



TransformED

Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028
Short Guides for Schools

Guide 6: Understanding the structure of the new curriculum





Purpose of this guide

This guide explains how the proposed Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028 is organised and how its different components work together to provide a clearer, more coherent and more equitable curriculum for all learners.

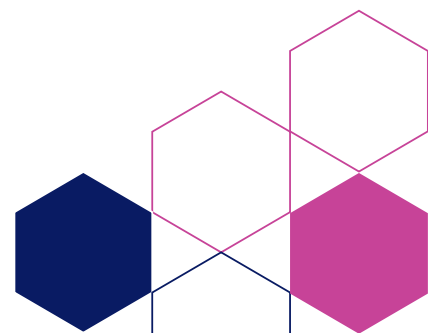
Understanding the structure of the new curriculum is important because it helps schools see how the proposed reforms seek to address issues identified in the Strategic Review, including lack of clarity, weak progression and inconsistency in pupils' curriculum experiences.

A subject-based curriculum

A major criticism of the current curriculum is that it is organised through broad Areas of Learning with relatively little specification of the knowledge pupils should learn. The review found that this often led to variation between schools, gaps in learning, unnecessary repetition and difficulties in ensuring progression over time.

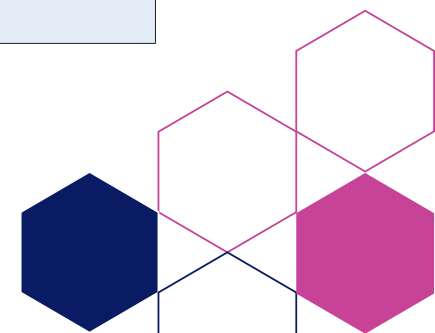
The new curriculum, therefore, represents a deliberate shift towards a more structured, subject-based approach. The intention is to provide greater clarity about what pupils are entitled to learn and how learning should build from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3.

A central feature of the new curriculum is, therefore, its emphasis on subjects as the primary way in which pupils gain access to knowledge and understanding. This is sometimes referred to as a domain-led curriculum because each subject represents a distinct body of knowledge, concepts and ways of thinking.

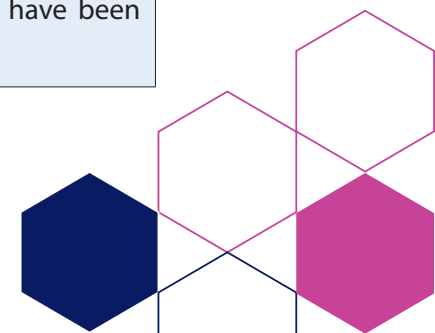


The table below sets out the proposed structure of the new Northern Ireland Curriculum, including the subjects, phases of study and key design considerations across Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3.

Subject	Key Information
Art and Design	Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3
Digital Technology	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
Language and Cultural Awareness	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.
Mathematics	Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3. 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.



Subject	Key Information
Modern Languages	The Key Stage 3 Modern Languages curriculum is designed as a tightly structured programme that develops beginner proficiency in a 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.
Music	Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3
Physical Education	Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3
Personal, Social, Citizenship and Careers (PSCC)	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.
Science	Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3. 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. 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.
Technology and Design	Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3. 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.



Subjects: the building blocks of the curriculum

The curriculum is made up of individual frameworks for each subject. Each subject framework has two key components.

A vision statement

Every subject begins with a concise vision statement explaining why the subject matters and the contribution it makes to children's intellectual, cultural and personal development.

Curriculum entitlement

Each subject also contains clearly defined curriculum entitlement statements that specify the knowledge, concepts, vocabulary and understanding that pupils should develop at different stages. These are written as concise "Pupils should learn..." statements.

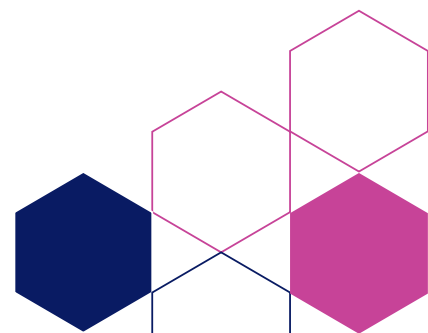
This ensures greater clarity about what pupils are entitled to learn and reduces the need for schools to interpret broad curriculum requirements.

How progression is built into the curriculum

One of the most significant structural changes is the emphasis on progression. Instead of progression being assumed, it is designed directly into the curriculum. Knowledge is carefully sequenced so that earlier learning creates the foundation for later learning. Important concepts are revisited, extended and deepened as pupils move through school.

This means that progression is not simply about moving from one topic to another. It is about:

- increasing depth of knowledge;
- developing more sophisticated understanding;
- strengthening vocabulary;
- applying knowledge in increasingly complex ways; and
- building stronger connections across learning.



What flexibility will schools retain?

Although the curriculum is more specific than the current framework, schools will continue to play a vital role in curriculum design. The statutory curriculum defines what pupils should learn. Schools retain responsibility for deciding:

- how learning is organised;
- which resources are used;
- which texts, examples and case studies are selected;
- how curriculum time is allocated; and
- how learning is adapted to meet local needs.

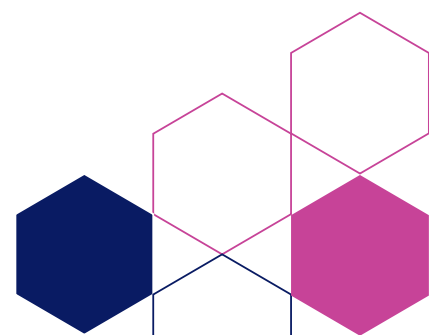
The curriculum, therefore, seeks to achieve a balance between a common entitlement and professional autonomy.

What is new?

Several aspects of the proposed structure differ from the current curriculum. These include:

- a stronger emphasis on subjects and disciplines;
- clearer curriculum entitlement statements;
- greater specification of knowledge and vocabulary;
- progression built directly into the curriculum framework;
- the introduction of Digital Technology as a subject from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3;
- the introduction of Personal, Social, Citizenship and Careers to replace PDMU and LLW; and
- a stronger connection between curriculum content and capability development.

Together, these changes are intended to strengthen clarity, consistency and progression across the education system.



What does this mean for schools?

Schools will need to become familiar with the structure of the new subject frameworks and how progression is organised within and across subjects.

Rather than creating progression models from scratch, schools will be able to use the curriculum framework as the foundation for curriculum planning. The focus of curriculum discussion may increasingly shift towards sequencing, implementation and ensuring that all pupils access the intended curriculum.

For many schools, the reforms may reinforce existing good practice while providing greater clarity about knowledge, progression and entitlement.

Discussion questions for schools

1. How will the new structure improve curriculum progression for pupils?
2. Does the proposed balance between entitlement and flexibility feel appropriate?
3. Are there aspects of the structure that require further clarification?
4. What feedback would our school provide on the proposed curriculum structure?

Key message

The proposed Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028 is organised around subjects, progression and a shared curriculum entitlement. By providing clearer subject frameworks, stronger progression and a closer connection between knowledge and capabilities, the new structure aims to deliver greater coherence, consistency and equity for all learners.

Recommended reading

- Curriculum 2028: [Overview paper](#) (chapter 6)
- Curriculum 2028: [Subject frameworks](#)
- [Draft Religious Education syllabus](#)

