NORTHERN IRELAND CURRICULUM 2028 CONSULTATION

ENGAGEMENT WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE







October 2026

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Executive Summary

In June 2026, the Department of Education launched a public consultation on the proposed Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028, which is a key milestone within the TransformED programme of curriculum, assessment and qualifications reform. This report presents the findings of engagement with post-primary pupils undertaken as part of that consultation. Participatory workshops were held with 72 young people across eight post-primary settings in September and October 2026. The settings included controlled and maintained non-selective schools; controlled, voluntary and non-selective grammar schools; an integrated school; and schools involved in the Dixon plan. Underpinned by a children's rights-based approach, the workshops explored the areas set out in the Department's specification:

- the aims and objectives of the new curriculum;
- preparedness for future learning;
- the curriculum capabilities;
- the vision statements and core content of the Key Stage 3 subject frameworks;
- the Personal, Social, Civic and Careers (PSCC) framework.

The engagement found that awareness of the curriculum review was generally limited, and most participants had not heard of it before taking part. Young people called for clear, impartial information from the Department about what is changing and why. Most young people were broadly supportive of the proposed curriculum, although participants in one school were notably more critical, questioning the need for change and how the reforms would be implemented.

Young people most often described the purpose of education in terms of qualifications and employment, while also recognising its role in developing life skills, friendships and character. The proposed aim was generally viewed as reasonable, although some found its language vague and others felt it did not reflect the importance they place on qualifications and employment. The objectives were seen as broadly appropriate, although some participants felt they focused too heavily on who young people will become rather than who they are now.

Young people's preparedness for post-primary school depended on the primary school they had attended, with many meeting subjects such as history, geography, languages and the arts for the first time in Year 8. Within Key Stage 3, participants valued learning

that built on what had gone before. However, many described their learning as fragmented or repetitive, and identified the move into Key Stage 4 as a significant step up. Careers guidance was widely seen as coming too late, often after GCSE choices had been made, although some also described the pressure of being expected to make long-term decisions at a young age.

Participants recognised the value of the proposed capabilities and often saw them as interconnected. Language and communication, physical health and wellbeing, reasoning and problem solving, and creativity and imagination were the most highly valued. However, some questioned whether capabilities such as empathy and perseverance can be taught in the classroom, and others felt that school does not currently do enough to develop creativity and social and civic participation.

Across the subject frameworks, young people's own sense of each subject's purpose often closely matched the proposed vision statements. The most consistent concern was a perceived emphasis on theory and knowledge at the expense of practical, hands-on learning, particularly in subjects young people regarded as practical or creative. PSCC was largely welcomed as a way to prepare young people for life beyond school, although responses were strongly shaped by experiences of Learning for Life and Work (LLW). Careers and futures generated the most discussion, with participants calling for greater awareness of the range of pathways available, including alternatives to university, and for more first-hand experience of work.

In light of these findings, the Department may wish to consider providing clear, accessible information about the new curriculum for young people; securing clear sequencing within subjects, so that learning builds from year to year and the move into Key Stage 4 feels like a step rather than a jump; making practical, hands-on learning more visible in the subject frameworks; building on the careers and futures strand of PSCC, which participants welcomed, by ensuring that it is exploratory rather than directive, introduces the full range of pathways, including alternatives to university, before GCSE options are chosen, and offers first-hand experience of the world of work; and supporting teachers and carefully managing the transition from LLW to PSCC as the new curriculum is introduced.

Overall, the young people who took part offered thoughtful insight into how the proposed curriculum could better reflect their experiences and needs. Their views point towards a curriculum that is coherent from one stage to the next, practical and relevant to their lives, and that recognises who young people are now as well as who they will become.

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Introduction

In June 2026, the Department of Education launched a public consultation on the proposed Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028. The consultation represents a key milestone within TransformED, which is the Department's wider programme of curriculum, assessment and qualifications reform. The proposed curriculum has been designed to provide greater clarity, coherence and progression for all learners from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3.

This report presents the findings from engagement with children and young people undertaken as part of that consultation. The engagement focused on young people aged 11–17. As learners who have recently completed primary education and are now experiencing post-primary provision, this age group is well placed to comment on prior learning, current provision and future requirements, including the progression of curriculum content from primary to post-primary school. The Department's specification for this engagement identified five key aspects of the proposed curriculum to be explored with young people:

- The aims and objectives of the new curriculum;
- The vision statements for each of the Key Stage 3 subject frameworks;
- Preparedness for future learning;
- The capabilities that will emerge from the new curriculum;
- The core content of subjects of greatest interest, including the Personal, Social, Civic and Careers (PSCC) framework.

The report begins by outlining the methodology used for the engagement, including the engagement activities undertaken and a participant overview. The findings are then presented under the five areas identified in the Department's specification. The report concludes by setting out the implications for curriculum reform arising from children and young people's feedback, together with overall conclusions for consideration as the Department develops the final Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028.

Methodology

A qualitative, participatory research design was adopted, using workshops that combined structured discussion with interactive, age-appropriate activities. This approach enabled young people to engage with the proposed curriculum reforms in an accessible way, and to discuss their experiences of education in their own words. The engagement schedule used to guide the workshops is provided in Appendix One.

The design was underpinned by a children's rights-based approach to participation. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) affirms the right of children and young people to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and for those views to be given due weight. In line with the Lundy model of child participation, the engagement sought to provide young people with a safe and inclusive space in which to form and express their views, support to exercise their voice, and assurance that their views would reach an audience with the capacity to act upon them, thereby creating the opportunity for influence within the wider consultation process.

The Department of Education's specification identified five areas to be explored with children and young people. It stated that the engagement should explore young people's views on:

- The aims and objectives of the new curriculum;
- The vision statements for each of the Key Stage 3 subject frameworks;
- Preparedness for future learning;
- The capabilities that will emerge from the new curriculum;
- The core content of subjects of greatest interest, including the Personal, Social, Civic and Careers (PSCC) framework.

These areas provided the overall structure for the engagement and the organising framework for the findings. While these areas shaped the engagement, sessions were also designed to allow participants to raise issues that mattered to them. The analysis was therefore both deductive and inductive: deductive in that it was shaped by the areas identified in the specification and the subject framework categories, and inductive in that it remained open to themes emerging from young people's own accounts.

Participant Overview

Eight participatory workshops with young people across a range of post-primary settings were delivered during September and October 2026. Each workshop lasted between 45 and 120 minutes and used a combination of structured discussion questions and participatory activities. Activities were adapted where necessary to reflect the age, communication needs and educational context of each group.

The engagement sought to include a diverse cross-section of young people aged 11–17, reflecting the Department of Education's requirement to engage with a representative range of participants from across Northern Ireland. A purposive, maximum-variation sampling approach was used to capture the perspectives of young people experiencing different forms of post-primary provision. Participants were recruited through schools, and the final sample included young people from controlled and maintained non-selective post-primary schools, controlled, voluntary and non-selective grammar schools, an integrated school, a single-sex school, and schools involved in the Dixon plan.

The selection of participating schools also sought to achieve variation in geography, including urban and rural settings, and in socio-economic context. Within participating schools, recruitment sought, where feasible, to include young people of different genders, ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic backgrounds and educational experiences, in line with the considerations set out in the Department's specification.

A breakdown of participant demographics is presented in Table 1.

Setting	Number of Participants	Gender	Age Groups Represented
Controlled non-selective post-primary school	8	4 boys, 4 girls	11-14
Maintained non-selective post-primary school	6	2 boys, 4 girls	12-16
Non-selective grammar school	10	6 boys, 4 girls	12-17
Voluntary grammar school	11	2 boys, 9 girls	12-16

Non-selective junior school involved with the Dixon Plan	10	5 boys, 5 girls	12-14
Controlled grammar school	8	4 boys, 4 girls	15-16
Controlled non-selective post-primary school	9	9 boys	11-17
Integrated post-primary school	10	4 boys, 6 girls	13-17

Table 1: Participant Overview

Overall, 72 young people took part in the engagement. Participants ranged in age from 11 to 17 and included 36 boys and 36 girls. The final sample included schools in both urban and rural areas, serving communities with differing levels of socio-economic disadvantage.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were fully informed of the purpose, scope and nature of the engagement prior to taking part. Information sheets were provided to young people and their parents or carers, outlining the aims of the project, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw, and the intended use of the information collected, including the possibility that the Department may publish this report or use its findings as part of the consultation analysis and response. Both parental consent and young people's own consent were obtained prior to participation.

Workshops took place during the school day in familiar school environments and in line with each school's safeguarding procedures. At the start of each session, the facilitator emphasised that there were no right or wrong answers and that young people could choose not to answer any question. Discussions were audio-recorded for analysis purposes, and participants and parents or carers were informed of this in advance. Written outputs from activities, such as written responses, were also collected.

All information gathered was treated confidentially and anonymised. While Table 1 sets out the range of settings involved, several were the only school of their type in the engagement, so attributing quotations by detailed school type could make individual schools identifiable. Quotations, and references to settings in the text, are therefore attributed to one of two broad categories: grammar school or non-selective school. These categories were chosen because some key differences in participants' views emerged between grammar and non-selective settings, whereas no marked differences

were found by management type (for example, between controlled and maintained schools). Where a setting combined grammar and non-selective features, such as a grammar school that does not use academic selection, it has been included in the non-selective group.

Data Analysis

Data from the workshop discussions was analysed thematically. This involved reviewing the discussion data to identify recurring patterns, key messages, areas of consensus and areas of divergence across participants and groups. The analysis was guided by the five areas identified in the Department's specification and by the subject-specific categories contained in the Key Stage 3 subject frameworks, while remaining attentive to themes emerging from young people's own accounts. Throughout the report, young people's own words are used to illustrate the findings. Quotations are presented verbatim, with minor edits only where necessary for clarity or to protect anonymity.

Limitations

The findings in this report provide insight into the experiences, views and priorities of the young people who participated. A purposive sampling approach was used to ensure that the engagement included young people from a range of post-primary sectors and settings, alongside an appropriate geographical and socio-economic spread, although the final sample was also shaped by the availability of schools. The engagement offers a microcosm of the perspectives of young people across post-primary provision, capturing a broad range of views from different types of school and context. While it does not seek to capture the views of every young person in Northern Ireland, many themes recurred across settings, suggesting they may resonate with young people more widely.

In addition, since the consultation documentation is detailed and technical, key elements were summarised and presented in age-appropriate formats, meaning that young people responded to simplified representations of the proposals rather than to the full consultation documents. While some of the gaps participants identified may therefore be covered in more detail in the full documentation, this approach was essential for meaningful participation and offers valuable insight into how young people understand the proposals when they are presented accessibly.

Finally, since most participants had not heard of the curriculum review before taking part, many sessions included capacity building in line with the rights-based approach

underpinning the engagement. This meant that all young people had the information they needed to voice their opinions. As a result, their views on the proposals largely reflect initial responses, grounded in their own experiences of school. A small number of participants had discussed the proposals with a teacher in advance, which may have shaped their views.

Findings

This section presents the findings from participatory workshops with 72 young people across eight post-primary settings in Northern Ireland, carried out in September and October 2026. Each workshop began by asking young people what they already knew about the curriculum review, followed by a brief introduction to the proposals. Participants then explored the areas set out in the Department's specification in turn, using accessible summaries of the proposed aim and objectives, capabilities, subject frameworks and PSCC framework. Group discussion was combined with participatory activities, such as prioritising the objectives and capabilities they felt mattered most, and completing written feedback on what they felt individual subjects should help young people to achieve. Throughout, participants were encouraged to draw on their own experiences of primary and post-primary school, and to raise the issues that mattered most to them.

Young people engaged thoughtfully with the proposals, and most were broadly supportive of the proposed curriculum. Several themes recurred across the areas explored: the importance of continuity as young people move from one stage of education to the next; the value they place on learning that is practical and relevant to their lives, including life skills such as managing money; and the wish for earlier, clearer preparation for the choices and pathways ahead. Some differences also emerged between settings. Participants in grammar schools more often described a smooth transition from primary school, and some felt that aspects of PSCC were better learned at home, while participants in non-selective schools more often framed the purpose of school around qualifications and employment and stressed the role of school where support at home is limited.

The findings begin with participants' awareness of, and overall attitudes towards, the curriculum review, and are then presented under the five areas set out in the Department's specification.

Awareness of and attitudes towards the curriculum review

Awareness of the curriculum review was generally limited. Most participants had not heard of the review before taking part, and some were unfamiliar with the Department of Education itself. Once the review had been briefly explained to them, a number of participants felt that young people had not been consulted widely enough, and that the information they had received before the workshop was not always neutral. They called for clear, impartial information from the Department, so that pupils, parents and teachers could understand the proposals and form their own views.

"I didn't even know we were having a curriculum review." (Non-selective school)

"I had no clue what a curriculum review was. The first I heard of it was when [teacher] asked if I wanted to do this here session with you... I think the Department should put out more information about it, because some people might want to know. It might matter to some people." (Grammar school)

"Is this something that will affect us? Like, will our year group be one of the ones that has to change what they're doing... I feel like we probably should know about it if we're basically involved in it." (Non-selective school)

"I think there really isn't anyone near enough, like, awareness of the change being made because we've been told like little bits and pieces, but then there are people that know nothing... I know you're talking to students now about it, but I bet if you talked to the vast like student population of Northern Ireland, I think most of them would say they've got no idea the curriculum is changing." (Grammar school)

"It would be nice if we had like a general statement or like there was something to go off, that was just general information that everyone, teachers, parents, and students could all get an idea of what's going on, without opinions or bias, and then everyone could get an understanding." (Grammar school)

By contrast, participants in one grammar school were already aware of the review, having discussed it with a teacher prior to participating in the consultation.

"The only way that we've heard about it is through teachers... Yesterday we were pulled into a classroom with [teacher] who was very unhappy about how the course had been changed. She was also the only person who told us what her thoughts were." (Grammar school)

Participants' overall attitudes towards the reforms also varied. Most participants welcomed the new curriculum.

"I like the new curriculum. I think it's good." (Non-selective school)

"I think it's good the curriculum is changing, but at the same time I think it'll be weird for my year group because some people like classes the way they are." (Non-selective school)

"It's hard to say now if it'll be good or bad because it hasn't actually happened yet but it's good they're trying to make things better." (Grammar school)

However, participants in one grammar school were more critical of the reforms.

> *"Northern Ireland has the best education system in the UK, and I think from what I've gathered from talking to people… is that our education system is trying to change to be more like the England one, but ours is already working really well." (Grammar school)*

> *"I'm sure that there's maybe some positives to this, but so far I don't think I've seen them." (Grammar school)*

These participants questioned whether a common curriculum was appropriate across different types of school and for young people with differing abilities and aspirations. They argued that teachers who know their pupils are best placed to decide what they learn, and felt that young people pursuing vocational pathways, or with different academic strengths, might require different content.

> *"If we're all learning the same stuff, what's the purpose of going to a grammar school? I feel like teachers know their students, so they know how to change what they're teaching because they know like what their students are good at, what they need to work on. I'd rather someone who knows me decide what I learn instead of someone in the government who I've never met." (Grammar school)*

> *"If you're making everyone learn the same content, what about non-academic people who don't want to go on to do something academic? They want to go on to do like hairdressing or something like that. They don't need to learn all this content, they just need to know what they need to know to get them to the next level." (Grammar school)*

> *"Even in this school, different teachers obviously teach things slightly differently… And I just think if everyone's learning the same thing, it's going to get repetitive and it's going to get boring." (Grammar school)*

Participants in this school asked how a common curriculum fitted with academic selection, and raised concerns that it could widen the gap between grammar and non-selective schools, where a wider range of abilities might make implementation more difficult.

> *"If they're trying to make schools like teach the same thing and try and be on a similar level, then what's the point of the transfer test?" (Grammar school)*

> *"I think that this might be encouraging a bigger gap between grammar schools and secondary schools because in a secondary school there's a really wide range of abilities and that it might be harder to like implement this new curriculum." (Grammar school)*

These participants also raised concerns about how the reforms would be implemented. They worried that the first year groups to experience the new curriculum could be disadvantaged while teachers adjusted, and suggested that the curriculum should be phased in to avoid content repetition.

> *"I'm worried you're going to get maybe two years of the guinea pig year group that might not be as good, because it's our teachers' first go at the new curriculum... They'll be slightly less briefed and slightly less informed on the subject." (Grammar school)*

> *"I think that if this were to work, it can't just be rushed in next year. Like they should start it at P1 and then work it up. Because say all third years are gonna learn about World War One. We've already done World War One in first year. We'll just be wasting our time going over the same topic again." (Grammar school)*

Finally, participants across settings stressed that the success of any new curriculum would depend on wider conditions in schools, not only on its content. They pointed to teacher engagement, classroom behaviour and the impact of long-term teacher absence as factors that would shape what young people actually learn.

> *"I guess it's not so much about what's being taught, it's also like the environment of the school. If you've got this new curriculum but you still have schools where the teachers are just laid back and don't really care, it still won't be fair for everyone." (Non-selective school)*

> *"Behaviour in school is a bigger problem than the curriculum. People will never get taught half of the things in this because people are getting kicked out of the classroom. It's too disruptive to get through this." (Non-selective school)*

> *"I think I would be really good in PE if I actually got taught it a bit better, but at the moment we're just doing fitness testing every lesson because that's all the substitute teacher knows what to do. We don't have a clue what we're supposed to be doing in PE and I just feel like we're going to be so far behind all the other classes who actually have a proper PE teacher." (Grammar school)*

> *"My class knows like nothing about technology because our teacher has been off for six months, and the substitute teacher knows nothing about technology, so like we doesn't learn anything. There needs to be better training or whatever, so you don't miss out on learning if you've got a substitute teacher." (Non-selective school)*

Participants' awareness of the curriculum review was limited, and a number felt that young people had not been sufficiently informed about changes that would directly affect them. Most participants welcomed the new curriculum, although participants in one grammar school were more critical, questioning the need for change, how a common curriculum would accommodate different types of school and learner, and how the reforms would be implemented. Across settings, participants recognised that the success of the new curriculum would depend not only on its content, but on the conditions in which it is taught, including teacher engagement, classroom behaviour and the impact of teacher absence.

The aims and objectives of the new curriculum

Perceptions of the aim of the new curriculum

Participants were asked what they thought the aim of education should be. Across all of the non-selective school settings, the most common response framed the purpose of school in terms of qualifications and future employment.

> *"School is about doing your GCSEs so you can get a good job." (Non-selective school)*

> *"The point of school is to prepare us for when we start to work." (Non-selective school)*

> *"School broadens your opportunities and kind of makes you start to think about what path I want to go for like the rest of my life. It prepares you for your choices you're going to be making." (Non-selective school)*

> *"School is for education and for learning, so you can get smart and get a job." (Non-selective school)*

> *"The only reason for going to school is to get GCSEs, to get qualifications, and then you can get a job." (Non-selective school)*

> *"To learn. To get an education. To get jobs. To get jobs and reach your full potential." (Non-selective school)*

Participants also identified learning itself as a core purpose of education. This was often linked to understanding life and the world beyond school.

> *"We're here to learn." (Grammar school)*

> *"We're here to learn, so we have an understanding of life. And I feel like that helps like when you go into like jobs and stuff. You learn how to actually act in the world, and school prepares you for that." (Non-selective school)*

> *"School teaches you stuff, so you aren't sitting on the floor like a baby not able to talk." (Non-selective school)*

Alongside these views, participants described a broader set of purposes centred on developing skills for life.

> *"To develop skills for life... Leadership. Communication. Being able to work in a team. Critical thinking." (Grammar school)*

> *"School gives us social skills." (Non-selective school)*

> *"We go to school every day so we can learn life skills." (Non-selective school)*

> *"School gives you life skills, like communication and teamwork." (Non-selective school)*

> *"To get life skills, like cooking and making money." (Non-selective school)*

> *"School should teach you how to like effectively communicate to be able to put your point across, or stand up for yourself, or get what you kind of need out of independence." (Non-selective school)*

The social side of school was important to a number of participants. Friendships were named as purposes in their own right, not simply as by-products of attending school.

> *"School is for making mates." (Non-selective school)*

> *"One of the reasons for school is to make friends." (Non-selective school)*

Some participants set out more developed views of education's role in shaping character and citizenship. These included understanding global political and geographical issues, developing a moral compass, and learning to live alongside people who are different. Taken together, these responses suggest that while qualifications and employment were predominantly identified as the purpose of education, many also recognised school's social, personal and civic functions.

"School should help you be educated on the political and geographical problems in the world." (Non-selective school)

"School should give you a strong moral compass… You don't know what someone's going through unless you've walked 100 miles in their shoes. School should teach you right and wrong, but also how to live with people who are different to you." (Non-selective school)

In contrast, one participant reflected a sense that school was simply an obligation, rather than something with a purpose that young people could clearly identify.

"You just have to go to school. It's the law. I don't know, the point is just that we have to go." (Non-selective school)

When participants were presented with the proposed aim, most were generally positive. They felt it was reasonable, reflected what schools already do, and would be recognisable to most schools.

"I like the new aim. I think it's a good thing." (Non-selective school)

"It's probably a good thing that they keep it consistent." (Grammar school)

"I think that aim is fair enough. It's fair enough, like it tells the truth. I think most schools would be able to say yeah, that's what we're here for." (Non-selective school)

However, in one grammar school, some participants were concerned that the aim was vague or generic. These participants questioned what certain phrases meant in practice, and indicated that the aim's broad framing did not match their own experience.

"It says it enables them to have genuine choices that empower them to make informed and responsible decisions. Like, is that within jobs or just within sort of life in general? Do you know what I mean? It's a bit vague." (Grammar school)

"It's kind of generic. I'm sure that the most recent one they brought in like seven years ago looked something very similar to this." (Grammar school)

"I didn't put down this school as my first choice because I thought it would equip me with the knowledge, skills, and experiences that enable me to have genuine choices. I did it with a genuine path in mind." (Grammar school)

Participants from another school discussed a disconnect between the language of the aim and their own account of school's purpose. Some felt that an aim which did not mention qualifications or employment failed to reflect what they saw as the central reason for being in education.

> *"My only thing is, it's not very specific. It says they're aiming for skills and experiences, but I think an aim about education should mention qualifications or employment." (Non-selective school)*

> *"The aim isn't specific. It's very broad. It should be more specific. We all know the aim is to learn, to get an education, to get qualifications. It should be more specific." (Non-selective school)*

At the same time, other participants recognised the tension in writing a single aim for all learners. Participants questioned whether one aim could apply equally across different areas and different young people, and acknowledged that an aim meant to fit everyone would inevitably need to be broad.

> *"The problem with having one aim is that it's different areas and different people, so you won't be able to apply to people in the same way." (Grammar school)*

> *"I think if you wanted a specific aim, it would be 15 pages long. You can't be too specific, it has to fit everyone, so it kind of has to be broad." (Non-selective school)*

Finally, some participants proposed that the aim should differ across key stages. These participants suggested that the early years of post-primary education are principally about settling into school, building relationships and learning to be part of a community, while the focus shifts towards qualifications and future pathways from Year 11 onwards. This suggests that young people experience the purpose of school as changing over time, and that a single aim may not fully capture this progression.

> *"I think it would be good to have a different aim for Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, because in year 8 through ten, the aim is learning and choices and experiences, and then when you're in year eleven it's more about qualifications and the future." (Non-selective school)*

> *"I would argue that in first year, second year, and third year, it's more about learning the way your school works. It's not so much about exams, but it's more so about learning how to like respect other people around you... So I think your*

aim should be different, because what you're supposed to get out of it is different." (Non-selective school)

Overall, young people held a clear view of the purpose of education, with qualifications and employment most often identified as its central aim. Responses to the proposed aim were generally positive, with participants viewing it as reasonable and reflective of what schools already do. However, some felt it was too vague or generic to be meaningful, while others noted that its omission of qualifications and employment did not reflect their own understanding of why they are in school.

Perceptions of the objectives of the new curriculum

The proposed curriculum sets out five objectives. It aims to support each young person to develop as an individual, a member of society, a contributor to the economy, a steward of the environment and a lifelong learner. Participants looked at each objective in turn, discussing which they considered most important, whether any should not be an objective of education, and whether anything was missing.

Being an individual was the objective participants most frequently identified as the most important, across several school settings. Some saw it as the foundation for the other four objectives, arguing that young people could only take part in society, the economy and wider life once they had developed as individuals.

"Being an individual is the most important objective, because you can do all of the other objectives as an individual." (Grammar school)

"Being an individual is the most important, definitely." (Non-selective school)

"You're already a member of society. Whether you're good at it or not, you're a member of society. But part of being a good member of society is that you're a good individual." (Non-selective school)

Participants understood being an individual mainly in terms of personal growth and independence.

"I like that they have being an individual because you need to grow in yourself and like be your own person. It's good as an objective, because situations in school are supposed to grow you as a person, like that wouldn't happen if you didn't go to school… School should make you an individual. I don't know if they all do, but they all should." (Non-selective school)

"When we're in school, most of us live with our family still, and you're not really learning how to be on your own. So when people do end up being on their own, it can be quite hard." (Non-selective school)

However, one participant saw a tension between this objective and the idea of a common curriculum. They felt that requiring all schools to teach the same content worked against the objective of developing young people as individuals.

"I feel like making every single school the same is really taking away like everyone being very individual. You can't just group everyone into learning the same stuff and then saying that that's one of your objectives." (Grammar school)

Being a member of society was also frequently named as the most important objective. Participants who chose it explained their choice in different ways. Some focused on being able to contribute to the world and help others. Others stressed that society depends on everyone working together, and a few saw school as the place where young people learn the morals and values that hold society together.

"Member of society is the most important, because with society, you need every single individual to work together in order to keep the cogs of society running. So if you don't know how to do that, one single cog could disrupt the whole of society." (Non-selective school)

"I'd say a member of society, because then you can contribute to the world and help people around you." (Grammar school)

"Being a member of society because through school we learn our morals and values. So if we don't have school, then everything would just be anarchy." (Non-selective school)

Participants also associated this objective with their experience of school as a community. They described school as a place to learn how to live and work with other people. Several looked ahead to working life, where they expected to have to cooperate with colleagues, including people they might not necessarily like.

"I think being a member of society is the most important thing for us to learn, because in school we're part of like a community, and we feel like part of it, and we want to feel the same when we move out of school and into a job when we're working alongside people, and we feel like we're supposed to be there. So it's preparing us to live with other people." (Non-selective school)

"You do need to be able to do things by yourself, but you can't do things by yourself all the time. In some jobs, maybe, but in most jobs, you work as a team and you have to be able to cooperate with those people and get on with them, even if you wouldn't like them as a person. You just need to put that away and be able to do the job." (Non-selective school)

"School helps you learn to socialise and mix with different groups of people, and just learn that you're not just one group, and that's like everyone's different." (Non-selective school)

Some participants felt this objective could more clearly reflect the specific context of Northern Ireland and the people who live there.

"I do think it would be nice if we had like something slightly different. You know, something that focuses more on like the people in Northern Ireland and like their context." (Grammar school)

"We're a small country, but I think it's important our education relates to us." (Grammar school)

Being a contributor to the economy drew support from participants, which is consistent with their view that qualifications and employment are the main purpose of school. Support was especially clear in one school, where nine out of ten participants identified it as the most important objective of education.

"I think the most important objective is that we become contributors to the economy, because nowadays in life you have to earn money to get the things that you want. So if you want to buy a house, a car, raise a family, you're going to have to have, say, your GCSEs to get a job. So you're going to have to go through school." (Non-selective school)

"Being a contributor to the economy is the main point of school. Like you're learning to get a job." (Non-selective school)

"A contributor to the economy because that's what you're sort of learning to work towards in school anyway." (Grammar school)

Some participants also saw this objective as being about wider society, in addition to personal gain. They described the economy as what keeps society running, and pointed to the ways everyone's work and spending contribute to the common good. Their understanding of how the economy works varied, but they shared a clear sense that economic participation matters for everyone.

"I think a contributor to the economy, because the economy basically runs society, and contributing to the economy can do many things for society. Like if you're a bin man, everyone gets their bins done, and then you contribute to society by getting paid and then spending your money." (Non-selective school)

"If you don't make enough money, the economy can crash or skyrocket, and prices go up or prices go down, and if that happens there's kind of no point of their own money, and everybody will just steal." (Non-selective school)

However, one participant questioned whether this objective was realistic for young people who do not yet have jobs, and suggested that the objectives should focus more on who young people are now, rather than only on who they will become.

"I'm not sure this is realistic for a child... Maybe the objectives should be about what we're like now rather than who we're going to be." (Grammar school)

Being a steward of the environment was also welcomed as an objective by participants across a range of school settings. Participants saw it as important because the environment is the world in which they live, and they recognised that failing to look after it would have serious consequences.

"It's good they have steward of the environment because if no one protects the planet, something might happen and we could all die." (Non-selective school)

"I think the environment one, because it's where we live, and if we don't take care of it, then we have a problem." (Grammar school)

"A steward of the environment because like you're protecting like your community and stuff." (Non-selective school)

"I feel like steward of the environment is important. It's the world around us and if we don't look after it, it's going to come back at us." (Non-selective school)

Some participants thought about this objective in terms of responsibility between generations. They understood that environmental problems they face today stem from the actions of earlier generations, and felt a responsibility to leave things better for those who come after them.

"The actions of our forefathers are causing problems for us nowadays, and it's going to continue to cause problems for the next generation. So, we do need to think about how it's going to affect, and we do need to learn how to prevent it." (Non-selective school)

> *"I'm really glad steward of the environment is one. I think that hasn't really been a focus in schools, but it's good to leave Earth a better place than what you started with, and for the generations to come to follow you, it's just more beneficial than just helping yourself, I guess. It's like less selfish." (Non-selective school)*

Although participants welcomed the objective, some felt that school does not currently do enough to help young people become stewards of the environment. These participants saw it as a chance for this to change.

> *"At the moment, I don't think you really learn how to be a steward of the environment in school. Like school doesn't really teach you much about the environment. There is a lot of pollution in the sea and on land and stuff so it would be good if you learnt more about that." (Non-selective school)*

> *"I'm not sure our school helps us be good stewards of the environment at the moment, so it's good that it's in the new curriculum, so it's something that we can work on. At the moment I just don't think we're told enough about the impact we have on the planet." (Non-selective school)*

Finally, a small number of participants identified becoming a lifelong learner as being the most important objective of the new curriculum. These participants saw this objective as underpinning the others, because being a good learner allows young people to pick up everything else.

> *"I would say a lifelong learner because you're forever learning things. Like there's not like there's infinite things that you can always learn. So you can always learn from someone." (Grammar school)*

> *"A lifelong learner is the most important one, because learning new things is just beneficial for like the economic thing. You need to keep learning so that you can be better, and then build like a future." (Non-selective school)*

> *"I think it's important to be a good learner because if you're a good learner, you can pick off the rest of the stuff." (Non-selective school)*

Generally, participants felt the five objectives were appropriate and broad enough to cover what education should offer.

> *"They're pretty broad, they include everything they need to. Like I was going to say one of the objectives should be that you become mature or that you become*

a good person, but that's included in individual. Being an individual kind of means all of that, it covers everything it needs to." (Non-selective school)

"The objectives are good… [And] our school is pretty good, I'd say we'd get all of them objectives." (Non-selective school)

However, in one grammar school, participants identified gaps relating to character and values. These participants suggested objectives about being a genuinely good person and a good friend, about integrity and honesty, and about working hard and doing one's best.

"I think that they should have something along the lines of being like a genuinely good person, like a good friend, and looking out for people around you. Because at the end of the day, like I know you, I know jobs are important to people, but what's the point in like having a job if you don't have any friends to like complain about it to?" (Grammar school)

"I think there should be something in there about integrity, like knowing moral values and knowing to tell the truth and be honest." (Grammar school)

"Maybe there should be an objective about doing your best or working hard. Not everyone is just as academic as the next person but everyone should try their best." (Grammar school)

In addition, one participant questioned whether the same objectives should apply throughout a young person's time at school, given how much pupils change between Year 8 and upper sixth. They felt the objectives focused too much on who young people would become as adults, and not enough on who education could help them be now. This reflects earlier suggestions that the aim should differ across key stages, and the concern that being a contributor to the economy is not a realistic description of children's present lives.

"I'm not sure the objectives of education should be the same the whole way through school. Obviously like an 11 year old or a 12 year old is going to be vastly different than when they leave in upper sixth. So it's weird that your objectives are focused so much on what you're going to do as an adult instead of who education can help you be today." (Grammar school)

Participants generally responded positively to the five objectives and felt that, taken together, they were broad enough to capture what the new curriculum should offer. Being an individual and being a member of society were frequently identified as the

most important, valued as the foundations for personal growth, independence and living and working well alongside others. Being a contributor to the economy also drew strong support, reflecting young people's view that school is primarily a route to qualifications and employment. Being a steward of the environment was widely welcomed, and a small number saw being a lifelong learner as underpinning all of the others. However, some participants identified gaps relating to character and values, and others questioned whether the objectives focus too heavily on who young people will become as adults rather than who they are now.

Preparedness for future learning

Experiences of the primary to post-primary transition

Participants' experiences of the transition from primary to post-primary school varied. Some, particularly those in grammar school settings, described a smooth transition, explaining that their primary schools had given them the building blocks required for Key Stage 3.

> *"I think that moving from P7 to first year, there was a good transition." (Grammar school)*

> *"In my primary school, you got like the building blocks that you needed, and then when you got in the first year, you were kind of able to apply it." (Grammar school)*

> *"I'm not sure about other schools, but in this school, I think that the teachers were definitely capable of making the transition like really easy. It wasn't big going from P7 into the first year. Just felt like going from P5 to P6 or P6 to P7." (Grammar school)*

However, many participants felt that primary school had not prepared them for the range of subjects they met in post-primary school. A recurring theme was that primary education had focused mainly on English and maths, with other subjects taught occasionally or not at all. As a result, many young people found it overwhelming to meet subjects such as history, geography, languages and the arts for the first time in Year 8.

> *"I don't get why in primary school you just do English and maths, and then maybe history or art on a Friday." (Non-selective school)*

> *"You only really learn like English and maths and stuff like that in primary school… So doing all these subjects like geography, history, like art, and stuff,*

you just didn't fully know exactly what to do… [It was just] pushing you in at the deep end." (Non-selective school)

"I feel like my primary school didn't prepare me enough… We had like 15 different classes. I found it really overwhelming because in primary school it was just maths and English, maths and English, every day. So it was really different doing geography and learning about like say volcanoes or whatever. I was like, okay, we did not touch on that in primary school. So I thought that it was really different." (Non-selective school)

"I'm not even sure if my primary school did history. I know we did maths and English, and I remember learning about like Jesus and stuff. I think it would be good if primary schools had to follow this here new curriculum. Like they should have to do geography and history and all, to prepare you for first year. Even if it was just like P6, P7, when you're like doing practice transfers and stuff." (Non-selective school)

Where subjects such as history had been covered in primary school, participants often felt the content was disjointed and did not connect with what they went on to learn in Year 8. Some participants criticised World Around Us for covering topics in an illogical order, leaving them feeling they had to start again in post-primary school.

"We only did English, maths and World Around Us in our primary school. But it was kind of random what you learnt, like it's so different when you come to [post-primary school] and suddenly you're learning out of textbooks and stuff. In primary school, history is making a wee Egyptian mask out of a paper plate." (Grammar school)

"In primary school, there was nothing on like home economics. There was nothing on your health, nothing on nutrition, nothing on how to cook. And it's like same with history. We had World Around Us, which taught us about important events, but it was quite random. You just ended up learning the first thing that came to your teacher's mind. It didn't really link with what we do now in school." (Non-selective school)

"In history in primary school we done Egypt, flags, World War Two, the Titanic, and the history of Space… It's just all this stuff you don't need to know, taught completely out of order." (Non-selective school)

"We didn't do history in primary school. It was called World Around Us. We learned about World War Two, then we did the Titanic, and then Ancient Egypt.

Doesn't that seem like the wrong order to you, you know? Like that didn't help at all when I started first year, I basically was starting again." (Non-selective school)

Participants were also aware that differences between primary schools meant pupils arrived in Year 8 at very different starting points. This was particularly evident in languages, music and drama.

"See because we didn't learn any languages in primary school, it was a big jump in first year because some people did French in their primary school so they knew stuff. Some people did know some stuff, some people didn't, some people had done it in their primary school but it wasn't learned properly, so we started and people were all at different levels." (Non-selective school)

"I do think I felt prepared moving from P7 to Year 8, but I went to a good primary school. We did the recorder, so I was prepared for music. We did loads of plays so we were prepared for drama. Like we had that experience so it was easy... [But] I know some schools didn't do some of the subjects that we did. I mean I'm not saying their schools weren't as good just because they learnt different stuff but if you come in and you don't know anything, that's much harder for them." (Non-selective school)

"In my primary school, we had people who would come in and do drama with us, and it was so fun, and it was so cool. And then when we got to secondary school, it still had that same fun element. But the people who in their primary schools didn't do drama, it was incredibly jarring. They were very scared that it was embarrassing... They couldn't really get used to it because they hadn't experienced it." (Non-selective school)

Participants in one non-selective school reflected on how the arts are approached in primary school. They felt that art and drama were treated as fun activities rather than subjects to be learned and studied. They suggested that primary schools could introduce more structure and reflection into the arts, in an age-appropriate way.

"For all the arts, we didn't do much of it in primary school. And if you did, it wasn't a class thing. It was a 'this is fun' thing. So I think when first years come in and they're like, oh, we have art and we have drama and we have things like that. They come at it from an angle of, this is where we just have fun instead of viewing it as like this is something you can learn and you can study." (Non-selective school)

> *"I think [in primary school] you could get the children to do more serious topics, like write about why they drew what they drew in art, instead of just making them to draw or making them to play cymbals. Like so, putting a bit more structure, like why do you like these colours, like not very like hard questions because they are P7s, but just like why did you draw this?" (Non-selective school)*

Beyond curriculum content, participants described the practical and organisational demands of post-primary school as a significant adjustment. Moving between multiple classes during a day, finding their way around a new building and being responsible for their own equipment were all described as a big jump.

> *"I'd say I felt very prepared because I had learned a lot of content, but it was a very jarring switch to be going around like 15 classes a day. Like I didn't know where anything was." (Non-selective school)*

> *"In primary school everything's ready for you, and then you get to first year and even stuff like remembering your own pen, and if you forget it some teachers would ring your parents, but it's just a big jump to suddenly everything's your responsibility." (Non-selective school)*

> *"We didn't do the 11 plus exam. I'm not saying like you should have an exam for every school, but just like to prep you more into like learning the techniques you need to know... Exams are big in like Year 8, 9, 10, or whatever. But just to get you prepped into it so that it's not like a big jump or anything. So do more exam prep and stuff." (Non-selective school)*

Overall, participants' experiences of the transition from primary school into post-primary school suggest that how prepared young people feel depends on the primary school they attended. While some, particularly in grammar school settings, described a smooth and well-supported move, others met subjects such as history, geography, languages and the arts for the first time in Year 8, or found that what they had covered in primary school did not connect with what came next. This meant pupils often arrived at very different starting points. Alongside curriculum content, participants highlighted the organisational demands of post-primary school as a significant adjustment, and called for greater continuity between primary and post-primary learning.

Continuity and progression within post-primary education

Participants held a range of views regarding how well learning connects from one year to the next in post-primary school. Some described a clear sense of progression, where

teachers recapped earlier learning so new content could build on it. Participants valued these recaps, especially when they had forgotten material from previous years.

> *"At this school, we do have a recap because that's how we build it onto stuff." (Grammar school)*

> *"In some subjects they recap things that you learnt, and sometimes you're like, yeah, I don't remember learning that, so it's good that they recap it. So then it's like going back into your brain." (Non-selective school)*

Other participants experienced learning in Key Stage 3 as fragmented, and found it challenging to understand how one year's learning was supposed to prepare them for the next, or how Key Stage 3 related to GCSE.

> *"In like English, you do something different and then something different and something different, and I don't think it make sense how what you've learned is supposed to help you next year." (Non-selective school)*

> *"I do think we need to change the curriculum, because they do need to make it so like everything follows on. Like, at the moment you learn part of something, and then the next year you might learn the rest of it. We should learn it all in one go, and then once we get it, you can move onto the next topic." (Non-selective school)*

> *"I feel like I'm not making progress in science. We just keep learning more and more topics, but I don't feel like we're finishing any of them, and we never go back to get better at the old ones. I feel like they just keep stacking up, and I'm not fully learning anything." (Non-selective school)*

Repetition was also a strong theme, particularly in the non-selective schools. Participants described repeating content between Key Stages 2 and 3, and from year to year within Key Stage 3. They found this frustrating and considered it to be a waste of time.

> *"We did repeat a few topics from year eight and year nine, and then we repeated the topic in year 10... It was bad because then we've already done it before, so then our teachers are wasting time on stuff when we could be learning stuff that we don't know... There was a lot of repetition between like English especially." (Non-selective school)*

> *"I think English can be very repetitive. You'll be sitting in class thinking, I've heard all this before, because what you do in Key Stage 3 is the same as what you did in*

Key Stage 2. Now to be fair at GCSE it's totally different, so maybe [Key Stage 3] is just preparing you for what's to come. But it does feel a wee bit repetitive." (Non-selective school)

"Every single year in Geography, we learn the same things, just rivers. Every single year from year 8 to 11, we have learned rivers. Like I know what a meander is." (Non-selective school)

"Repeating stuff in school is horrible. Horrible. It just shouldn't be like that. And it means you don't feel prepared for fourth year because you just done the same stuff over and over and over again, you aren't ready for what's coming up." (Non-selective school)

"I feel like year eight and year nine are really similar. They should maybe make sure they have kind of separate identities, so what you're doing is more of a step up. Otherwise when you get to GCSE it's such a jump." (Non-selective school)

However, not all participants saw repetition as a negative. Some felt that revisiting content helped to consolidate learning and ease the move into Key Stage 4, while others argued that overlap between subjects reflected transferable skills rather than repetition.

"See what you learned in like geography in like the end of third year, it was like everything that you start off with in fourth year… It's like the same thing. You repeat it, you know, so you know it." (Non-selective school)

"I'm not sure it is repetitive, I think I'd say it's transferable skills… Sometimes what you learn in drama is the same as what you learnt in English. But that's not repetitive, it's just different perspectives… It's more about transferability rather than copying." (Non-selective school)

Participants identified several points within post-primary school where they felt a sudden jump in expectations.

"Year 8 to Year 9 was a jump, because you're doing basically completely different things." (Non-selective school)

"There is a jump at the moment. Like it was a jump, you know, going into [KS4]." (Non-selective school)

Participants pointed to specific changes at Key Stage 4 that could be better prepared for in Key Stage 3, relating to subject content and organisation, approaches to

assessment, and expectations around workload. They suggested that these could be introduced gradually during Key Stage 3, so that the move into Key Stage 4 felt like a step rather than a jump.

> *"It would be good to introduce the technical language in subjects like science early, because there's a lot of sophisticated language you need, and if they introduced some of those like more technical concepts earlier or like more technical language earlier, that'll be less of a jump later." (Non-selective school)*

> *"There's some stuff that I feel like we should be learning to give us the best chance possible at GCSE. We should be learning more of the specification when we're in junior school, so it's less of a big jump into GCSE." (Non-selective school)*

> *"I feel like even introducing coursework in like the younger years, I feel like that could help because you don't do coursework in junior school, and then it was just a jump to coursework from GCSE." (Non-selective school)*

> *"I feel like in junior school, yes, we do get homework, but it's not anywhere near the pressure or level or extreme of deadlines that you get when you go to GCSE or A level, because I remember starting GCSEs and having like so many homeworks due for the same day and not really knowing how to navigate that coming from a place where I got one maybe once a week and if you didn't do it, it wasn't that big of a deal." (Non-selective school)*

In contrast, some participants in one school did not perceive a significant step up between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. While they acknowledged an initial period of adjustment at the start of GCSE, they described this as a temporary "*bump in the road*" that quickly smoothed out once they adjusted to the new demands.

> *"So with the step up from year 10 to GCSE, it was kind of where like it was difficult at first, but then it kind of just smoothed out a bit. It was kind of just a bump in the road. It's the same with A level, where you'd have like a little bump, and then it would just like kind of flatten out of it and be more smooth sailing because you get used to it. It's the same with the jump from for me like P7." (Non-selective school)*

> *"I felt the jump more from GCSE to A Level, but not really from junior school to GCSE." (Non-selective school)*

Finally, participants were asked to reflect on how they knew they were making progress in school. They described progress as knowing more about a topic than they used to, solving problems more quickly, and achieving higher scores in examinations.

> *"I don't think you necessarily get better at subjects like geography, but you know you're making progress because you know more. You can look back at the end of the year and think, I know more about this topic than I used to. That's how I know I got better." (Non-selective school)*

> *"You know you're making progress in a subject because you can do the work faster, and you can start to figure out how you're going to do the work. You get quicker at problem-solving." (Non-selective school)*

> *"You expand as a person the more you progress in a subject… You start off things can only be done in one way, and then as you learn more, you realise you don't have to stick to that one way that everyone else is doing. You start to think bigger." (Non-selective school)*

> *"If you're getting the grades you want, you know you must've made progress. If you're getting good scores in your exams and stuff, you know you're doing well. You can't really base it on feelings, it's more like you can see you've done well because it says so on your report card." (Grammar school)*

Overall, participants' experiences of continuity and progression within post-primary school were mixed. Where teachers recapped and built on earlier learning, participants could see how content connected from one year to the next. However, many described learning in Key Stage 3 as fragmented or repetitive, and found it difficult to see how it related to what came next. The move into Key Stage 4 was generally identified as the most significant step up, with participants pointing to new subject structures, technical language, coursework and workload as areas that could be introduced more gradually in Key Stage 3.

Preparation for future pathways and choices

Participants' views on how well school prepares them for their future pathways were mixed. In one of the grammar schools, nine out of eleven participants said that what they were learning prepared them for where they were going next. In other schools, participants were less confident.

> *"I don't think I'll be ready for a job when I'm finished here. And that's literally the point of school, you're learning to get a job." (Non-selective school)*

A consistent theme was that careers guidance comes too late in post-primary school. Participants described choosing their GCSEs without knowing which subjects they would need for particular careers, and called for careers education to begin much earlier, so that GCSE choices could be made with a clearer sense of where they might lead.

> *"I think they do careers when you're sixteen in this school, but that's not enough. You need like three or four years to prepare what you want to do, so you should be learning when you're in Year 8. By the time you're in Year 10 or 11, it's a bit late." (Non-selective school)*

> *"I wanted to do engineering, but I never did physics. And because when I was picking my GCSEs, my A levels, I didn't know that you kind of needed physics for a lot of engineering class. It shut a lot of doors for me that I didn't even know I had shut." (Non-selective school)*

> *"Well, like I know I haven't started with my GCSEs yet, but like I have to pick my GCSEs this year, but like I haven't really been like told like what subjects I could like do if I want to do a certain job. It's just like oh, what subjects you do good in? It's not like if you want to do something, you should probably do this." (Non-selective school)*

> *"I've already picked my GCSEs now, and like I was speaking to my like careers advisor, and she was like talking through it, and she's like, 'Well, you can't do that as a career because you didn't pick this GCSE.' I'm like, well, I didn't pick that because I never thought I'd need it." (Non-selective school)*

Other participants found it difficult to make choices when they did not yet know what they were good at or what options were available.

> *"I'd like to do something I'm good at, but it's hard because you don't really know what you're good at, so you don't know what to do. I think if you were given options for what you could do or what it might look like, that would make it easier to decide what you want to be." (Non-selective school)*

> *"The problem is, most people don't know what they want to do before GCSEs. Like even for me, I'm thinking about A Levels and I'm picking them, and I still don't know what I want to be. Schools need to be doing [careers] earlier, so people know sooner what they want to do and then can pick the choices they need to get there." (Non-selective school)*

At the same time, some participants described the pressure of being expected to make decisions about their future at a young age, and felt that they were making permanent decisions before they were ready.

> *"I feel like there's so much stress on like you need to know what you want to do when really like we're still really young. I think some of us don't kind of realise that we're still kids and like it's okay not to know, and it's okay to change your mind and different things like that." (Non-selective school)*

> *"Will I hold the same ideals and interests at 14 as I will at 40? Definitely not. So why have I already made all my permanent decisions that have such an effect on my entire life? It's like a lot of stress for someone as young as me." (Non-selective school)*

> *"Everyone's like, oh, what do you want to do... It's so like daunting because you've got to figure out what you want to do for the rest of your life pretty much. So it's scary." (Non-selective school)*

Participants' views suggest that while some feel well prepared for their next steps, many are making important decisions about their future without the information they need. Careers guidance was widely seen as coming too late, often after GCSE choices had already been made, leaving some young people unaware of the doors those choices could close. At the same time, participants described the pressure of being expected to make long-term decisions at a young age. Taken together, their views suggest that young people want earlier opportunities to explore their options and understand where different pathways lead, without feeling that they must commit to a single direction before they are ready.

The capabilities that will emerge from the new curriculum

The proposed curriculum sets out nine capabilities that young people should develop through school:

- creativity and imagination
- emotional understanding and empathy
- environmental and ecological responsibility
- language and communication
- mathematical and computational proficiency
- physical health and wellbeing
- reasoning and problem solving
- self-regulated learning and perseverance

- social and civic participation

Participants were introduced to each capability, with short explanations where needed. They discussed whether the capabilities reflected the skills and qualities young people should develop, which they considered most important, and how well school currently helps young people develop them.

Participants held differing views on the importance of creativity and imagination. For some, it was the most important capability, whilst others questioned whether it was equally relevant to everyone. They suggested that the need for creativity depends on the job a person goes on to do, and wondered whether school could develop creativity in young people who did not naturally have it.

> *"Creativity and imagination is the most important skill you can learn, because you need to know how to do things differently or otherwise you'll just be stuck in a boring job." (Non-selective school)*
>
> *"If you're a farmer, do you really need creativity?" (Non-selective school)*
>
> *"Creativity and imagination is a tricky one because some people do just have no imagination, no creativity. How would your school help you with that?" (Non-selective school)*

Some participants felt that school does not currently do enough to develop this capability. They described learning as largely directed by teachers, with few opportunities to think for themselves.

> *"Our school isn't good at creativity and imagination at the moment, because you aren't ever expected to think for yourself. You just get told what to do, you get handed pages of stuff and told, yeah, this is what you're doing now. You're never expected to think for yourself." (Non-selective school)*

Other participants raised concerns about the impact of artificial intelligence on creativity. They felt that relying on AI as a "quick fix" was taking away opportunities for young people to be creative.

> *"This is a negative of our school, but sometimes you'll see a poster that's AI generated... You're just saying, oh well, that's not a capability that matters, we need something done quick. Let's just go and quickly get something generated." (Non-selective school)*

> *“Creative Art Club, for example, has an AI-generated poster, and it’s just very ironic.” (Non-selective school)*

> *“The disappearance of physical media and art and all is tragic, and it is being caused by AI.” (Non-selective school)*

Participants who prioritised emotional understanding and empathy as a capability saw it as essential for managing their own emotions and for supporting others.

> *“With emotional understanding and empathy, you can like figure out how to help yourself with your emotions and how to help other people with theirs.” (Non-selective school)*

> *“You need empathy to like be able to support your friends and your family members.” (Non-selective school)*

However, participants in one of the grammar schools questioned whether empathy could be taught in the classroom setting. They felt it was developed through personal experience and relationships, by spending time with friends and learning to care about others. School was seen as a place where this happens because young people are around one another, rather than through anything taught in lessons.

> *“I don’t understand how you can learn empathy in school. I think that’s something you learn from like your own personal experience, like having friends.” (Grammar school)*

> *“With emotional understanding and empathy, those are things that you learn in school but not in class. You learn them because you’re around other people… I don’t think I’ve ever like someone’s ever told me something in class, and I’ve gone, ‘Oh, I’ve just developed empathy.’ Those are things you learn from being around people, and you’re around people in school, but I’m not sure how much the new curriculum will actually help.” (Grammar school)*

Participants saw environmental and ecological responsibility as an important capability, although views differed on how well it was reflected in the proposed curriculum and on the kind of environmental learning young people need. Some felt that the environment could be woven throughout the curriculum.

> *“So many of these subjects link to the environment, like your sociology and your geography and everything does lead back to the environment because it’s where we live.” (Non-selective school)*

However, participants in one of the grammar schools noticed a gap between the curriculum's stated intentions and its content. They pointed out that the environment appears both as an objective and as a capability, yet they felt it was insufficiently covered in the proposed curriculum itself.

> *"Wasn't becoming a steward of the environment one of the objectives? And then this is a capability, but environment isn't really mentioned in the new curriculum at all. If that's a part of the aim, then why was it like not really covered?" (Grammar school)*

Participants also reflected on the kind of environmental learning they had experienced. They described primary school as focusing heavily on individual actions, such as turning off lights and recycling, and questioned what difference these actions could make, given the scale of fossil fuel use by large companies around the world. They felt that, as young people move up through school, environmental learning should go beyond these actions and help them understand what is actually happening in the world. Without this, they suggested, young people may come to feel personally to blame for climate change.

> *"See in primary school, we were always told to turn off the lights when we left a room and that, and we knew about recycling. It was very drilled in, but like what's that gonna do when there's like billion dollar companies all over the world burning through so much fossil fuels? Like turning off one light isn't gonna help anything. I think at least when you're higher in the school there should be an understanding about what's actually happening in the world. Otherwise you leave one light on and you're thinking you're to blame for climate change." (Grammar school)*

Language and communication was widely seen as a fundamental capability, and many participants identified it as the most important. Participants described being able to talk to people as essential to almost everything.

> *"Language and communication [is the most important capability] because like we need to know how to talk to people. If you can't talk, you kind of just aren't able to do anything." (Non-selective school)*

> *"It's good to be able to understand how other people think and communicate." (Non-selective school)*

> *"In most jobs you need to be able to communicate with people. If you can do that effectively, then you'll do really well at your job." (Non-selective school)*

"It's really important to like understand people and to listen to them and hear their point about anything, or just to help understand where they're coming from." (Non-selective school)

One participant understood communication as underpinning the other capabilities.

"Yeah, I feel like the communication is also helpful because even with like the physical health and wellbeing and like a lot of these things, like social and civic participation, all of these things like would really struggle if you didn't know how to communicate." (Non-selective school)

Participants' views on mathematical and computational proficiency depended on how they interpreted it. Where it was understood to include IT and digital skills, it was seen as highly relevant. Mathematical skills, by contrast, were sometimes seen as the least important capability.

"Does that mean like IT and computer skills? Because we live in a digital world, that would be number one for me." (Non-selective school)

"Really, the mathematical skill is the least important. It still is important. Like all these are important, but like thinking on like life skills and how you use them. I don't know how much like math would help me in like my life, especially like Pythagoras. Don't know how that would help me at all in life." (Non-selective school)

Physical health and wellbeing was strongly supported across school settings, and several groups identified it as the most important capability. Participants saw good health as the foundation for everything else, without which they would not be able to work or participate in society.

"Physical health and wellbeing is so important. If you didn't learn your wellbeing, you'd be really sick most of the time and wouldn't be able to do stuff. You have to be able to stay like physically healthy as well, if you want a job." (Non-selective school)

"Physical wellbeing is the most important [capability]. You might not know how to take care of yourself. You might not live long if you don't take care of yourself." (Non-selective school)

"If you're not healthy in your body, obviously that's a problem because you need to focus on yourself first before you focus on anything else… you need to be active." (Non-selective school)

Participants also saw this capability as preparation for independence after school. They noted that school provides structure, support and opportunities such as sport and extracurricular activities. Once they leave, they will need to look after their own health and wellbeing without that support.

> *"Schools offer like things like sports and stuff. You don't have that when you leave school, so you have to know how to do that stuff yourself." (Non-selective school)*

Participants who discussed the reasoning and problem solving capability saw it as foundational. They valued its transferability and suggested that reasoning and problem solving can be developed across all subjects, and outside school as well as within it.

> *"Reasoning and problem solving is the most important skill, because if you can do that, you can figure out how to do everything else... You can get problem solving from any subject, and you can also learn it outside of school, too." (Non-selective school)*

> *"I think reasoning and problem solving is the most important one because if you teach that early, you know you can apply your reasoning to anything. Say physical health and wellbeing. If you're reasoning that, like oh, if I do this, if I do the gym, then I'll be stronger. I'll be more fit. So that's just logical, and then you can apply that." (Non-selective school)*

Participants who prioritised self-regulated learning and perseverance saw it as a skill for life and work. They valued being able to manage their own learning and keep going when things are difficult, particularly bouncing back from setbacks such as a disappointing exam result.

> *"I think self-regulated learning and perseverance is the most important thing you can learn in school. You need to know how to manage yourself and keep going even when learning is difficult. Say you don't get the score that you want in your exam for your favourite subject, you're going to be down, but you need to know how to pick yourself back up and try and go again. That's a skill for life." (Non-selective school)*

> *"I think self-regulated learning and perseverance, because... say for example, your boss sends you an email, and there's something that you need to learn very quickly, that's a self-learning thing. Also, responding to feedback is incredibly important because you shouldn't look for compliments. You should look for feedback. But say your boss gives you feedback that could be negative, you need*

to learn how to respond to that, instead of like acting out and taking it personally, and then keeping going when learning is difficult." (Non-selective school)

However, participants in one grammar school setting were more critical of this capability. As with empathy, participants felt that perseverance is developed mainly through personal experience outside school, and questioned how self-regulated learning would actually be taught.

> *"Perseverance is sort of something that you should develop with your own personal experience… I don't think that should be specific to a capability that you do in school." (Grammar school)*

> *"I'm not really seeing like where they're actually planning to tell you about this capability because I feel like people like learn in different ways, and like a lot of people, especially in Key Stage Three, learn from like the practical element, or like where it's more like hands-on. Whereas like it's even like they're trying to make it very like theory-based, which doesn't fit the way that a lot of people learn things." (Grammar school)*

Some participants felt schools do not currently do enough to develop the social and civic participation capability, and identified areas where they wanted more learning.

> *"I think at the moment schools don't do enough for social and civic participation. In most schools people just mess about and teachers don't really do anything about it. That's a problem for their future life if they're not learning anything." (Non-selective school)*

> *"Would politics come under this [capability]? I'm a believer in politics, it should be mandatory in schools. World politics, too, as well as Northern Ireland. That's a skill everyone should have by the time they finish school." (Non-selective school)*

> *"We don't really learn that much about Northern Ireland. I think we could learn more about that, if it's going to be a skill. We've learnt about the different flags, but that's it." (Non-selective school)*

> *"In this school, years ago it was all Christian, white. Now there's a lot of Muslim folks. We need to learn how to live with all people how to be good citizens." (Non-selective school)*

However, one participant felt that social and civic participation was not relevant at Key Stage 3. They argued that it should be taught later, as young people approach adulthood.

> *"I feel like social and civic participation is irrelevant for someone in Key Stage 3. I feel like that should be something taught like when you're becoming an adult and doing your GCSEs. It shouldn't be brought in teaching like year eight how to participate in society." (Grammar school)*

Although most participants discussed the capabilities individually, one participant reflected on the framework as a whole. They felt that all the capabilities were important and closely connected.

> *"Maybe they all like work together in a way. They all come together as like one, and it just is like kind of like your basic needs." (Non-selective school)*

When asked whether anything was missing from the framework, participants suggested several additions. Some felt it overlooked the importance of enjoying school, arguing that school should be an enjoyable experience and not only a route to academic achievement. Others called for more emphasis on practical life skills. Finally, one participant noted that the framework did not include manners and respect, which they saw as an important part of what young people should learn in school.

> *"I don't think that there's a lot on just like enjoying school. I think school needs to be enjoyable." (Grammar school)*

> *"Maybe one of the skills should just be like how to use technology? Like how do you use a phone properly, how do you use apps and stuff, how do you use a calculator even. There's people in my class just figuring those things out because no one taught them." (Non-selective school)*

> *"Maybe there should be a life skills lesson where we learn how to do stuff like how does stuff in society work." (Non-selective school)*

> *"There's not a capability on manners and respect, but that's one of the skills you should learn in school." (Non-selective school)*

> *"It's random but like why don't we learn stuff like how do they stock the food in the shop, how does food arrive on the shelves, where has it come from to get here? Like there's so much we don't know about why things are the way they are, how things work, and none of that is on the curriculum." (Non-selective school)*

Overall, participants generally recognised the value of the proposed capabilities. Different groups identified different capabilities as the most important. However, some participants questioned whether certain capabilities, such as empathy and perseverance, can be taught in the classroom, and whether others, such as social and civic participation, are appropriate at Key Stage 3. Some participants also identified perceived gaps in the framework, including practical life skills, manners and respect, and the importance of enjoying school.

The vision statements and core content of the Key Stage 3 subject frameworks

Each proposed Key Stage 3 subject framework includes a vision statement, describing why the subject is important and what studying it should help young people to gain. It also includes a set of subject-specific categories setting out the main strands of knowledge and skills within the subject. Participants were invited to consider what they felt the purpose of a selection of subjects should be, before comparing their ideas with summaries of the proposed vision statements and discussing the subject-specific categories. Not every group considered every subject, and the views presented below reflect the subjects each group discussed. As the Personal, Social, Civic and Careers (PSCC) framework was a particular focus of the engagement, participants' views on PSCC are presented separately.

Across the subject frameworks as a whole, the most consistent concern was a perceived lack of practical learning. Participants in one grammar school setting felt strongly that the frameworks emphasised theory and knowledge at the expense of practical experience. Some suggested that this risked making learning less engaging and less effective. Practical subjects were described as the parts of the school day that young people most enjoy, because they offer the chance to move, make things and feel a sense of accomplishment. Some participants also felt that subjects they saw as creative, such as art and digital technology, did not reflect that creativity in their vision statements.

> *"In all of the practical subjects, there's obviously more of a focus on theory, but we're all kids. People, if they pick to do a subject, are excited because it's the time where they get to like use their hands and they get to get up and they get to learn new skills. Like we're at the end of the day, we're talking key stage three. Everyone sort of dislikes maths, and everyone enjoys Tech because you get to make something, but you also get a reward at the end. Like you've done something and you've accomplished something." (Grammar school)*

"I feel like there's not much about like active subjects or learning outside. It's good to make sure subjects are practical, so you can be active and move around, because not everyone learns by reading. And obviously if you're doing technology or PE you're going to be moving, but even in subjects where you're learning from a book, they should have to do practical ways of learning too, so everyone can learn. I mean science for example, there's so much practical stuff you can do in science, there's so much you can learn outside. But if you're just reading a book, it's boring." (Non-selective school)

"For some of the subjects that are like creative, they're actually missing that aspect because, like, for art, for even digital tech, they haven't really mentioned creative things." (Grammar school)

"I think that they're just like it's talking about the skills and experiences, but again, I feel like they're missing so much of the practical element that gives you those skills, and that also I'm not really seeing the bit that's like explaining to you how to make responsible decisions. Whenever it's all very theory based and all very like there's not much getting like actual experience in what you're doing." (Grammar school)

Closely associated with this was a concern that the vision statements did not reflect the importance of enjoying learning. Some participants felt the frameworks were designed for a small proportion of pupils who learn well by absorbing and memorising large amounts of information. They argued that this would disadvantage those who learn through practical activity, discussion or listening. Participants in one school also stressed that the success of the frameworks would depend on teachers making learning engaging.

"They're sort of written like it's for a bunch of like robots or something. People want to enjoy their school experience, and there's barely any practical work. And as like a young person, there needs to be stuff that you enjoy in school, instead of just read this, write this, just all this robotic stuff that you have to do instead of stuff that you enjoy." (Grammar school)

"There's a lot in each subject, and none of them seem to be like extremely interactive. It sort of seems like it'll be more like you'll be taught at rather than helped to learn." (Grammar school)

"I feel like all this is tailored to like one learning style of people who are good at just taking in loads and loads of information, but there are different types of students who learn through doing like practical work and learn through like

lesson, like listening, talking, and I feel like this is just for a small percentage of students who are just good at taking down notes and remembering everything, while like they're just having information fired at them." (Grammar school)

"It's good having this but you also need teachers who know how to make learning fun… Like not sitting in a class all day because some kids like can't sit on a chair all day. Like, make it more fun than just staring on a board for 45 minutes." (Non-selective school)

Some participants suggested that young people should have more choice over which subjects they study at Key Stage 3. They argued that pupils who already know what career they want should be able to drop subjects they do not need, and focus on those that are relevant to them.

"Maybe if you already know what job you want, and you know you aren't going to need like history or tech, maybe you should be allowed to drop it. It seems like there's a lot of subjects in this here [curriculum framework]. It would be better to spend more time learning the subjects that you actually need to do." (Non-selective school)

"I think you should be able to pick if you want to do a language or not. Like, if you're gonna like need it, you use it. But if there's no point learning if you're not gonna use it." (Non-selective school)

One participant suggested that schools with a faith ethos should be able to reflect that ethos in what young people learn.

"I grew up in the Catholic Church… This is a Catholic school. I think that if you come to a faith school, maybe you should have a faith element to your curriculum. Like the ethos of your school should be allowed to influence what you're learning." (Non-selective school)

Participants were generally positive about the subject-specific categories. In one non-selective school, all participants felt the categories reflected the most important parts of each subject. Some participants could also see how the capabilities would be developed through particular subjects.

"You can see where you're going to learn the capabilities in the curriculum. Like you'll learn creativity and imagination in art, you'll learn environmental and ecological responsibility in geography, you'll learn language and communication in English." (Non-selective school)

Participants' views on the vision statements and core content of individual subjects are summarised below.

Art and Design

Through written feedback, participants described art and design as being about expression and perspective. A number of participants felt that the vision statement and subject-specific categories were reflective of their own understanding about what the art and design curriculum should incorporate.

> *"I think they're pretty good. That pretty much covers everything you'll need to know in art." (Grammar school)*

However, a recurring concern was that the framework appeared to focus particularly on theory-based learning, and this came out most frequently in discussions around art and design. Participants pointed out that this did not match the largely practical GCSE and might not prepare pupils for their subsequent qualifications.

> *"In art, I feel like there's so much of the theory element whenever right now the GCSE is like fully practical, so it doesn't really make sense. If they're trying to make it that you like develop your skills throughout the school, why would you spend so much learning about the theory element... The assessment has to relate to what you've been learning all through school." (Grammar school)*

> *"I feel like in Key Stage 3 you should be taught the basics, and if you're passionate about art and choose to keep it on, then you should be taught about art history and different artists in the past." (Grammar school)*

> *"It feels like there will be a lot of writing in art, but I don't think there should be. You do writing in English." (Non-selective school)*

One participant suggested that learning how to care for and look after art equipment should be included in the framework, describing it as the most important skill in the subject.

> *"I think art and design needs to include learning how to look after the art equipment. I'd say that's the most important thing and I don't think it's in there." (Non-selective school)*

Finally, some participants felt that ability in art depends largely on natural talent, not on how the subject is taught. They suggested that while practice might bring some

improvement, the framework itself would make little difference to how well young people do in art.

> *"I feel like some people are naturally really good at art, and some people aren't. I don't think it's something you can really practice and get better at it, like you might improve slightly but you're not going to be top of the class, because some people are just naturally better and seem to find it easier. It's not really a curriculum issue, some people just are never going to be great at art." (Non-selective school)*

> *"The thing with art is you're either good about it or you aren't. You have to have a natural interest in it to actually do well, and even if you didn't learn anything in art in [Key Stage 3], you could still do pretty well in your art GCSE if you're someone who's just good at art." (Grammar school)*

Digital Technology

In written feedback, participants suggested that digital technology should include practical everyday skills, such as how to use a smartphone and how to touch-type. Participants in one school setting discussed how their school balanced theoretical knowledge with practical skills well in this subject, and hoped this style of learning would be reflected elsewhere.

> *"We did theory in our first year of digital tech, and it was really boring at the time but then now I look back and it made everything else so easy. I think sometimes you don't understand why you're doing that stuff at the time. It only makes sense once you're looking back, but it made everything so much easier to learn because you understood what you were doing." (Grammar school)*

One participant hoped that learning to use AI safely would feature as part of the subject.

> *"We should learn how to use AI safely in this. I hope that's part of it." (Non-selective school)*

English

Through their written feedback, participants identified improving grammar as the main purpose of English at Key Stage 3 and were pleased that this was reflected in both the vision statement and the subject-specific categories. However, some participants from a grammar school setting felt that the framework overlooked the importance of analysis and suggested this needed to be integrated earlier into Key Stage 3.

"There's no analysis in English, which is obviously like a really good one. I think and like seeing a different meaning of things." (Grammar school)

"For the English one as well, they didn't mention any analysis skills… I wasn't great at English, and when I got to GCSE, it was so hard for me to start in the analysis, and I think it's really important to get those skills from earlier on." (Grammar school)

Another participant in the same school felt that the English framework overlooked the enjoyment of literature. They suggested that it focused on knowledge rather than on developing a lasting love of reading, which they saw as important for all young people, including those who do not continue with English beyond GCSE.

"For English, I feel like it's missing the whole element of like enjoying literature. So it's like giving you the knowledge instead of the skills to move forward. Like someone who maybe chooses to stop at GCSE needs to still be able to like enjoy reading and still be able to get enjoyment out of it." (Grammar school)

Drama

Participants described drama as being about self-expression, developing creative skills and confidence, and learning how to handle difficult situations in real life. However, participants from both grammar schools felt the framework could place more emphasis on confidence and public speaking.

"I feel like in drama they should focus on confidence and public speaking more. So maybe there's some skills missing." (Grammar school)

"It doesn't say like performance and speaking, but they'd be pretty important for drama I think." (Grammar school)

Participants in one school were also concerned that drama is sometimes dropped in favour of more academic subjects. They felt this removed an opportunity for young people who are less academic in other areas.

"In our school we don't do drama. We only do it for a year or two but then it's replaced by the more academic subjects when you get into year 10… I do think it's a shame that we didn't get to continue with it. I think we should be able to keep drama because, like, it gives other kids a chance to like get their grades up if they're not good at like say science, at least their drama to make it sound like they were good at something." (Non-selective school)

Geography

Participants' written and verbal feedback on geography closely matched the proposed vision statement. They described the subject as learning about the world, its countries and cultures, the environment, global warming and why natural disasters happen.

> *"I'd say this one looks pretty much perfect." (Grammar school)*

Views on the balance of content within the framework differed. One participant in a grammar school felt that place knowledge and human geography should be less central than physical geography and natural processes, which they saw as the core of the subject. Participants also felt that the framework could be made more concrete and practical. They suggested that skills such as map reading should be explicitly included, and that more emphasis should be placed on applying geographical knowledge to the real world.

> *"I don't really think that from P7 onwards you should be learning about places and people in geography. It's sort of more about like natural processes, and like the end part seems more like geography than the first little show." (Grammar school)*

> *"You never learn stuff like how to read a map. That would be good in geography." (Non-selective school)*

> *"There's not really much in this about applying knowledge to the real world." (Grammar school)*

Home Economics

Participants' written feedback described the home economics framework as general, though they welcomed the inclusion of cooking. However, participants in a grammar school setting felt that cooking was not a sufficiently significant aspect of the framework. They suggested that the practical, hands-on element of the subject was underrepresented.

> *"Cooking seems like a pretty small part of home economics." (Grammar school)*

One participant felt that what matters most in home economics depends on young people's own aspirations. This young person, who hoped to become a pastry chef, felt that preparing and presenting dishes were the most important skills for them.

> *"I'm looking to be a pastry chef whenever I leave this school. So then in home economics, the most important thing for me to learn will be different to what*

someone who wants to be another kind of chef would need to know. For me, I need to learn is how to present the dishes and like prepare them and everything." (Non-selective school)

Mathematics

Participants' written feedback on mathematics reflected the proposed vision statement's emphasis on patterns, logic and problem solving, identifying critical thinking and pattern recognition as key skills. However, participants also prioritised practical numeracy for everyday life, including taxes and managing money, and noted that financial skills were not explicit. A number of participants felt that the framework contained too much content, and that topics such as algebra had limited relevance beyond school.

> *"For maths, you need your basic skills like adding and subtracting. That's what most people are going to need in their daily life… Maybe there should be an order to what you learn, like you have to learn the basics first before you do the rest of the stuff in the framework." (Non-selective school)*

> *"I think this [curriculum] is good in that you've got your basics and then you can expand on it, but it doesn't need so much stuff in maths. I think we just need the basics, there's too much here… Maybe there should be one curriculum for the people who want to go further, and then one for the people who just need maths so they can get a job and then not use it again." (Non-selective school)*

> *"Maths should teach you like your basics, like times tables, money, and stuff like that. I don't think algebra and stuff is important in the slightest. You're never gonna do algebra again, and knowing algebra is not gonna benefit you in any way… What job are you going to need algebra? Only maths teacher." (Non-selective school)*

History

Of all the subjects, history generated the most discussion. Participants generally agreed with the vision statement and subject-specific categories. In relation to substantive knowledge, participants stressed the importance of learning history in chronological order and completing topics before moving on, so that young people understand how events connect.

> *"I think if you learnt history in order, it would make way more sense. The way we'd learn it, you'd not know what happened when." (Non-selective school)*

"I think in history, the problem is they never teach it in chronological order, and history happens in different places at different times… Even if you learn all that, you would need to learn it in order because otherwise you're jumping from like Egyptians to like the civil rights movement for Black Rights Matter, and it's just those sometimes those things aren't directly related." (Grammar school)

When discussing disciplinary knowledge, participants emphasised the value of the historical skills young people develop over time, which they saw as underpinning future study. They highlighted the importance of matching content to young people's age and maturity, so that more complex topics are introduced as pupils become better able to understand them.

"I feel like for history, it is not necessarily the content that matters. It's the skills that you get from it, because whenever you go to university, they… want you to apply the skills that you've learned over the years to what you're learning now." (Grammar school)

"In first year, you should do something a bit more like Henry the Eighth, where anyone can understand. But whenever you do get older, and if you do choose it for GCSE, then you can actually like learn more and in depth. But there's no point in teaching everyone the same thing when they could be on different levels." (Grammar school)

A consistent theme across the school settings in both the discussion and the written feedback was the importance of local and Irish history. Participants suggested that schools should be able to focus on events connected to their own area and to reflect their own ethos and community.

"It's good to have people who have different knowledge of different things. So, schools in Coleraine, for example, they could learn about the Ulster Plantation because obviously that happened in Ulster. But in Belfast, they could learn about the Titanic." (Grammar school)

"I think schools should be able to teach history from their own ethos, so like if you're teaching Irish history you should be allowed to focus on your own community." (Non-selective school)

"I think like people should be able to decide like what type of history they want to learn. Like the Catholic grammar school, you want to maybe learn the troubles from a Catholic side and Protestant. You want to learn from like a Protestant

point of view instead of just the point of view that the government set for you." (Grammar school)

Modern Languages

Participants' written feedback on modern languages aligned with the proposed framework. They identified pronunciation, speaking and culture as the most important aspects of learning a language. However, one participant felt that writing was not explicitly reflected in the subject-specific categories and sought assurances that this was included in the framework.

> *"They haven't mentioned the writing element in the categories, and I think personally one of like the most important like parts of learning a language is being able to write confidently in it." (Grammar school)*

Another participant raised the range of languages available in schools. They felt that being offered only one language limited young people's engagement, and that interest in the language matters as much as how it is taught.

> *"I don't think there's enough variety of languages. In our school, we only get offered one language, but you might want to learn French or German or whatever. There needs to be more variety because if you're not interested in the one that's being taught, it doesn't matter how it's taught, you're not going to do well." (Non-selective school)*

Music

Participants' views on the curriculum framework for music differed between schools. Many of the participants were satisfied with the framework, but some felt that music, which they saw as a practical subject, appeared too theory-based in the subject-specific categories.

> *"I feel like subjects that are supposed to be practical, like music, don't seem to have much practical work in the points [the subject-specific categories]. This is mainly theory, and they're supposed to be practical subjects." (Grammar school)*

> *"Maybe there should be [a subject-specific category] like development of your musical skills?" (Grammar school)*

The content of the subject-specific categories sparked a debate in one of the grammar schools, where participants discussed whether it was possible for young people to

succeed in music without knowing how to play an instrument. They reflected on their own experiences of transitioning from primary school to post-primary school, and commented that they thought it was unlikely they would be able to progress in music without also learning music as an extra-curricular activity.

> *"I think realistically we all know that you should have some knowledge of an instrument if you want to do music. I mean most people do it in primary, either you do recorder or flute or whatever. But if you didn't do that, then you're just not going to have the right level of knowledge to be able to do well in Key Stage 3." (Grammar school)*

> *"Primary schools are limiting your options if they aren't giving you at least a basic knowledge of playing an instrument." (Grammar school)*

In contrast, participants in one non-selective school felt the categories captured the most important parts of the subject. They noted that young people could still learn to communicate through music even without becoming skilled performers.

> *"As long as you get those basics, it's good. Like you might not learn to be good at playing the piano in music, but you can still learn to communicate through music." (Non-selective school)*

Physical Education

Participants' written feedback on physical education closely reflected the curriculum framework. They described the subject as being about staying healthy and building energy, stamina and self-motivation. Participants also highlighted wellbeing and the benefits of exercise for mental health, which are less explicit in the framework.

> *"PE helps you take care of your body." (Non-selective school)*

> *"PE is about mindset and body. If you've got bad mindset, you're gonna do bad things. Like you're gonna go into like say some addictions and things like that. But if you've got a good mindset, you like do exercise and stuff, and then that leads on to taking care of your body." (Non-selective school)*

Participants in one school discussed how the curriculum capabilities could be developed through physical education.

> *"It doesn't really matter if you're doing football or rugby or whatever in PE, because you'll still get to communicate and develop like teamwork and all those kind of skills." (Non-selective school)*

Some participants raised barriers to participation that they felt the framework alone could not address. These included missing lessons for forgetting kit, even when pupils want to participate, and the limits of any curriculum when young people are not interested in the subject.

> *"The problem with PE is, if you forget your PE kit, that's it. You can't do it. They don't care if you want to do it or could do it in your uniform. That's just you missing the lesson, even if you still wanted to take part." (Non-selective school)*

> *"When it comes to PE, either you're interested in it or you're not, and if you're not, it doesn't matter how good your curriculum is." (Non-selective school)*

Science

Participants who discussed science felt that its subject-specific categories were broad enough to allow plenty of practical learning. However, they suggested that in practice such opportunities were not always taken up. They saw hands-on investigation as essential for engaging young people, particularly those who would learn better through practical work than from a textbook.

> *"There's so much practical stuff you can do in science... The categories are pretty big, there's lots of opportunities to make learning practical but last year in science, we only used the Bunsen burners once. There must be loads you can learn in chemistry with a Bunsen burner." (Non-selective school)*

Participants also reflected on how science is organised as they move through school. In one non-selective school, participants were confused by the sudden move from one science teacher in Years 9 and 10 to three separate science teachers at GCSE, which they felt had never been explained.

> *"I don't understand why did the year nine and 10s only have like one science teacher, and then you suddenly have three when you go to year 11 and 12? I don't think that was ever explained. You just go from one science to three." (Non-selective school)*

By contrast, participants in a grammar school context described a more gradual approach. In their school, science is taught as a single subject in Years 8 and 9 and then split into biology, chemistry and physics in Year 10. They felt this prepared them for the separate sciences at GCSE without being overwhelming in Year 8, and helped them discover which sciences matched their wider interests.

"I actually think the way our school does this is really good, so in year 8 and 9 you just do science, and then in year 10 it's split into the three sciences. I think if they did three sciences in year 8 it would be too much, but doing it in year 10 means you're that bit more prepared for it, and it gives you a chance to see what it would be like to do the three sciences at GCSE. It also shows you I guess what the sciences are really like, so you maybe will find if you're interested in PE that biology is right up your street, or if you're interested in like technology you might realise you quite like physics too. It all starts to come together in year 10, but it would be too much to get your head around in year 8." (Grammar school)

Technology and Design

Participants in one grammar school had very different experiences of technology and design depending on their class, and put this down largely to how each teacher structured the subject. In one class, lessons were described as moving between bookwork, projects and write-ups, with no clear connection between them. In another, participants described a clear structure in which theory led into a related practical project, followed by reflection, with safety and the use of machines and equipment taught throughout. They valued this balance of theory and hands-on learning, and felt well prepared for GCSE as a result. This structured approach fits closely with the proposed framework, although participants' experiences suggest that the benefits of the framework may depend on how consistently it is taught from class to class.

"In our class it just honestly felt very random, it seemed like we were doing bookwork one week, then we were doing a random project, then we were doing write up, and none of it seemed connected. [Teacher] once gave us a huge 78 page booklet for us to fill out, and it took a whole term… It was never marked and as far as I'm aware, it has nothing to do with GCSE technology so I don't really know why we did that, it just seemed so random." (Grammar school)

"It was totally different for me. Ours was so structured. So we'd do the theory and the book work, and then from that we'd get a practical project that was like related to what we'd just learned, and then we'd go back and do like reflections and stuff on it. And all in amongst that you're learning safety and using the machine and the devices and stuff. It all fit together and made sense, it's so much better having that structure. I just think our teacher is better, because they taught us everything we needed to know." (Grammar school)

"I'm in [participant's] class and I agree, our teacher does it so well. You've got this balance of theory and hands-on knowledge, and I felt so well set up for GCSE." (Grammar school)

Overall, participants generally engaged positively with the vision statements and subject-specific categories, and in many subjects their own sense of a subject's purpose closely matched the proposed framework. However, a consistent concern across subjects was that the frameworks appeared to prioritise theory and knowledge over practical learning, particularly in creative subjects such as art and music. Participants also highlighted the importance of enjoying learning and of approaches that suit different ways of learning. Within individual subjects, they identified specific gaps, including analysis in English, writing in modern languages, financial skills in mathematics and map reading in geography, and placed particular value on local and Irish history.

The Personal, Social, Civic and Careers (PSCC) framework

The Personal, Social, Civic and Careers (PSCC) framework was a particular focus of the engagement. The framework is organised around three categories: self and learning, relationships and society, and careers and futures. Many participants responded positively to the PSCC framework. They welcomed the subject as a way to prepare young people for life beyond school and to introduce this learning earlier.

"I think [PSCC] will help kids." (Non-selective school)

"You need a career. You need a career to build you up and give you money and then everything else is a lot easier. It sounds like learning [PSCC] would set you up for life." (Non-selective school)

"I think [PSCC] looks good, and I think actually this is a good thing that they're making sure we do it earlier... Doing this subject would give you an idea what path you need to follow, and you need to start working towards that early." (Non-selective school)

"I'd do something like that. If PSCC was a subject we could choose, that would be something I'd want to do. I'd like to see the variety of careers out there." (Non-selective school)

As PSCC would replace the current Learning for Life and Work (LLW) provision, many participants drew on their experience of LLW when responding to the proposed

framework. Participants tended to be critical of LLW in its current form, describing it as something pupils did not value or take seriously.

> *"We do LLW and see to be honest it's a waste of time. People don't care about it. It doesn't actually matter at all." (Non-selective school)*

> *"We do LLW in our school, and that's supposed to be preparing you for real life. But like some stuff we learn in LLW you don't need, and it's not on us. You know what I mean? Like it's you just don't need it... The important stuff is the employability bit and the relationships bit, and we don't do that in LLW until we're in third year. You should be doing this the whole way up, from primary school." (Non-selective school)*

> *"We have to do an LLW GCSE. That's mandatory by the school. I don't know how many people enjoy that and how many people think or feel like it might be a bit of a waste of time. And I think that whilst learning about social and civic participation is important, I think it would be so much better if we just did one of those days where we got an external organisation in to come in and teach us about it like once per year, rather than us having to dedicate half an hour a week to something that most people's parents have already explained to them." (Grammar school)*

Given these experiences, some participants welcomed the replacement of LLW with an updated provision, noting that it retained what they considered the most valuable elements of LLW, such as learning about relationships.

> *"There's obviously a lot of overlap in LLW and PSCC, but that's a good thing. The important stuff from LLW, the relationships and stuff, that's still there, and the [young people] coming into this school won't know what LLW was, this will just be their new normal. Although maybe they didn't need to change the name, maybe they could've kept the name and just changed the curriculum in it." (Non-selective school)*

However, some participants were more sceptical, and questioned whether a dedicated subject was needed. They felt that much of the content could be covered through existing programmes, occasional sessions with external organisations, or at home. Some felt that teachers delivering this content were not subject specialists and were working through set material rather than teaching with enthusiasm.

> *"I don't think we need a whole new subject because we already have external programmes for this." (Grammar school)*

"When teachers teach their own subject, that's something they're passionate about. When we get thrown into an employability careers or a tutor classroom, which is personal development, the teachers there, that's not their specific subject, and for the most part, they are just trying to get through the book because that's what they've been told that they need to do." (Grammar school)

Participants also discussed the respective roles of school and home in teaching this content. Some participants in a grammar school setting felt that these skills were better learned from parents, but participants in non-selective schools tended to take the opposite view, highlighting that not all young people have responsible adults at home who are able or available to support them.

"I think that sometimes things are better to be taught in your own home surroundings, like that your parents can teach you." (Grammar school)

"It's not enough to say parents will teach you this stuff. Unfortunately, some kids have parents who don't really support them, and I feel like the teachers could help us more because some kids' parents can't support them because they're busy or like they just like don't have parents." (Non-selective school)

"Not all parents are going to do it. Some are going to do it and do it well, but some others might be busy... The school will be like the parents will teach them, and the parents will think that the school will teach them, and then they just don't learn it." (Non-selective school)

"I think it'll be good because, like, especially for like relationships and society, and you might be like awkward or don't really want to talk to your parents about that stuff." (Non-selective school)

Participants welcomed the prospect of formalised financial education. Many participants said they currently learned little about money, saving or taxes, and were enthusiastic about the introduction of financial content at Key Stage 3, noting that many young people have bank accounts at that age and not all have a trusted adult at home to advise them. Some participants called for this aspect of the curriculum to include practical experiences, such as running a business.

"At the moment schools don't really teach us about the economy and how to save money, or taxes and stuff. And when you get to that stage, you're just starting from scratch and trying to see how to do it. It's one of the most important things we need to learn at school and we don't really do it at all at the moment." (Non-selective school)

"It's definitely good they've got financial stuff coming in at Key Stage 3, because most people are going to have a bank account when they're that age, so they need to know stuff like interest and that. Like I got around £300 in Christmas money last year and I'd have had that spent in a month, only my mum told me what to do with it to save it, and now I'm getting interest on it too. But not everyone has someone who can tell them that, so it's good to learn it in school." (Non-selective school)

"We've never learnt anything about money in this school. If they could teach that, that would be good." (Non-selective school)

"School should teach you how to handle money. That should be a mandatory thing, it's good they're bringing that in." (Non-selective school)

"The most important thing you should know how to do when you leave school is know how to manage your money." (Non-selective school)

"They need to make sure they do stuff like running a business or starting a social enterprise or whatever in the new curriculum. We all need money, like you really can't live without it, so we should be learning how to use it, and save it, and where to put it when we have it." (Non-selective school)

Participants also valued the self and learning aspect of the framework. They felt that school does not currently teach young people how to manage their emotions and hoped PSCC would address this.

"School doesn't really teach us how to deal with our emotions and stuff. We're just told to ignore it, but how can you ignore it if you're upset? We're not really told how to like manage our emotions and stuff… This new subject might be good for that." (Non-selective school)

"You need to learn about yourself and how to manage your behaviour if you want to make a good life." (Non-selective school)

Careers and futures generated the most discussion. Participants in one school saw it as one of the most important parts of PSCC, linking it directly to their view that school should prepare young people for employment.

"Careers and futures would be so important for young people to learn. Everyone wants to get a job when you're older, like whenever you've left school. That's what school should be helping you prepare for, you know? Getting a job and stuff." (Non-selective school)

"It would be good to do more on careers. I like the idea of that as a subject." (Non-selective school)

A recurring theme was that young people only know about a narrow range of jobs. Participants described growing up aware of only a handful of careers and choosing GCSEs before they understood the options available. They wanted careers education to show them the full variety of pathways and what each would require.

"I feel like going from like primary school and then first, second year, third year, I only knew like five jobs: firefighter, teacher, like cook, and police officer or something. Like you don't know that many jobs. You should be learning how many there actually are out there." (Grammar school)

"I don't know what I want to do, I haven't really thought about it. It's so hard, because they never give you options. You only know the jobs you know. They should give you options of like, this is something you could do, and this is what you'd need to do it." (Non-selective school)

"It's probably a good idea to have an idea of what you're going to do for a career before you pick your GCSEs." (Non-selective school)

Some participants called for regular work experience, placements and visits to workplaces as part of PSCC. They believed this would help young people make informed choices and motivate them by giving them a clear sense of what they were working towards. Participants also asked for careers guidance that provided information about alternatives to university, such as apprenticeships and other courses, and information about self-employment or business ownership.

"See like when you're picking your GCSEs, you need to know at that point what you want to do... Everyone in school should have to do a placement in [PSCC], like working in a primary school or in a hairdresser's or whatever, and then you'll know what it's like to do that job." (Non-selective school)

"You can do dance in this school. You can do drama. But yet, we don't do work experience... Every couple of months we should go out and see what a different type of job is like. We could go to a workplace and see, like this is what it would be like to be a bricklayer... I think it would inspire you to try harder, if you know what you're aiming at." (Non-selective school)

"I think [PSCC] would have given me more determination, because I know I need to pass like so much stuff but I don't actually know what I need to focus on. If I

knew where I was going or what I needed, I'd be able to work towards it." (Non-selective school)

"Schools are more focused on uni because that's like a bigger thing. But then I don't feel like I really know what else I could do. Like, I don't really know much about apprenticeships or like going and doing other courses or anything." (Non-selective school)

"I guess some people will start their own business. I'd like it if PSCC teaches you the basics of that, like how to be self-employed, just so everyone learns what they're going to need." (Non-selective school)

However, some participants urged caution about how much careers content is appropriate at Key Stage 3. They felt that at this stage careers education should give young people a chance to think about the future without pressure, since many change their minds and should still be enjoying school.

"Probably in Key Stage 3 you don't need like a lot of careers stuff, but it's good even just to give you an idea what you want. You might change your mind but still at that age you should be having fun and not worrying too much." (Non-selective school)

"Most people do change their minds on what they want to do for a job, so it would be a bit unnecessary to do loads and loads of careers in Key Stage 3. It's good it's more just like giving you the chance to think about it, because your choice could change... To be honest, I wish we learned more in Key Stage 3 because I still don't know what I want to be." (Non-selective school)

"There seems to be a bit of a rush to get to the end point, and maybe there's not enough time preparing you for what that looks like for you." (Grammar school)

Some participants in a grammar school context raised a related concern, drawing on their experience of LLW. They felt that practical skills such as CV writing or budgeting were often taught long before young people needed them, and so were forgotten by the time they became relevant. These participants questioned whether current employability and citizenship provision focuses on the right content at the right stage.

"In LLW, we learnt how to write a CV, and I can't remember how to do it, it's not something that stuck in my head... Sometimes you sort of take it as it comes. I don't need to write a CV right now, and when I do need to write a CV, I can, and there's so much stuff on the internet. I can figure out how to do that, with the

help of people around me. It's not something that I need to learn in first year." (Grammar school)

"I think the whole thing that I'm noticing with this is that it's just too early. I was told how to budget in year 11 this year for my LLW exam. I'm not going to remember how to do that at the end of year 14 when it actually starts to matter." (Grammar school)

Finally, participants raised several practical questions about how PSCC would be introduced, including whether the name could be shortened, whether the subject would be examined, and how the transition from LLW would affect pupils already working towards an LLW qualification.

"The name PSCC is quite long. I think maybe they should come up with a shorter name for it. It's not that catchy." (Non-selective school)

"Would PSCC have an exam? I feel like if you don't have an exam, people aren't really focusing on it as a subject." (Non-selective school)

"I guess I'd want to know from the Department how they're going to remove LLW from the curriculum and swap it with this one. Like if I'm starting LLW this year, will I finish it before I start this here new one? And if I get my LLW, will it still count as a qualification or is it then pointless… I feel like maybe that would be something I'd want to know, that maybe could be explained." (Non-selective school)

Overall, participants' views on PSCC were largely positive. Many welcomed the subject as a way to prepare young people for life beyond school, and valued its focus on financial education. Some appreciated PSCC as an updated provision that retained LLW's most valuable elements, while others, particularly in a grammar school setting, questioned whether a dedicated subject was needed. Participants called for greater awareness of the range of jobs and pathways available, including alternatives to university, and for more first-hand experience of work. At the same time, some participants cautioned against placing too much emphasis on careers at Key Stage 3, or teaching practical skills long before young people need them.

Conclusion

This engagement gave 72 post-primary pupils the opportunity to consider the proposed Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028 and to share their views on what they need from their education. Young people engaged thoughtfully with the proposals, drawing on their own experiences of primary and post-primary school, and their views raise a number of considerations that may help to inform the finalisation of the curriculum.

Awareness of the curriculum review was generally limited, and most participants had not heard of it before taking part in the consultation. Where young people were aware of the proposals, their understanding had largely been shaped by conversations in school. A number of young people called for clear, impartial information from the Department regarding the proposed curriculum, and there may be value in developing accessible, age-appropriate information setting out what is changing, why, and how the changes will affect pupils already in post-primary education. In line with the rights-based approach underpinning this engagement, the Department may also wish to provide feedback to participating young people on how their views have informed the final curriculum.

Young people generally viewed the proposed aim and objectives as both reasonable and appropriate. However, some found the language of the aim vague, and others felt it did not reflect the importance they place on qualifications and employment. Some also questioned whether the objectives focus too heavily on who young people will become as adults rather than who they are now, and felt they could more clearly reflect the context of Northern Ireland. As the aim and objectives are finalised, consideration could be given to how they are communicated to young people, including how they relate to qualifications and future employment.

Young people's experiences of progression throughout the education system highlighted the importance of continuity across the phases of the new curriculum. The practical and organisational demands of moving into post-primary school were identified as a significant adjustment. Beyond these, participants' preparedness depended largely on the primary school they had attended, with many meeting subjects such as history, geography, languages and the arts for the first time in Year 8. As the new curriculum spans both primary and post-primary education, the Department may wish to consider how it can support a broader and more consistent experience of subjects across primary schools, and stronger links between learning at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3.

Participants valued learning that built clearly on what had gone before, but many described their learning in Key Stage 3 as fragmented or repetitive, and the move into Key Stage 4 was generally identified as a significant step up. The Department may wish to consider how the subject frameworks can secure clear sequencing within each subject, so that learning builds from year to year and any revisiting of content is purposeful rather than duplicative. Gradually introducing aspects of Key Stage 4, such as technical subject-specific language, elements of coursework and managing multiple deadlines, may also help the move to GCSE to feel like a step rather than a jump.

Careers education emerged as a particular priority. Participants felt that guidance often came too late, after GCSE choices had been made, leaving some unaware of how their choices related to future pathways. At the same time, some described the pressure of being expected to make long-term decisions at a young age. Taken together, these views support the introduction of careers and futures within PSCC at Key Stage 3, and suggest that it will be most valuable if it is exploratory rather than directive, helping young people to understand the range of pathways available before GCSE options are made.

Participants recognised the value of the proposed capabilities and generally saw them as closely interconnected. However, some young people questioned how capabilities such as empathy and perseverance could be taught in the classroom setting. Others felt that school does not currently do enough to develop capabilities such as creativity and social and civic participation. Participants also felt that environmental responsibility should be more visible across the curriculum. Some found terms such as “computational proficiency” unclear, suggesting that the language used to describe the capabilities to young people may need to be made more accessible.

Across the subject frameworks, young people’s own sense of each subject’s purpose often closely matched the proposed vision statements, suggesting that the frameworks broadly capture what young people value. The most consistent concern was a perceived emphasis on theory and knowledge at the expense of practical learning, particularly in subjects young people regarded as practical or creative. The Department may wish to consider how practical, experiential learning and the skills young people are expected to develop can be made more visible within the vision statements and subject-specific categories.

PSCC was largely welcomed as a way to prepare young people for life beyond school, and participants valued its focus on managing emotions, relationships, financial education and careers. Their responses were often shaped by their experience of LLW, which many described as inadequate. While some questioned whether a dedicated

subject was needed, others highlighted that not all young people have support at home, underlining the role of school in this area. Participants' comments suggest that the status of PSCC and the quality of its teaching will be central to its success, and that the transition from LLW will need to be both carefully managed and communicated.

Finally, participants recognised that the impact of any new curriculum will depend on its implementation. Some young people were concerned that the first year groups to experience the new curriculum could be disadvantaged while teachers adjusted. Others pointed to wider conditions in schools, including teacher engagement, classroom behaviour and teacher absence, as factors that shape what young people actually learn. The Department may wish to consider how teachers are prepared for and supported in delivering the new curriculum, and how the wider conditions that enable learning are addressed alongside changes to curriculum content.

Overall, views across the engagement were not uniform. A small number of young people were notably more critical of the proposals. They questioned the need for change and how a common curriculum would accommodate different types of school and raised concerns about how the reforms would be implemented. However, the majority of the young people who took part were broadly supportive of the proposed curriculum, and offered insight into how it could better reflect their experiences and needs. Their views point towards a curriculum that connects from one stage to the next, is practical and relevant to their lives, and recognises who young people are now as well as who they will become.

Appendix One: Workshop Schedule

Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028 Engagement Schedule

1.0 Introduction: Understanding young people's experiences of school and education
What year are you in at school? What is your favourite subject? What do you think is the main purpose of school? What do you think every young person should gain from their education by the time they leave school?

2.0 Curriculum aims and objectives: *Facilitator introduces Appendix One: The Aim and Objectives of the New Curriculum*
Looking at the proposed aim of the new curriculum, what is your initial reaction? Does this reflect what you think young people need from education today? Why/why not? Is anything unclear? Does it make sense to you? How well does the proposed aim reflect the things you said were important in the first activity? Do you think the proposed aim strikes the right balance between knowledge, skills and personal development? Looking at the five objectives of the new curriculum, which of these do you think is the most important? Why? Is there anything here you don't think should be an objective of education? Is there anything important that you think is missing? Is there anything you'd change? **Optional activity* - Young people rank or prioritise the proposed objectives and explain their choices.*

3.0 Learning and progression
Thinking about your experience of school so far, do you feel that what you learn builds from one year to the next? Can you think of subjects where you can clearly see yourself making progress? What makes you feel that way? Are there subjects or topics where learning sometimes feels repetitive or disconnected? Are there times when you feel there are gaps in your learning, or that you are expected to know something that you have not learned before? Thinking about moving from primary to post-primary school: • Did your learning feel as though it continued from where you had left off?

- Were there things you had already covered?
- Were there areas where there seemed to be gaps?
- What could make learning feel more connected from one year to another?

For older pupils: Looking back at Years 8–10, how well do you think Key Stage 3 prepared you for GCSE-level learning?

4.0 Key Stage 3 Subject Frameworks: Vision Statements

Thinking about the subjects you learn in school, what do you think makes a subject worthwhile or important?

Are there subjects where the purpose of what you are learning is particularly clear? Why?

Facilitator explains that each proposed Key Stage 3 subject framework has a vision statement which describes why the subject is important and what studying it should help young people to gain. Working in pairs or small groups, participants are asked to complete the following statement:

"The most important thing this subject should help young people to…"

Facilitator introduces a short, accessible summary of the proposed vision statement for each of the Key Stage 3 subject frameworks (Appendix Two). Participants compare the proposed vision statements with their own ideas about the purpose of a selection of subjects.

Looking across the proposed subject vision statements:

- Do these sound like what you think these subjects should be for?
- Are there any vision statements that particularly stand out to you, either positively or negatively? Why?
- Is anything unclear or difficult to understand?
- Is there anything important missing?
- Is there anything you would change?

Facilitator explains that underneath each subject's vision statement, the framework breaks the subject down into the main strands of knowledge and skill that make it up. Using the same one or two subjects introduced in 4.0, the facilitator shares the category list for each (Appendix Two).

Looking at [subject]'s categories:

- Does this list match what you'd say [subject] is actually about? Is anything missing that you think should be there?
- Is there a category here you don't really understand, or that doesn't sound like

it belongs?

- Which of these feels like the biggest part of what you actually do in [subject] lessons — and is that different from what the list suggests?
- If a younger pupil asked you what [subject] covers, would this list help you explain it?

5.0 Curriculum capabilities

Apart from subject knowledge and qualifications, what skills, abilities or qualities do you think young people should develop through school?

Facilitator introduces the proposed curriculum capabilities (Appendix Three).

Looking at the proposed capabilities:

- Do these reflect the skills, abilities and qualities you think young people should develop through school?
- Which of these capabilities do you think are most important for young people to develop? Why?
- Overall, how well do you think school helps young people develop these capabilities? Which do you think school helps you develop particularly well?
- Which do you think schools need to place more emphasis on?
- What could schools do differently to help young people develop these capabilities?
- Are any of the capabilities unclear or difficult to understand?
- Is there anything important that you think is missing?

Activity: Working in pairs or small groups, participants identify the three capabilities they think are most important for schools to help young people develop and discuss the reasons for their choices.

6.0 Preparedness for future learning

Thinking about what comes after Key Stage 3, how well do you think your learning prepares you for what you will study next?

Are there subjects where you feel particularly well prepared for the next stage? Are there subjects where you think there may be gaps?

Do you feel prepared for the different ways you might be expected to learn at the next stage, for example working more independently or tackling more difficult work?

What could schools do during Key Stage 3 to prepare pupils better for future learning?

For older pupils: Looking back now, is there anything you wish you had learned or understood better before beginning your current courses?

7.0 Personal, Social, Civic and Careers (PSCC) and preparation for life beyond school

How well do you think school prepares young people for life beyond the classroom?

What are the things you currently feel school prepares you well for?

Are there things about adult life or your future that you do not feel school prepares you for?

What do you think every young person should know or be able to do before leaving school?

What do you think young people need to learn about areas such as:

- relationships;
- personal wellbeing;
- citizenship and participation in society;
- careers and the world of work?

Facilitator introduces the eight areas of learning within the proposed Key Stage 3 Personal, Social, Civic and Careers framework (Appendix Four).

Looking at the proposed areas of learning:

- Which areas do you think are most important for young people to learn about? Why?
- Are there any topics or areas you think schools should place more emphasis on?
- Are there any areas you think should receive less emphasis?
- Is there anything important that you think is missing?
- Is there anything you would change?
- Overall, do you think these areas would help prepare young people well for life beyond school? Why/why not?

Activity: Working in pairs or small groups, participants identify the three areas of PSCC they think are most important for young people and discuss the reasons for their choices.

8.0 Overall reflections and recommendations

Thinking about everything we have discussed, what do you think is the strongest part of the proposed new curriculum?

Is there anything about the proposed curriculum that concerns you or that you think needs to change?

Thinking back to the aim and objectives we looked at earlier, do you think the proposed curriculum as a whole would help achieve them? Why/why not?

Do you think the proposed curriculum reflects what young people in Northern Ireland need from their education?

If you could make one change to the proposed curriculum, what would it be?

Overall, do you think the proposed curriculum expects enough of young people and gives them opportunities to achieve their best?

What is the one thing you would most like the people designing the new curriculum to understand about what young people need from education?

Is there anything else you think should be included in the new curriculum, or anything else you would like to say?

Appendix One: The Aim and Objectives of the Northern Ireland Curriculum

Aim

The aim of the new Northern Ireland curriculum is 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.

Objectives

The objectives of the new Northern Ireland curriculum are:

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.

Appendix Two: Summaries of Vision Statements and Subject-Specific Categories

Art and Design

To understand and interpret the visual world, develop creative skills and express your own ideas through art and design.

- The making of Art
- The creative process of art
- The elements of art
- The history of art

Digital Technology

To understand how digital technology works, create digital solutions and think critically and responsibly about its impact on people and society.

- Computing and digital systems
- Digital creation and communication
- Digital ethics and responsibility

English

To develop strong reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, and use language and literature to communicate, think and understand human experience.

- Pattern
- Story
- Argument
- Metaphor
- Grammar
- Context

Drama

To create, perform and understand stories, work creatively with others, and explore how theatre and performance make meaning for audiences.

- Making drama
- Different forms and genres
- Audience
- Dramaturgy

Geography

To understand places, people and environments, the human and physical processes that shape them, and how our changing world is connected.

- Place knowledge
- Human and physical geographical knowledge

- Geographical skills, enquiry and fieldwork

Home Economics (KS3 only)

To develop the knowledge and practical skills needed to make informed choices about food, health, money, family life and everyday living.

- Nutrition and health
- Food preparation and cooking
- Consumer awareness and good choice
- Home, family and relationships

Mathematics

To build secure mathematical knowledge, understand patterns and logic, solve problems and use mathematics to make sense of the world.

- Number and algebra
- Geometry and measure
- Probability and statistics

History

To understand people and events in the past, use evidence and different perspectives to make sense of them, and explore how the past shapes ourselves and the world today.

- Substantive knowledge
- Disciplinary knowledge

Modern Languages

To communicate confidently in another language, understand other people and cultures, and open up opportunities for the future.

- Phonics
- Vocabulary
- Grammar
- Language proficiency
- Strategies for language learning and communication
- Cultural knowledge and intercultural competencies

Music

To understand, listen to, create, perform and enjoy music, and explore how music expresses people, identities and cultures.

- Communicating through music
- Pattern
- Place and purpose

Physical Education

To develop movement skills and confidence, enjoy being active and build the knowledge and habits needed for a healthy, active life.

- Physical movement
- Conventions
- Physical health

Personal, Social, Civic and Careers (PSCC)

To understand yourself and others, take part responsibly in society and make informed choices about your life and future.

- Self and learning
- Relationships and society
- Careers and futures

Science

To understand how the world and universe work, explore how scientific knowledge is developed, and use evidence to test ideas and reach conclusions.

- Life sciences
- Physical sciences
- Nature, practices and norms of science
- Biology
- Chemistry
- Physics

Technology and Design

To understand how products and technology work, design, make, test and improve solutions, and think about how technology affects people and the environment.

- Technology-conceptual knowledge
- Technology-procedural knowledge
- Design-conceptual knowledge
- Design-procedural knowledge

Appendix Three: Capabilities

Proposed capability
Creativity and imagination
Emotional understanding and empathy
Environmental and ecological responsibility
Language and communication
Mathematical and computational proficiency
Physical health and wellbeing
Reasoning and problem solving
Self-regulated learning and perseverance
Social and civic participation

Appendix Four: Key Stage 3 Personal, Social, Civic and Careers (PSCC)

The proposed Key Stage 3 PSCC curriculum is organised into three main areas:

SELF AND LEARNING

- Psychology of behaviour and learning
- Health and wellbeing science

RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIETY

- Social understanding
- Citizenship and civic understanding
- Ethics and moral reasoning

CAREERS AND FUTURES

- Careers and future pathways
- Financial competence
- Enterprise and life skills