



Department of  
**Education**  
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# Transform**ED**

Special Schools Curriculum Practitioner Working Groups

## Expressions of Interest

REVIEW OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND CURRICULUM



## Overview

As part of the TransformED reform programme, the Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum led by Lucy Crehan (May 2025) recommended a new curriculum framework, which is purpose-led, knowledge-rich, continuous and coherent, specific and focused, flexible and inclusive. Work to design the new curriculum framework for Northern Ireland is nearing completion and a consultation on the new draft framework will commence shortly.

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

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 across the sector and will be used to support pupils within special schools where appropriate. However, this in itself is not sufficient to meet the needs of the special school sector.

Therefore, a bespoke curriculum strand for special schools, aligned to the reformed curriculum framework is required.

The Department has commissioned Professor Noel Purdy OBE to lead this work, supported by a Special Schools Practitioner Working Group to shape the new framework.

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.

## Special Schools Practitioner Working Groups

### THE ROLE OF THE WORKING GROUPS

The Working Group will lead the development and drafting of a bespoke curriculum strand for pupils with moderate, severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties within a special school context, ensuring that the curriculum is informed by robust research evidence, specialist professional expertise and the practical realities of teaching and learning in special schools. The Special Schools Curriculum will 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.

The group will be chaired by Professor Noel Purdy OBE and supported by James Curran MBE, Principal of Harberton Special School as vice-chair. The group will:

- Map current curriculum approaches across special schools in Northern Ireland and undertake a needs analysis to identify existing strengths, gaps, challenges, and priorities for curriculum development;
- Identify the core curriculum entitlements, including communication, interaction, independence, self-regulation, wellbeing, and access to meaningful conceptual learning;
- Develop a non-linear model of progression that reflects the diverse developmental pathways of pupils and recognises consolidation, generalisation, maintenance, responsiveness, sustained engagement and increased participation as legitimate indicators of learning;

- Produce draft curriculum content, exemplars, and implementation guidance to support consultation, iterative refinement, and future policy development.

This work will involve engagement with Departmental officials and contribution to materials that will inform final policy decisions for the Minister of Education.

## Working Group Membership

Membership could include:

- Representation across a range of learning needs, developmental pathways and settings
- Special school principals, senior leaders or class teachers with experience of curriculum leadership / coordination.
- Practitioners with expertise in communication, sensory learning and therapeutic approaches

Additional members, including academics and specialists, may be co-opted as required.

Members will contribute to a curriculum that is inclusive, coherent and responsive to the needs of learners within special schools.

## How to get involved

If you are interested in contributing to the development of the new Special Schools Curriculum Framework, please complete the **Expression of Interest form**.

Completion of the form will require both tick box and free text responses. Where you are asked to complete free text boxes, we would encourage you to carefully address each of the essential criteria listed below and provide clear and relevant examples which demonstrate how your knowledge, skills and experience align with the specific criteria. All completed applications must be returned by **Friday 3 July 2026**.

### ESSENTIAL CRITERIA

Applicants must meet the following essential criteria to be considered for participation:

- Applicants must currently be employed as a teacher and be registered with the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI).
- Applicants must be able to demonstrate experience and expertise in working with pupils with complex Special Educational Needs (SEN), including recent classroom experience teaching pupils with moderate, severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties within a special school context in Northern Ireland.
- Applicants must be able to demonstrate knowledge of functional, communication and life-skills based curricula and an understanding of developmental, sensory and therapeutic approaches.
- Applicants must be able to demonstrate an understanding of curriculum design principles, including experience of curriculum planning (e.g. schemes of work or whole-school provision).
- Applicants must be able to demonstrate strong written and oral communication skills, including the ability to articulate professional views, contribute to drafting, and engage in constructive dialogue.
- Applicants must demonstrate the ability to work collaboratively and contribute to collective decision-making.
- Applicants must outline their vision for a Special Schools Curriculum Framework for Northern Ireland.
- Applicants must be able to commit to the required time and, where required, have secured approval from their Principal for release.

## **SELECTION**

Applications will be assessed by senior officials in the Department of Education, and a maximum of eight individuals will be selected.

## **TIME COMMITMENT**

It is expected that members will contribute between 15-18 working days between September 2026 – December 2026.

The absolute maximum commitment would be 20 working days. This will comprise a combination of:

- Working group meetings
- Individual drafting and review
- Remote engagement

There may also be an opportunity to participate in a study visit (within the UK or Republic of Ireland) to explore different curriculum models.

Engagement will include a blend of in-person and remote working.

Detailed schedules will be confirmed following establishment of the Working Group, with activity commencing in mid-September.

Work will be undertaken on an iterative basis over a 10–12 week period, to support the development, refinement and agreement of draft materials.

## **PAYMENTS AND RELEASE**

For any time out of the classroom, full substitute cover will be paid. Work completed outside contracted hours will be compensated directly to the individual at an equivalent rate to the substitute cover. Travel and subsistence will be available for face-to face meetings.

It is essential that applicants have discussed and agreed their release with their school Principal before applying.

## **PRIVACY NOTICE**

Your privacy is important to the Department, and we will process your personal data in line with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018 – General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). A copy of the Department's Privacy Notice is available on our website [www.education-ni.gov.uk](http://www.education-ni.gov.uk)

## **Further information**

Any general queries about the application/appointment process should be addressed in the first instance to Curriculum Reform Team. Email: [CurriculumReform@education-ni.gov.uk](mailto:CurriculumReform@education-ni.gov.uk)

