparation and capacity building (2026–2028), followed by a staged statutory roll-out from September 2028, continuing with embedding, including a clear and systematic review cycle.

The preparation and capacity-building programme will begin in the 2026–27 academic year and prioritise sustained professional development, closely aligned with curriculum content and supported by high-quality resources. These will include curriculum maps, model overviews and classroom materials that exemplify effective practice.

Next steps

This consultation is the first stage of curriculum development in Northern Ireland.

It is essential that the core content which will form the core legal framework for pupils between Foundation Stage and Key Stage 3 is established and agreed.

This will provide the core spine to inform wider policy work on further curriculum strands, particularly for the Irish-medium and special school sectors, and also the development of resources and professional development materials to support curriculum implementation.

You can respond to the consultation via the Departmental website.²¹

21 Through the curriculum webpages on the TransformED hub. (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/topics/transformed>)

Further workstreams

Over the coming months, a series of further supporting materials, guidance documents and additional bespoke frameworks will also be developed.

In the coming months the following key areas of work will be taken forward:

- **Northern Ireland Pedagogical Principles** to provide a shared, evidence-informed foundation for subject-by-subject teaching that will support the new curriculum to be implemented effectively in classrooms. The principles will draw on cognitive science to help teachers support memory, fluency and understanding.
- **A subject syllabus for Religious Education** which will set out the core learning entitlements in a way that is critical, objective and pluralist, whilst retaining a central focus on Christianity.
- **Guidance on curriculum adaptations** to support intentional and purposeful adaptation of the curriculum for children with Special Educational Needs.
- **Special Schools Curriculum** to provide a needs-led framework that reflects the diverse developmental profiles of pupils in special schools supporting accessible and meaningful learning matched to each pupil's needs.
- **Irish-medium curriculum strands** and guidance to ensure that pupils in Irish-medium education can access the same ambitious knowledge as their peers while reflecting the distinct linguistic, developmental and pedagogical demands of immersion learning.
- **An early years framework** to provide a clear, progressive foundation for children's early learning and development, aligning early years provision with the start of formal schooling.
- **A Key Stage 4 and post-16 enrichment curriculum** to support the broader development of young people beyond formal qualifications, ensuring they are prepared for life, work and citizenship during these critical phases of their education.

Implementation

The implementation of the new Northern Ireland Curriculum will have three phases:

- a. Preparation and capacity-building** (September 2026–June 2028). This phase will focus on developing and sharing curriculum resources, alongside providing professional development for teachers. A number of schools may also act as early adopters, beginning to introduce aspects of the new curriculum.
- b. Three-year phased statutory roll-out** (September 2028 onwards). The new curriculum will be introduced gradually, beginning with the first year of each key stage in the

2028–29 academic year. Roll-out will be progressive, building on the previous year and cover all subject areas. As part of the roll-out, transition arrangements will be put in place and guidance provided on core content and adaptations, to support pupils that may arrive at a key stage with gaps in prior knowledge. There will continue to be ongoing professional development and resource development throughout this period to support effective implementation.

- c. Embedding, review and ongoing support** (September 2031 onwards). This phase will focus on embedding the curriculum in practice. It will include a planned cycle of subject reviews and continued access to high-quality curriculum guidance, professional learning, and resources through the new Centre for Educational Excellence and Improvement.

Principles for implementation

The core principles which will underpin curriculum implementation are set out below.

Implementation will be phased and staged, with guidance on content coverage and adaptation during the transition period.
Implementation will be scaffolded with investment in professional development, including curriculum understanding, pedagogical principles and content knowledge.
Development of exemplar curriculum resources will be prioritised to support implementation.
Support will be provided for curriculum planning at school level as well as subject and phase specific resources.
Resource development will utilise the expertise of local practitioners.
The curriculum will remain under regular review with a rolling 5–7-year subject review cycle.
Curriculum design will underpin the design and development of statutory assessment and new qualification specifications for CCEA GCSE and A Levels.

Professional development

As highlighted above, a systematic, multi-year professional learning programme will be delivered, beginning in 2026–27 and continuing throughout curriculum roll-out.

This will include online and face-to-face training on:

- the purposes and principles of the New Northern Ireland Curriculum – its aim, objectives, structure, design and resulting capabilities;
- the subject frameworks;
- the Northern Ireland Pedagogical Principles.

There will also be integration with the content of Initial Teacher Education, induction, early career development and leadership development pathways.

TransformED Development Days (with accompanying materials) will continue to be provided throughout the period, alongside School Development and Baker Days.

Resource development

International evidence indicates that systems which provide coherent, well aligned curriculum resources at scale are more likely to achieve consistency, reduce unnecessary teacher workload, and avoid fragmentation during implementation.

To ensure the curriculum framework ‘comes to life’ in schools, there will be significant investment to develop a suite of high-quality curriculum aligned teaching resources and lesson materials for teachers and pupils. It is anticipated that a new digital curriculum resource hub will provide high-quality lessons and resources designed to help teachers plan more easily and reduce workload. These resources will be free, optional and adaptable.

They will include:

- structured, sequenced curriculum frameworks across subjects and key stages that schools can adopt or adapt;
- unit plans providing grouped sequences of lessons within topics;
- curriculum maps showing progression and prior knowledge requirements;
- video lessons;
- lesson plans and guidance (including sequencing and pedagogy); and
- pupil resources across all subjects and key stages.

Responding to the consultation

The consultation period on the new curriculum will be from **16 June 2026 to 30 September 2026**.

The Department welcomes all responses to refine and strengthen the design of the new Northern Ireland Curriculum. You can respond at Citizen Space or directly to the Department (curriculumconsultation@education-ni.gov.uk).

Following consultation, the content and structure of the new curriculum will be reviewed and updated in light of the evidence provided by stakeholders. The Department then intends to lay the legal regulations for the new curriculum during autumn 2026, with first teaching scheduled from September 2028.





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