



TransformED

Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028
Short Guides for Schools

Guide 2: Why is the curriculum changing?





Purpose of this guide

This guide explains why curriculum reform is being proposed in Northern Ireland and summarises the key findings from the [Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum](#).

The aim is to help school leaders, teachers, governors and support staff understand the case for change and consider how the findings of the review relate to their own school context.

It is important to note that the review concluded that the current curriculum has a number of strengths but requires revision and renewal to ensure it continues to meet the needs of children and young people.

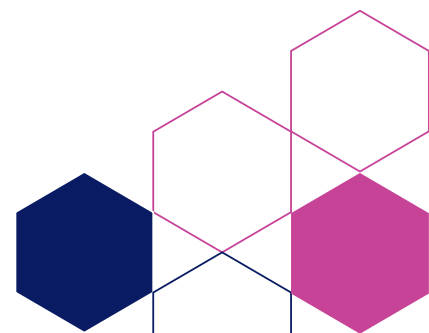
Why was the curriculum reviewed?

The Northern Ireland Curriculum was introduced in 2007. At the time, it represented a significant shift in educational thinking, providing schools with greater flexibility and encouraging a stronger focus on skills, personal development and cross-curricular learning.

Since then, education has changed significantly. Research into learning and curriculum design has developed, societal expectations have evolved and schools have gained almost two decades of experience in implementing the curriculum.

The Department, therefore, commissioned a Strategic Review to consider whether the **statutory national curriculum** remained fit for purpose and whether it was providing the best possible educational experience for all children and young people.

While the review recognised positive features of the current curriculum, it also identified a number of significant challenges which, taken together, make a strong case for reform.



Key issue 1: Lack of clarity about what pupils should learn

One of the most significant findings of the review was that the current Northern Ireland curriculum often lacks sufficient clarity regarding what pupils should know, understand and remember at different stages of their education.

The current curriculum provides schools with considerable flexibility. While flexibility can be valuable, it can also create uncertainty.

In practice, schools have often interpreted curriculum requirements differently. As a result, pupils of the same age attending different schools may experience very different curriculum content and varying levels of challenge.

This has important implications for consistency across the education system.

Where expectations are unclear:

- essential knowledge may be overlooked;
- curriculum coverage can vary considerably between schools;
- teachers can be unsure about priorities; and
- transitions between schools and phases become more challenging.

The review concluded that schools would benefit from greater clarity regarding the key knowledge, concepts and understanding that all pupils should develop as they progress through education.

Key issue 2: Curriculum overload

Many teachers reported that the current curriculum contains too many competing requirements. Over time, schools have attempted to address a wide range of priorities including subject content, cross-curricular skills, thinking skills, and various policy initiatives and societal issues. While each of these has value, many teachers felt there was insufficient guidance about what should be prioritised.

As a consequence, curriculum planning can sometimes become focused on “covering” material rather than ensuring pupils have learned it securely. Teachers described feeling pressure to move quickly from topic to topic without sufficient opportunity for consolidation, retrieval and deeper understanding. The review suggests that a more focused curriculum with clearly identified priorities would allow greater time for teaching, practice, discussion and reflection.

This does not mean reducing ambition. Instead, it means becoming clearer about what matters most. Rather than teaching a large number of disconnected topics at a superficial level, schools will focus more explicitly on the most important knowledge and concepts and ensure pupils understand them deeply.



Key issue 3: Weak curriculum progression

The review highlighted concerns about how learning develops across the different stages of education. This is known as vertical coherence. In some instances, pupils encounter the same ideas repeatedly without progressing to deeper levels of understanding. In other cases, gaps emerge because important concepts have not been taught systematically.

Progression is about much more than moving from one year group to the next. True progression involves:

- connections between previous and new learning;
- increasing depth of understanding;
- stronger application of knowledge; and
- more sophisticated and independent thinking over time.

The review found that curriculum progression was not always sufficiently clear or explicit. As a result, teachers often have to make their own decisions about sequencing and progression, which may lead to inconsistency. The new Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028 seeks to provide stronger progression frameworks so that learning builds more effectively over time.

Key issue 4: Insufficient emphasis on knowledge

A central message emerging from the review was the need to strengthen the role of knowledge within the curriculum. The review recognised that skills remain important. However, it emphasised that skills cannot develop in isolation.

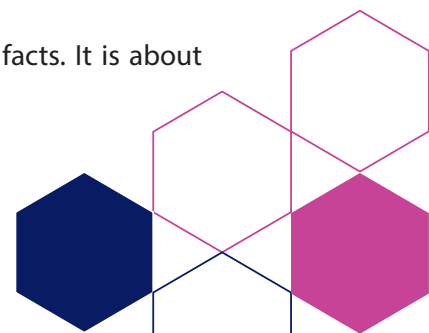
Pupils need secure knowledge in order to:

- think critically;
- solve problems effectively;
- communicate clearly;
- evaluate evidence; and
- apply learning in unfamiliar contexts.

For example, critical thinking in history depends upon historical knowledge. Scientific enquiry depends upon scientific understanding. Effective writing depends upon knowledge of vocabulary, language and subject content.

The review therefore recommends a more knowledge-rich approach to curriculum design. This means identifying the knowledge that matters most and ensuring that it is taught, revisited and remembered.

Importantly, a knowledge-rich curriculum is not simply about memorising facts. It is about building understanding through carefully sequenced learning.



Key issue 5: Equity and curriculum entitlement

The review also raised concerns about equity.

One of the key questions considered was whether all learners benefit equally from the current curriculum. Evidence suggested that some groups of pupils can face barriers in accessing the full curriculum entitlement, including pupils with special educational needs, learners experiencing disadvantage and others whose educational experiences may differ significantly depending on context.

The review, therefore, emphasised the importance of a curriculum that combines high expectations with meaningful inclusion. An equitable curriculum does not mean lowering standards. Instead, it means ensuring that every learner has access to ambitious learning supported by appropriate scaffolding, resources and teaching approaches.

What does this mean for schools?

Schools are not currently expected to redesign their curriculum. Instead, the consultation period provides an opportunity to reflect on current practice and consider the implications of the proposed reforms.

Schools may wish to consider their current curriculum and in particular:

- how clearly essential knowledge has been identified across all Areas of Learning;
- whether learning progresses systematically over time;
- how curriculum decisions are currently made; and
- whether all learners experience the same level of ambition.

The reform process should be viewed as an opportunity for professional dialogue.

Discussion questions for schools

1. Where do we see inconsistencies or gaps in progression that echo the Strategic Review findings about the Northern Ireland curriculum?
2. How effectively does our curriculum support all learners?
3. Which aspects of the review findings resonate most strongly with our experience?
4. Do pupils receive enough opportunity to secure deep understanding?
5. What opportunities might curriculum reform create for improving teaching and learning in our school?



Key message

Curriculum reform is about building on the strengths of the current Northern Ireland Curriculum while addressing areas where greater clarity, coherence and consistency are needed.

By strengthening progression, identifying essential knowledge more clearly and promoting equity for all learners, the proposed reforms aim to ensure that every child and young person benefits from a high-quality, ambitious and inclusive curriculum that prepares them for lifelong learning, work and active participation in society.

Recommended reading

- Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland curriculum
 - [Summary report](#)
 - [Full report](#) (chapters 5, 6 and 7)
 - [Departmental response](#)
- Curriculum 2028: [Overview paper](#) (chapters 3 and 4)

