Supporting Progress for Every Child

Transforming Statutory Assessment:
An Independent Review for Northern Ireland

March 2026

Contents

Foreword from the Panel

The Panel has listened carefully, observed closely, discussed extensively, and reviewed a wide range of evidence. We greatly value the contributions made to the Teacher Survey and the Call for Evidence and thank everyone who has participated. A substantial number of individuals, including young people, across nurseries, primary schools, and post-primary settings, have engaged with the Panel's work. We are deeply grateful for your insights. These discussions have shaped both the principles for assessment and the practical recommendations in this report.

The Panel has examined current policy and practice in Northern Ireland in detail and has been impressed by the exceptional commitment of schools and professionals to using assessment to support pupil progression. The widespread, well-managed, and well-designed use of assessment data is not typical of many education systems; it is both impressive and distinctive. This is a major strength of the Northern Ireland system and a testament to the dedication of Northern Ireland's educators.

We have listened carefully to accounts of the challenges schools face and have ensured that our recommendations reflect both international evidence on best practice and the realities of where schools have been, where they are now, and how the system can take its next steps towards higher equity and attainment.

We recognise that, over the past decade, schools have played a central role in shaping their own assessment arrangements and have developed strong ownership and a deep understanding of these systems. In proposing new statutory assessments, our intention is to complement and build on the high-quality arrangements already in place. We have aimed to design new approaches that match or exceed the utility of existing practices without increasing workload.

For example, evidence from both local and international research makes clear that we need to stimulate and support high-quality writing. While statutory assessment should include writing, we have deliberately *not* recommended the traditional model of teacher assessment with complex moderation, which has dominated recent decades and generated significant workload. Instead, we propose a new Northern Ireland Writing Repository – a low-workload, high-impact approach. This will highlight the importance of writing, gather samples from all schools, and allow teachers to see how their pupils' writing compares to work from across the system. While this does not yet provide assessment data for every individual pupil, it lays strong foundations for that possibility in the future and will offer valuable insights into writing standards and areas for improvement.

Similarly, based on compelling international evidence, the Panel recommends the broad use of reading fluency assessments. These require only a few minutes per pupil, provide immediate and meaningful information, and deliver maximum benefit with minimal workload.

Although our remit focuses specifically on statutory assessment, we fully recognise the wider

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ecosystem in which assessment sits. Our analysis and recommendations are shaped by the principle of coherence through the alignment of curriculum, assessment, qualifications, inspection, school improvement processes, resource allocation, and more. Our proposals form part of the wider TransformED programme; an integrated set of reforms aimed at supporting the progression of every child.

In engaging with international comparisons, our approach has been one of "policy learning" not "policy borrowing." Evidence from Sweden, Singapore, Republic of Ireland, Finland, Portugal, England and others has helped us understand what works, avoid known pitfalls, and consider new possibilities drawing specifically on case studies from periods of proven improvement.

The Panel's report is extensive because the evidence base is extensive – drawn from schools, domestic research and international comparisons. However, a large report does not translate to a burdensome assessment model. On the contrary, we have examined the full landscape to carefully select assessments that offer low workload, high utility, and genuine support for teaching and learning. We propose moving away from complex tasks and heavy moderation requirements and towards short, focussed assessments of core elements of learning. These arrangements are designed to support all learners, across all settings, including those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and in Irish-medium education. The result is a substantial report with ten clear recommendations and a streamlined assessment framework that will provide dependable insight into pupils' development and attainment.

Assessment should provide robust information that underpins understanding of individual progress, evaluates the effectiveness of learning programmes, supports transition into further education and employment, and facilitates clear reporting to parents and carers. We recognise that assessments often serve multiple purposes, and these can coexist effectively when well-designed and aligned.

The Panel is acutely aware that assessment tends to accumulate over time. Weekly tests, end-of-term tests, progress checks, sample surveys, diagnostic tools, qualifications and more can build up, layer on layer. In developing a comprehensive system from early years to Year 10, we have added only those elements that offer clear benefit, strong purpose, and a positive workload-benefit ratio, all grounded in evidence. Some assessments can be implemented quickly; others such as full Irish-medium provision require careful development.

We also recommend arrangements that provide the government with appropriate visibility of data. Sound system-level data will enable the Department of Education to monitor overall standards, identify effective practice, reduce regional and between-school variations, allocate resources effectively, identify emerging negative trends, and act swiftly when required.

Tim Oates CBE   Garry Matthewson   Dr Mick Walker

Overview

This report presents the findings and recommendations of the Independent Review of Statutory Assessment in Northern Ireland. The Review is a key component of the wider TransformED Strategy, which aims to modernise curriculum, assessment, qualifications, teacher professional learning and school improvement.

The Review was commissioned to address long-standing weaknesses in statutory assessment, including the collapse of Key Stage reporting, inconsistent recording and use of data, and the absence of a coherent framework capable of supporting classroom practice and system-level insight. Drawing on extensive evidence ranging from system-wide data to international research and over 100 stakeholder submissions, the Review provides a comprehensive analysis of the current challenges and opportunities for reform.

The Review identifies significant strengths within Northern Ireland's schools, including a strong culture of assessment practice and high levels of teacher professionalism. However, it also highlights major system-wide challenges: declining international performance, wide attainment gaps, inconsistent assessment arrangements across schools, heavy reliance on commercial assessment tools, and gaps in early identification of need. There is also weak alignment between the statutory curriculum and statutory assessment. International evidence underlines the risks of poor curriculum-assessment alignment and demonstrates that effective systems prioritise high-quality, curriculum-aligned assessments that support both individual learning and reliable national monitoring.

In response, the Review proposes a new statutory assessment framework for Northern Ireland centred on literacy, numeracy and science, and structured around a clear pathway for pupils from Year 1 to Year 10. The pathway recommended is based on curriculum-aligned, standardised assessments designed to reduce workload compared with a system reliant on teacher-led assessment.

Key components include:

- a new baseline check in Year 1;
- a Year 2 phonics check;
- annual reading fluency checks in Years 3–5;
- a multiplication check in Year 5;
- literacy and numeracy assessments in Year 4; and
- literacy, numeracy and science assessments at Years 7 and 10.

The current Levels of Progression will be replaced by scaled scores. The report also recommends the establishment of a Northern Ireland Writing Repository, optional adaptive assessments for formative assessment, dedicated Irish-medium assessments, and a robust approach to maintaining standards over time.

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The proposed framework prioritises the intelligent use of pupil-level and system-level data to inform teaching and learning. The intention is not to create high-stakes accountability at school level, but rather to build confidence in assessment arrangements and support school improvement through high-quality professional resources and system-wide support.

To ensure successful implementation, the Review sets out several enabling reforms:

- a Record of Development and Education Northern Ireland for every pupil;
- an independent Education Reporting Unit;
- strengthened assessment training in Initial Teacher Education and early career development; and
- clearer governance arrangements for statutory assessment.

Together, these recommendations aim to create a coherent, equitable and technically robust assessment system that supports every learner, enhances teacher confidence, and provides the dependable data needed to drive improvement across the education system.

There is a strong emphasis throughout the Review on minimising teacher workload and ensuring system readiness, with clear recognition that reforms must be carefully sequenced and phased in over time.

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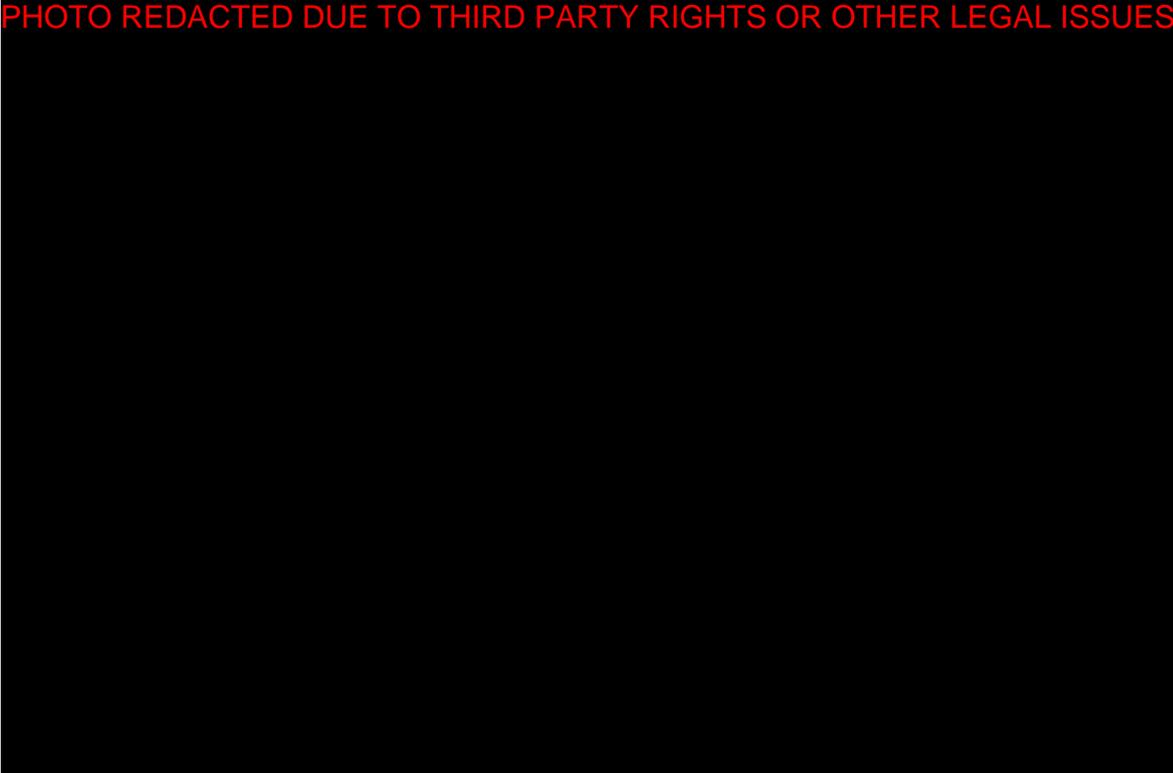
Part 1:
The context

Chapter 1:
The context for the Review

Background to the Review

1.1 On 10 March 2025, the Education Minister, Paul Givan launched his new TransformED strategy which aims to reform and improve education delivery in Northern Ireland. The strategy aims to create a world-class education system that is equitable, inclusive and responsive to the needs of all learners.

1.2 The strategy places teaching and learning at the centre of system improvement, setting out a renewed commitment to strengthening classroom practice and positioning Northern Ireland as a truly world leading education system.

1.3 TransformED is focused on the core areas of teacher professional learning, curriculum reform, assessment, qualifications, school improvement and tackling educational disadvantage. The carefully phased strategy is built around the Ten Point Plan, a roadmap designed to deliver educational excellence. It is accompanied by a detailed Delivery Plan setting out actionable steps to translate the strategy's vision into practice. The strategy takes 'policy learning' from across the globe and recognises that doing nothing on educational quality is not an option for Northern Ireland

1.4 Despite the efforts of educators and policymakers around the world, the overall trendlines on standards in mathematics, science and literacy have been going down. Continuous effort and understanding are needed to sustain standards; reform activities have worked in some countries but appear to contribute to decline in others.

1.5 A few nations have successfully avoided this downward trend, and it is reassuring that TransformED is using insights from those nations in building evidence-based policy and in managing implementation.

1.6 One of the big insights from high performing nations is the importance of coherence across curriculum, assessment, learning materials, inspection and other key areas such as the professional development of teachers and accountability.

1.7 Nations which have not attended to this have run into trouble. Sweden transformed the governance of its schools but relaxed assessment and inspection. It subsequently entered a long period of grade inflation and declining standards, which then developed into a national crisis. Scotland transformed its curriculum but lost any means of measuring the precise impact on attainment and permitted a poor connection between the reformed curriculum and existing national examinations. These are the dangers of neglecting curriculum and assessment coherence.

1.8 TransformED is developed with full knowledge of these prior problems. Some may feel that it is over-ambitious to reform so many elements of the education system in tandem. However, it is an approach underpinned by international experience and evidence. It is piecemeal, partial and poorly directed change around the world which has been disruptive and dysfunctional.

1.9 By contrast, TransformED is both appropriately wide-ranging and grounded in evidence. Not only that, the commitment to planning and action co-developed with the teaching profession means that it is a frontrunner for success.

1.10 It is within this wider context of the TransformED strategy that the Independent Review of Assessment Panel was established on 9 June 2025. As detailed in TransformED, there is a need to fundamentally review current arrangements for assessment in Northern Ireland and to develop attainment measures which set high standards and clearly defined learning outcomes for all pupils.

1.11 The Panel was, therefore, commissioned to conduct an evidence-based review of international assessment approaches and to make recommendations for change.

Review scope

1.12 The Terms of Reference for the Review set out the core aim of the work as being "to make a series of policy recommendations regarding the purpose, nature and design of assessment in Northern Ireland".

1.13 The purpose of the review is to:

- Assess the effectiveness of current assessment arrangements in Northern Ireland, including statutory and non-statutory assessments, in supporting pupil learning and progression.

- Evaluate the alignment of assessment practices with international best practices and the needs of learners, educators and society.

- Identify barriers to effective assessment and propose recommendations for improvement, including innovative and inclusive approaches which will support children with SEN.

- Make policy proposals regarding the purpose, nature and design of assessment in Northern Ireland, which will result in improved assessment arrangements which set high standards and clearly defined learning outcomes for all pupils.

1.14 The Review, which was carried out between June 2025 and January 2026, was tasked with producing a detailed report providing coherent proposals and recommendations for change.

1.15 The Review's remit does not extend to qualifications in Northern Ireland, which are being addressed separately under the TransformED programme.

Evidence gathering

1.14   The Review drew on a broad, diverse and triangulated evidence base to examine assessment in Northern Ireland. Sources included system-wide data, key Departmental publications, international research, extensive stakeholder engagement, a public call for evidence and a comprehensive teacher survey.

1.16   Although the Review was conducted within a tight timeframe, ensuring open access for all wishing to contribute was a priority. The stakeholder engagement phase involved a wide-ranging programme of activity, including:

- **13 visits** to schools and other educational settings, involving discussions with leaders, teachers, pupils and classroom observations;

- **24 focus groups** and **34 evidence sessions**, representing a broad spectrum of stakeholders;

- **106 written submissions** in response to the call for evidence; and

- **912 responses** to the online teacher survey.

Conclusion and key points

1.17   The Independent Review of Assessment, launched in June 2025, is a central component of the TransformED reform agenda.

1.18   Its overarching aim is to recommend a clear, coherent and evidence-based approach to the purpose, nature and design of assessment in Northern Ireland.

1.19   The Review is supported by extensive evidence-gathering incorporating school and education-setting visits, meetings and focus groups, an open call for evidence and a teacher survey.

Chapter 2:
The Northern Ireland education system

Structure

2.1   Education policy and legislation in Northern Ireland are devolved to a locally elected and accountable Assembly.

2.2   The Minister of Education is responsible for an annual resource budget of approximately £3.6 billion to deliver high-quality education for pupils in full-time schooling as well as a range of other services, including early years and youth provision.

2.3   The Department of Education provides the central governance and strategic management of the education system. It is responsible for ensuring that education policies are implemented effectively and that services are delivered efficiently.

2.4   The Department's main statutory areas of responsibility are 0–4 educational provision; primary, post-primary and special education; and youth services. Currently, it does not have responsibility for further education or training programmes for those above the age of 16, or higher education; these areas fall within the remit of the Department for the Economy.

2.5   The Department also holds statutory powers to inspect the quality of education in schools. This function is carried out on its behalf by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).

School and pupil context

2.6   Northern Ireland is a small jurisdiction, with 329,209 pupils in 1,102 publicly funded schools in 2025/26. This is made up of 164,717 pupils in primary schools and preparatory departments (Years 1–7); 156,763 pupils in post-primary schools and 7,729 pupils in special schools. There are also 21,878 pupils in funded pre-school education.

2.7   Approximately 90,300 pupils in all schools (including voluntary and private pre-schools) are entitled to Free School Meals and this represents just over a quarter of all pupils.

2.8   Pre-school education is not compulsory, but the Department aims to provide one year of funded pre-school education for children in their immediate pre-school year (i.e. the year before they start their compulsory schooling). This is available to every child whose parents and carers wish to access it.

2.9   Compulsory education then extends from ages 4 to 16 covering 12 years of schooling, though many pupils remain in school until age 18 completing 14 years of education.

This period of schooling is broken into phases, known as 'Key Stages' as follows:

Primary education

- Foundation Stage – Years 1 and 2 (ages 4–6)

- Key Stage 1 – Years 3 and 4 (ages 6–8)

- Key Stage 2 – Years 5–7 (ages 8–11)

Post-primary education

- Key Stage 3 – Years 8–10 (ages 11–14)

- Key Stage 4 – Years 11 and 12 (ages 14–16)

- Post-16 (currently non-compulsory) – Years 13 and 14 (ages 16–18)

2.10   Pupils transfer at the end of Year 7 (age 11) from primary to post-primary school. Many pupils sit a post-primary entrance exam for admission to publicly funded grammar schools. This exam is privately run by the Schools' Entrance Assessment Group (SEAG) and is not state endorsed or regulated.

2.11   Northern Ireland has a diverse school system, reflecting its historic religious and political divisions. Publicly funded schools (also known as grant-aided schools) include controlled, Catholic maintained, voluntary grammar, grant maintained integrated and Irish-medium schools. Even these categories sometimes overlap with both controlled integrated and controlled Irish-medium schools. Despite this diversity, all types of publicly funded schools follow the statutory Northern Ireland Curriculum.

The current context of education

2.12   Northern Ireland has long taken pride in the strength of its education system. It attracts high-performing school leavers and graduates to Initial Teacher Education resulting in a highly skilled teaching profession. The expertise of dedicated teachers and school leaders has long underpinned the system's achievements. Its pupils perform exceptionally well at GCSE and A level, consistently achieving outcomes that place them ahead of many counterparts across the UK.

2.13   Yet the environment in which the education system operates is becoming increasingly challenging. Extended periods of underinvestment, combined with limited progress on structural reform, have contributed to a deepening financial crisis across education.

2.14   In recent weeks the Minister of Education has published a consultation on a Five-Year Budget strategy. This outlines the extent of the structural funding crisis facing the education system and the likely reforms needed across a range of services including school transport, meals and Special Educational Needs (SEN) support, as well as reducing the numbers of schools and changing the approach to financial management in schools.

2.15   Notably, Northern Ireland has been without any consistent national measures of school or system performance at primary school or at Key Stage 3 due to widespread non-participation by schools in the current arrangements for statutory end of Key Stage assessment over an extended period since 2013.

2.16   Funding has not matched rising levels of need, constraining the system's capacity to provide adequate support to schools, modernise facilities, and invest in professional development for its education workforce.

2.17   As a result, confidence in the system has diminished and relationships across the sector have come under strain. Since 2014, there have been repeated prolonged periods of industrial action in schools with Action Short of Strike. This has impeded the operation of the education system in various ways including the absence of inspections in schools, impeding statutory assessment and impacting on the day to day running of schools. Industrial action has also, on occasion, affected participation in international assessment studies.

2.18   The continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has further compounded these pressures. It has fundamentally altered learners' experiences, shaped expectations about schooling, and introduced new and ongoing barriers to learning. Wider societal pressures on children and young people are increasing too, with many children starting school less prepared for learning.

2.19   As in other jurisdictions, Northern Ireland has seen a sharp rise in the number of children and young people with SEN and the existing SEN system is no longer sustainable or capable of meeting their needs responsively and appropriately.

2.20   However, the system is not standing still, and the current Minister is leading reform programmes across a range of areas, including teaching and learning, SEN, and Early Years and childcare, as well as examining teacher workload.

2.21   The Independent Review of Education (2023) provided a comprehensive, evidence-based consideration of the fundamental issues impacting education in Northern Ireland. It made proposals for progressive reform of the education system over the next two decades and set out a vision for a well-designed, efficient system of education that continues to provide choice, is inclusive and encourages collaboration ahead of competition.

2.22   The Review particularly highlighted limited investment in the core areas of teaching and learning. In response as set out in Chapter 1, the Department published its flagship TransformED strategy to deliver educational excellence across Northern Ireland.

2.23   TransformED focuses on teaching and learning, setting out in detail the Department's plans for a renewed focus on core classroom priorities to make Northern Ireland a truly world-leading education system.

2.24   The purpose of the strategy is to strengthen the very foundations of the education system by addressing its most critical elements: curriculum, assessment, qualifications, school improvement, tackling educational disadvantage and teacher professional development. These areas are essential to delivering high-quality education and meeting statutory obligations.

2.25   Equally, the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Reform Agenda and Delivery Plan, published in February 2025, sets out an ambitious, system-wide programme to improve outcomes and educational experiences for children and young people with SEN in Northern Ireland.

2.26   'Transforming the Support Model' for pupils is a cornerstone of SEN Reform which seeks to establish a new, more effective and sustainable model of support for children with a statement of SEN.

The statutory curriculum

2.27   A key aspect of the TransformED Programme is curriculum reform. The current statutory curriculum was introduced into all publicly funded schools on a phased basis from 2007 with three key aims in mind:

a. to ensure that the core curriculum delivered in all grant-aided schools was relevant to the needs, aspirations and career prospects of all young people;

b. to promote a greater focus on skills and their application as well as knowledge, and on connecting learning across the curriculum; and

c. to reduce the prescription that had applied since 1989, and to give teachers much more flexibility to exercise their professional judgement in planning and delivering lessons that were connected, relevant, enjoyable and supported pupils in achieving their full educational potential.

2.28   There is, for all Key Stages from Foundation to Key Stage 4, statutory minimum content which must be covered. At Key Stage 4, the statutory minimum content is reduced, although schools must offer pupils a range of courses leading to recognised qualifications. Since September 2012, statutory end of Key Stage assessment arrangements have been in place to support the Northern Ireland Curriculum. These include arrangements for assessing the cross-curricular skills of Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT at the end of Key Stages 1,2 and 3.

2.29   The 2007 curriculum also had a particular focus on the core cross-curricular skills of Communication (literacy); Using Mathematics (numeracy); and Using ICT, as well as whole curriculum "Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities".

2.30   A Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum was carried out in 2025. It concluded that the current curriculum is too high-level, lacks clarity about essential knowledge and skills, and has remained largely unchanged for nearly 20 years.

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2.31 The core recommendation of the Review, from which all others flow, is that the Department of Education should design and implement a new curriculum framework for Northern Ireland.

2.32 The Review recommends that the new curriculum should be based on the following key principles:

- **Purpose-led** – driven by the revised aims and objectives of the Northern Ireland Curriculum.

- **Knowledge-rich** – based on the understanding that deep and connected knowledge forms the foundation for complex thinking skills.

- **Continuous and coherent** – carefully sequencing knowledge and skills over time and making meaningful links across subjects.

- **Specific and focussed** – clearly articulating important concepts, ideas and specific skills that pupils should learn and leaving time for them to do so.

- **Inclusive and flexible** – capable of responding to the diverse needs of learners, schools and communities.

2.33 Research and international evidence tell us that a knowledge-rich curriculum is forward-looking and future-orientated. Cognitive science and educational research point to the essential role of knowledge in high attainment in education and effective performance in the workplace, at all levels of employment. Creativity, critical thinking and skilled performance all depend on the knowledge resources a person holds. Knowledge is not opposed in any way to competence - knowledge is an essential element of competence. A knowledge-rich curriculum provides the personal resources a young person needs to operate in a rapidly changing, developing and challenging world.

2.34 The work of curriculum reform is being taken forward by a Curriculum Taskforce chaired by leading educationalist Christine Counsell, with Lucy Crehan as Deputy Chair.

2.35 The aim of the reformed curriculum is to provide greater clarity to teachers on what should be taught and when, ensuring that learning is well-sequenced and that knowledge and skills build progressively over time. The intention is to have a draft curriculum framework ready for public consultation by spring 2026.

2.36 The Panel is mindful that its review of assessment will ultimately evaluate the extent to which learners have engaged with, and achieved, the intentions of the new curriculum. For that reason, the curriculum and its associated assessment system must be designed coherently, with clear alignment between what is taught and what is measured.

2.37 If assessment is developed in isolation, it risks distorting classroom practice or failing to capture the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that the curriculum aims to promote. Ensuring that curriculum content and assessment are closely linked provides clarity for teachers, supports consistency in learning, and gives confidence that outcomes genuinely reflect the aims of the reform. Consequently, the Panel has taken the utmost care to ensure that this report does not pre-empt the content of the new curriculum.

Conclusion and key points

2.38 Northern Ireland's education system continues to demonstrate real strengths, including high levels of pupil achievement and a highly qualified, committed teaching profession. However, the system now operates in a context of growing complexity and pressure. Long-term underinvestment, limited structural reform, and rising levels of need, as well as the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, have collectively created a situation that is financially and operationally unsustainable. These pressures have weakened confidence across the sector and made it harder for schools to meet the increasingly diverse needs of their learners.

2.39 At the same time, important reform efforts are underway. The Department of Education's TransformED strategy, alongside its Five-year Budget strategy and the SEN Reform Agenda, represent a significant and purposeful effort to stabilise and modernise the system.

2.40 The forthcoming new curriculum framework offers a major opportunity to strengthen teaching and learning, bring greater clarity and coherence to what pupils should know and be able to do, and ensure the system is better equipped to meet future challenges.

2.41 Together these reforms, to which the review of assessment is a further integral element, aim to rebuild the foundations of education in Northern Ireland and support a more inclusive, coherent and high-performing system for the next generation.

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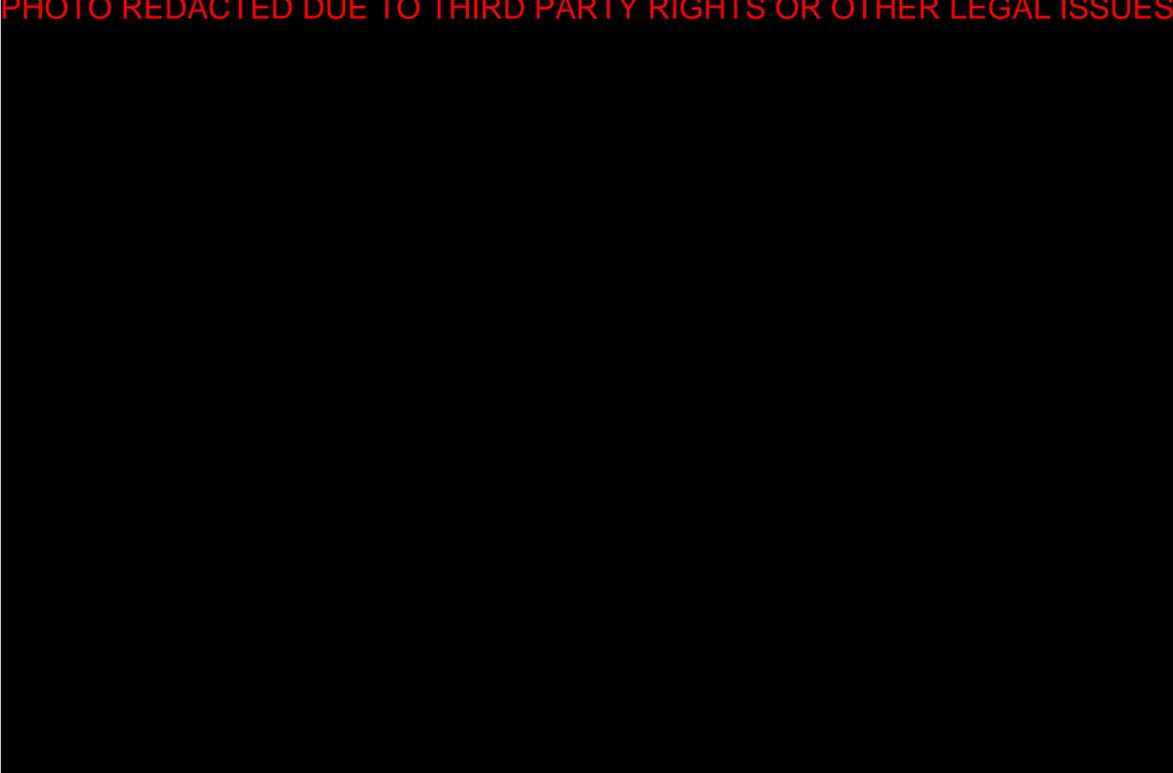
Chapter 3:
The performance of the education system

3.1 Northern Ireland's education system has historically compared favourably with the rest of the UK and with international comparators. However, allied with the current contextual stresses identified in Chapter 2, there is also evidence of plateauing and decline in performance in different curricular areas and of significant equity issues across the system. Understanding the situation is made complex by the absence of robust domestic assessment measures across phases.

International studies

3.2 On a positive note, a 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) carried out by the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) found that ten-year-old pupils in Northern Ireland significantly outperformed pupils in 52 of the 56 participating countries, ranking just behind Singapore and the Republic of Ireland. In 2021, 23 per cent of pupils in Northern Ireland reached the Advanced International Benchmark in reading, the third highest percentage internationally.

3.3 There was, however, a relatively wide spread of reading attainment in Northern Ireland. Only two of the comparator countries, Australia and Singapore, had a greater gap in mean scores between high and low attainers.

3.4 Northern Ireland also took part in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in 2019. The performance of nine and ten-year-olds in mathematics ranked seventh out of 58 participating countries. The average science score, although lower than the mathematics score, was also above the TIMSS science average.

3.5 By contrast to the primary assessments, Northern Ireland's performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the large-scale international assessment taken by 15-year-olds internationally, is of more concern.

3.6 Northern Ireland's outcomes in PISA 2022 are above average in reading but average in mathematics and science. Northern Ireland's average scores for both mathematics and reading in 2022 had declined significantly since 2018. This pattern was mirrored by that of the wider OECD trend averages in these subjects following the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.7 Notably, however, PISA results have declined in the longer-term. In 2000 and 2003, Northern Ireland's 15-year-olds were significantly above the OECD average in mathematics, reading and science.

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Over the last decade Northern Ireland's scores have decreased significantly across all three domains as follows:

- the average reading score significantly decreased from 501 in 2012 to 485 in 2022, a decline of 16 points;

- the average mathematics score 2022 (475) was significantly below the score in 2012 (487), a decline of 12 points; and

- the average science score for Northern Ireland in 2022 (488) was significantly below the score in 2012 (507), a decline of 19 points.

3.8   Of particular note is that Northern Ireland's average score in PISA 2022 was significantly higher than that of Wales, not significantly different to that of Scotland but significantly lower than the average score for both England and the Republic of Ireland in each of mathematics, reading and science.

3.9   The following graphs of UK performance in PISA show clearly the decline in performance across all areas in 2022 in Northern Ireland; the consistent decline in science performance over the last decade; and the significant performance gap that now exists with England.

Table 1 – PISA reading score by UK nation over time

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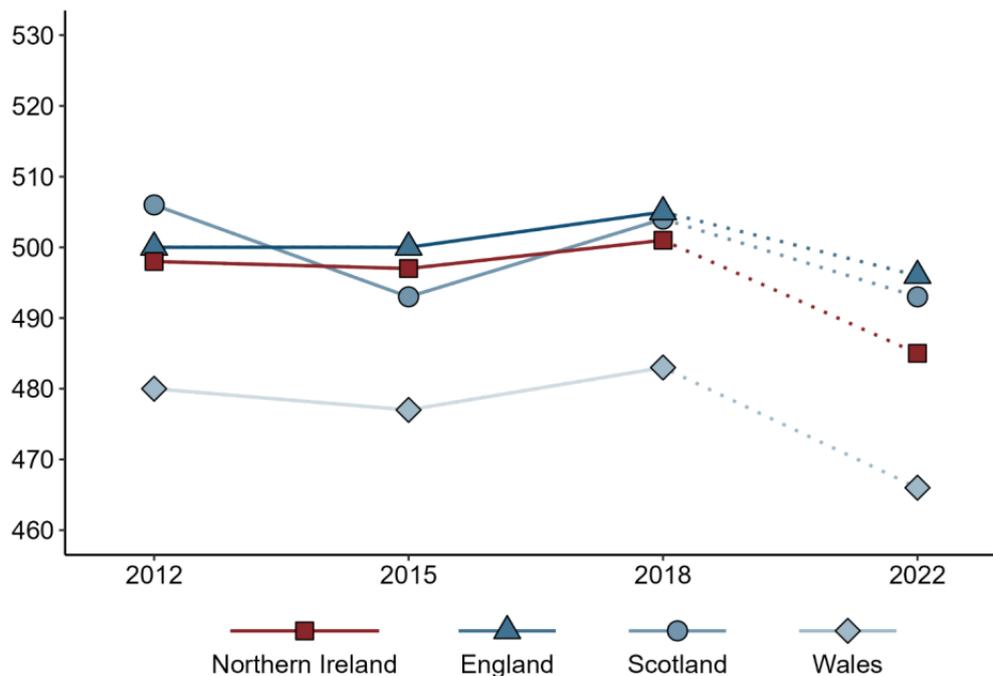**Transforming Statutory Assessment:** An Independent Review for Northern Ireland

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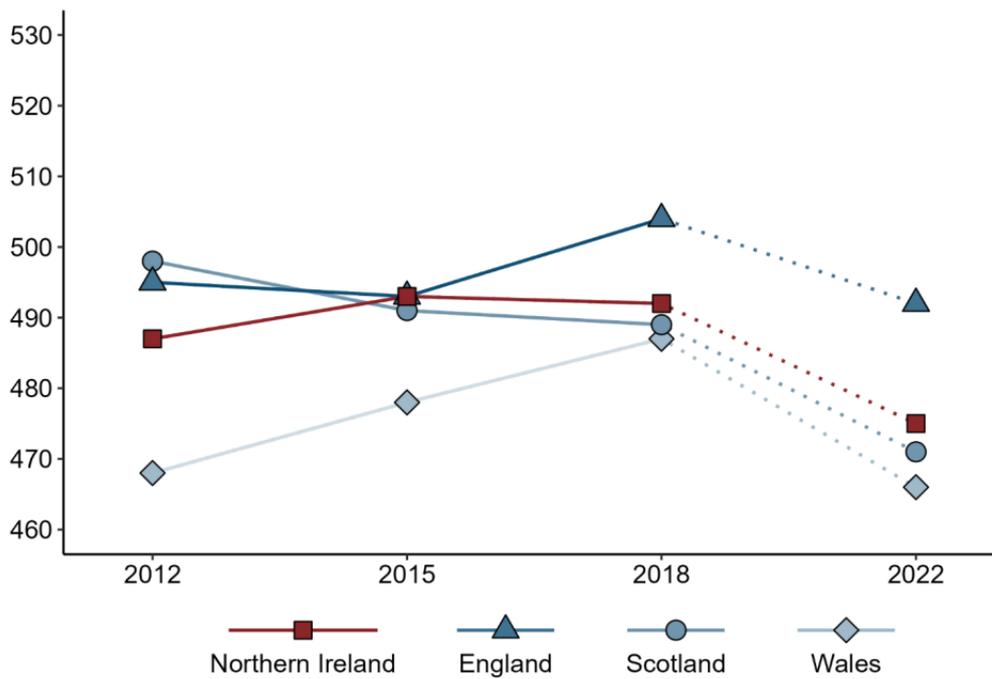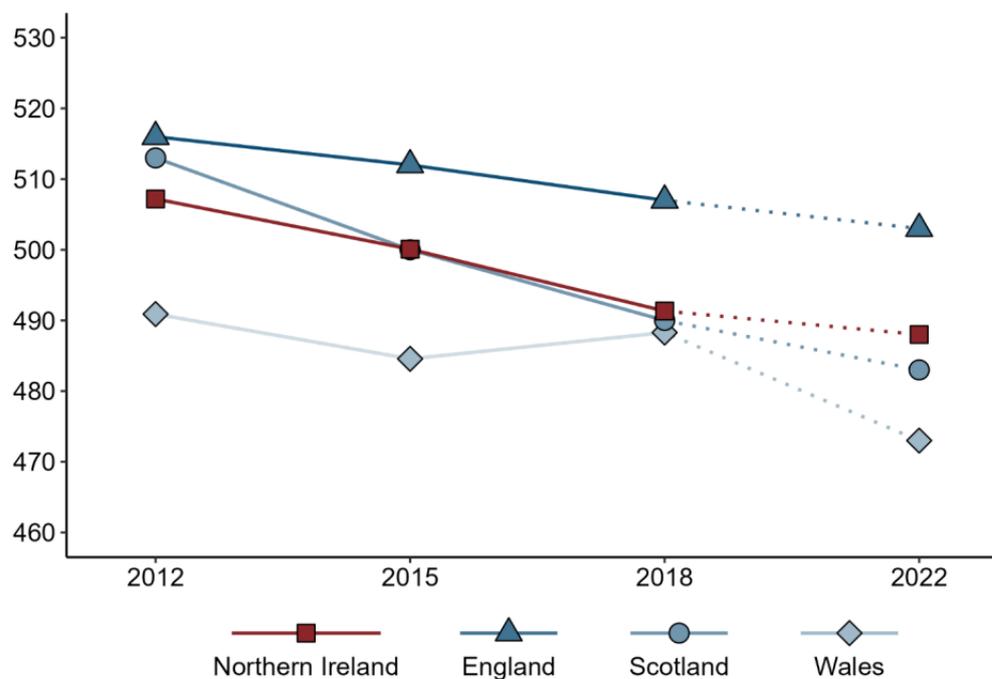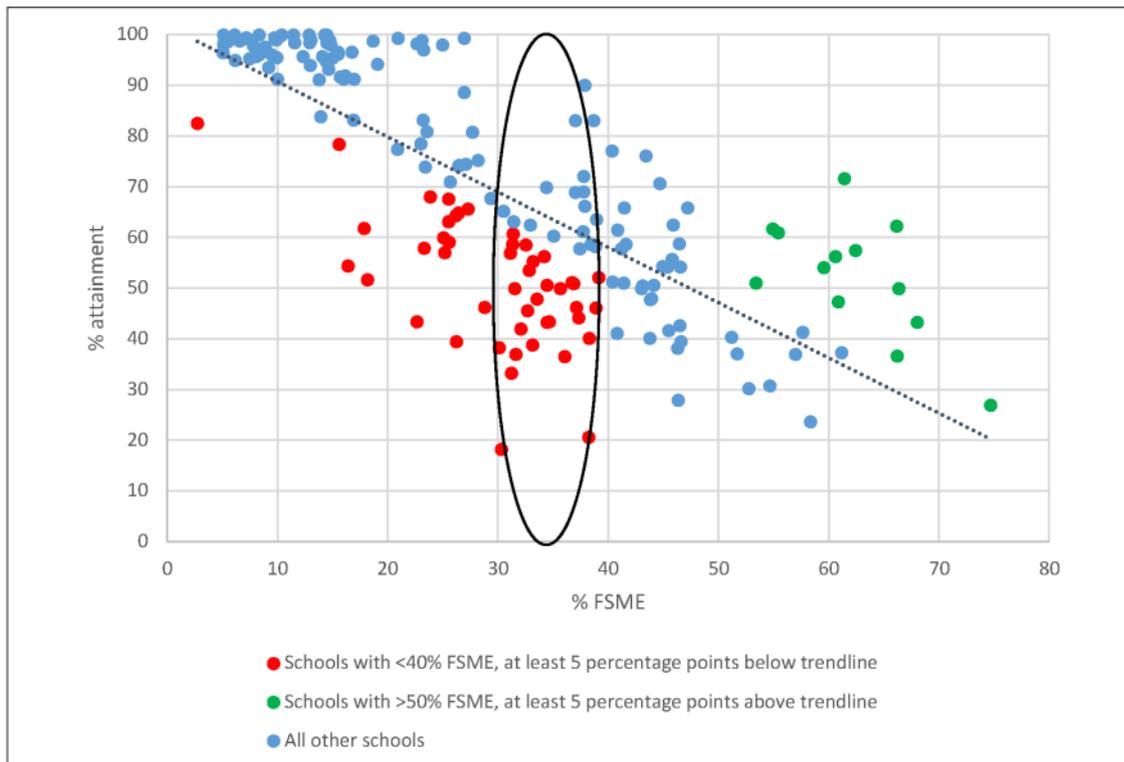## Table 2 – PISA mathematics score by UK nation over time

Table 3 – PISA science scores by UK nation over time

System attainment data

3.10   Positively, the educational outcomes achieved by school leavers have improved significantly over the last two decades with greater numbers and percentages of pupils achieving important qualifications and key benchmarks.

3.11   In 2023/4, 73% of Year 12 pupils attained the important benchmark of at least 5 grade A*–C passes at GCSE or equivalent level, including GCSE English Language and Mathematics. In 2012/13, the comparative figure was 60.9%.

3.12   Northern Ireland has raised the bar for children on Free School Meals with many more achieving important qualifications than 10 years ago. In 2023/24, 52.5% of Year 12 pupils entitled to Free School Meals achieved this key benchmark compared to 33.9% in 2012/13.

3.13   There has also been an increase in the number of pupils staying on at school to complete sixth form study and outcomes have remained strong. In 2023/24, 71.4% of Year 14 pupils achieved 3 or more A levels (including equivalents) at grades A*–C. In 2012/23, this figure was 65.2%.

3.14   The number of pupils leaving school with no formal qualifications has also been reduced significantly from 27% in 1980, to 1.8% in 2012/13, to less than 1% by 2023.

3.15   Nonetheless, as in many systems internationally, there remains a strong correlation in Northern Ireland between socio-economic disadvantage and educational outcomes. The Table 4 below shows a general downward trend, that is, the higher the proportion of pupils entitled to Free School Meals in a school, the lower the attainment.

3.16   The gap in attainment between children in receipt of Free School Meals and those not in receipt has closed, but slowly. In 2023/24, the GCSE gap between pupils entitled to Free School Meals (52.5%) and those not entitled to Free School pupils (80.0%) was 27.5% points. Ten years ago, the gap was 33.5% points.

3.17   The Independent Review of Education particularly highlighted that there are significant variations in pupil outcomes between schools that appear to share similar characteristics, including similar levels of disadvantage. They found that the biggest concentration of underperformance is in the 30% to 40% Free School Meal range.

3.18   The black oval in the centre point of the following graph highlights the very significant difference in attainment between schools with similar levels of disadvantage. The range of attainment (from the highest- to lowest-performing school) at GCSE is 71.9 percentage points and at A-level is 69.3 percentage points.

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Table 4 – Proportion of pupils achieving 5+ GCSEs (or equivalent) A*–C (including GCSE English and Mathematics relative to proportion of FSME at school in 2018/19)

- Schools with <40% FSME, at least 5 percentage points below trendline
- Schools with >50% FSME, at least 5 percentage points above trendline
- All other schools

Conclusion and key points

3.19   Northern Ireland's education system continues to demonstrate areas of high performance, particularly at primary level and in school-leaver qualifications. International studies such as PIRLS and TIMSS confirm that younger pupils perform strongly, especially in reading and mathematics. However, the longer-term trend is more concerning. PISA data – for pupils aged 15 – shows a sustained decline over the last decade across reading, mathematics and science, with performance now sitting below that of England and the Republic of Ireland.

3.20   Domestic attainment data presents a more positive picture, with significant improvement in GCSE and A-level outcomes over the past decade and a marked reduction in the proportion of pupils leaving school with no qualifications. Yet, persistent and substantial inequalities remain. Socio-economic disadvantage continues to be strongly associated with lower attainment, and variation between schools with similar levels of disadvantage is striking. These disparities highlight systemic issues that cannot be explained solely by community context and point to deeper structural and practice-related challenges within the system.

3.21 Taken together, the evidence suggests a system with strong foundations and notable successes but one facing clear strategic challenges: declining international competitiveness at age 15, persistent inequity, variability in performance across schools, and gaps in robust assessment data across phases. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated, system-wide focus on quality, consistency and equity. It also requires significantly improved domestic assessment data across all phases to inform, drive and evaluate improvement.

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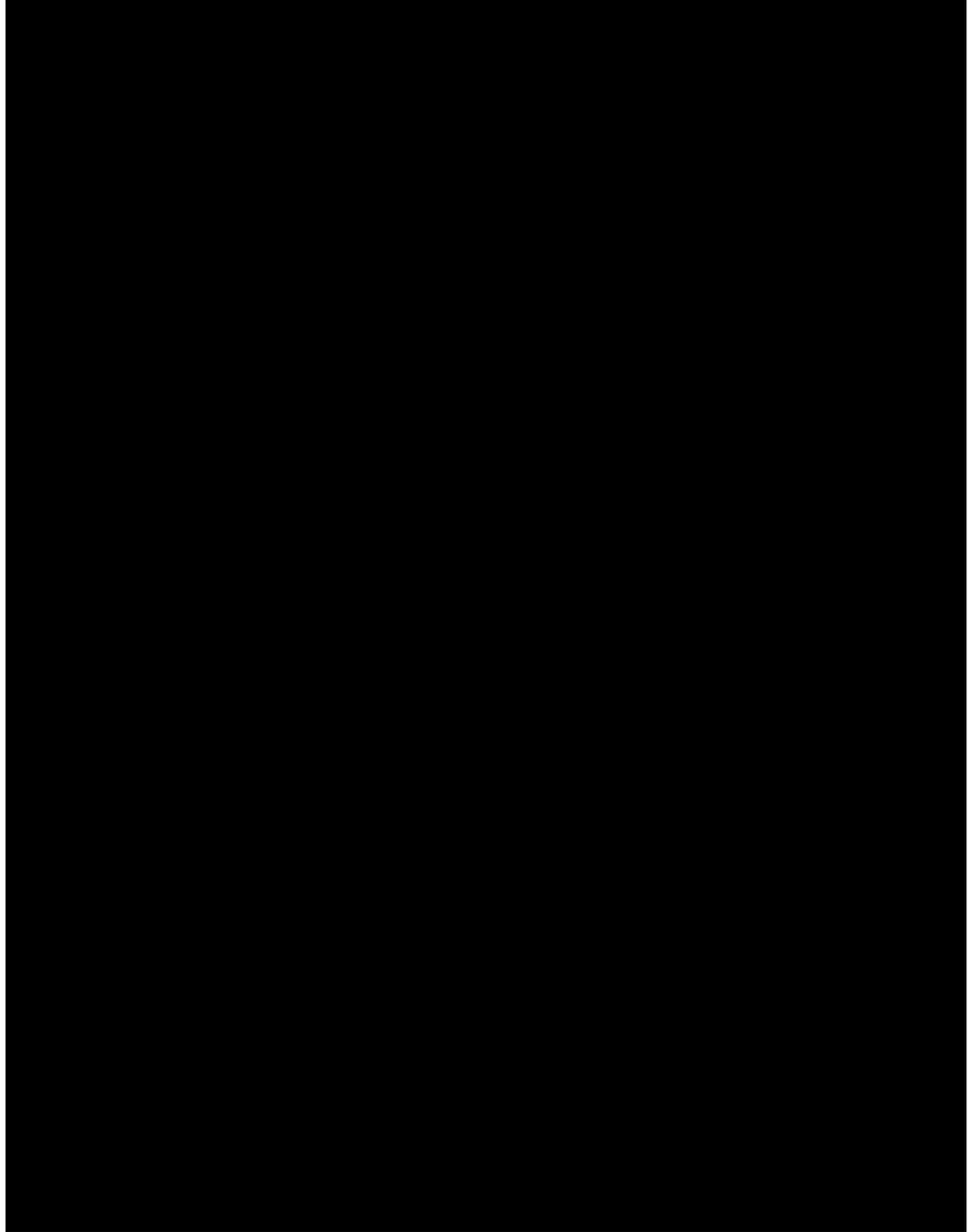
Part 2:
The evidence

Chapter 4:
The current assessment framework in Northern Ireland

Introduction

4.1 As highlighted in Part 1, the framework for assessment across the school system in Northern Ireland, like many aspects of the education system has been fundamentally disrupted in recent years by a mixture of Action Short of Strike, which included widespread non-participation from schools in the current arrangements for statutory end of Key Stage assessment, and by the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2 This has meant Northern Ireland has been without any consistent national measures of school or system performance at primary school or at Key Stage 3 over an extended period since 2013. In 2024/25 one component of the Levels of Progression for Communication and Using Mathematics was teacher assessed without moderation, which began to move towards information gathering. In 2025/26, interim arrangements for system level sample assessments have been put in place, but fundamental weaknesses remain.

4.3 This chapter sets out the details and strengths and weaknesses of the current assessment framework in Northern Ireland.

Overview

4.4 At three key points in compulsory schooling in Northern Ireland, the nature of assessment is stipulated by legislation:

- the end of Key Stage 1 (age 8);
- the end of Key Stage 2 (age 11); and
- the end of Key Stage 3 (age 14).

4.5 Pupils at these stages in education must legally be assessed in the three cross curricular skills of Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT, with reference to curriculum levels known as Levels of Progression.

4.6 Development work on the Levels of Progression began in 2002. There followed almost a decade of development, trialling and consultation. The Levels of Progression set out a seven-level scale of attainment for pupils up to Year 10 in each of the three cross-curricular skills. Each level contains a series of separate competence-based statements which focus on skills as well as knowledge.

4.7 The Levels were designed to broadly align to the National Qualifications Framework as follows:

Level 1   = NQF Entry Level1

Level 2   = NQF Entry Level 2

Level 3   = NQF Entry Level 3

Level 4/5 = NQF Level 1

Level 6/7 = NQF Level 2

4.8 The Levels of Progression aim to provide teachers, parents and carers, and young people themselves, clear information on the cross curricular skills – skills that all pupils will be given the opportunity to develop through the curriculum.

4.9 The Department, on the professional advice of CCEA, therefore, agreed "expected levels" in all three cross-curricular skills, which most pupils are expected to be able to reach at three key points in their education: age 8 (level 2); age 11 (level 4); and age 14 (level 5).

4.10 When these arrangements were introduced in 2012/13, pupils were to be assessed, not by a test, but by the teacher's professional judgement of their progress. Teachers were asked to assess their pupils through school-based assessment activities. CCEA produced a range of assessment tasks, but schools did not have to use the CCEA Assessment Tasks.

4.11 There was an expectation that individual pupils should progress at least one level between each Key Stage. This allowed for progression to be shown and was designed to ensure that there was a focus on both achievement at or above the expected levels and on measuring the progress made by pupils from their different starting points.

Statutory Assessment – Key Legislation

Education (School Information and Prospectuses) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 (NI Statutory Rule)

Sets out the **minimum** requirements to be included in school prospectuses and annual reports of Boards of Governors. There is a requirement to publish within the prospectus school level outcomes at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. The Regulations, however, reference Levels of Attainment rather than the Levels of Progression which subsequently replaced them.

The Education (Pupil Records and Reporting) (Transitional) Regulations (NI) 2007 (NI Statutory Rule)

Regulations 5 to 8 of this Order have been revoked by the Reporting Regulations 2009 Order. However, regulations 9 – 14 are extant. These require Boards of Governors in cases where a pupil is transferring to another school to make arrangements for a formal record of the academic achievements, other skills and abilities and academic progress relating to the pupil to be transferred within 15 school days; and for the disclosure or transfer of any other educational

records relating to a pupil (including a teacher's record) which are kept at the school within 15 school days. A copy is to be supplied to the pupil's parent.

Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 (Primary Legislation)

This Order stipulates that the curriculum for a grant-aided school must ensure the acquisition and development by pupils of the cross-curricular skills; and any other skills specified by order of the Department. It defines the cross-curricular skills as communication; using mathematics; and using ICT.

The Order gives the Department the authority to put in place such Levels of Progression it considers appropriate for each of the cross-curricular skills and places a duty on the Department to set these in place as soon as is practicable for pupils in key stages 1, 2 and 3.

It also gives the Department the authority by Order to specify such assessment arrangements it considers appropriate for pupils in relation to (a) an area of learning (b) the cross-curricular skills; and (c) any other skill specified under Article 8(1)(b). It also states that the Order may impose such duties on the Boards of Governors and principals of grant-aided schools as appear to the Department to be necessary or expedient for the purpose of implementing the assessment arrangements.

The Education (Assessment Arrangements) (Foundation to Key Stage 3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 (NI Statutory Rule)

This legislation requires the principal of each grant-aided schools to make arrangements to assess pupils in the autumn term, using such computer-based assessment method as the Department may specify and in accordance with any guidance provided by CCEA.

Pupils in Years 4–7 must be assessed, pupils in Years 1–3 and Years 8–10 may be assessed.

The results for pupils must be recorded, notified to parents in writing and a meeting to discuss the results must be offered.

It is also the duty of the principal to send notification of results to CCEA in such form and by such date as it may require.

The Education (Pupil Reporting) Regulations (NI) 2009 (NI Statutory Rule)

These regulations apply to all grant aided schools except nursery schools or pupils in primary schools or special schools who have not attained the lower limit of compulsory school age.

The regulations stipulate information to be reported annually to parents in relation to a pupil's educational and other achievements. They introduce a statutory requirement for an annual report to be provided by 30 June and set out what the report should contain at each Key Stage. If a pupil in any year has been exempted from any part of the curriculum or assessment arrangements the annual report should indicate this.

In the case of a pupil in the final year of Key Stage 1, 2 or 3, parents must also be notified of the Level of Progression the pupil has achieved in any cross-curricular skill; as well as the percentage of pupils in the school attaining each level in a cross-curricular skill and those exempted from assessment.

It also creates a duty for principals to send notification to CCEA, in such form and by such date as it may require, of the results of assessments in relation to any cross-curricular skills in which the pupil was assessed with reference to Levels of Progression.

The regulations also introduce a requirement for a summative record of achievement to be produced for pupils at the end of Key Stages 2 and 4, and sixth form. It must include any qualification, award or certificate gained by the pupil, the particulars of any school societies, clubs or activities in which the pupil was involved; and particulars of any position of responsibility held by the pupil.

The Education (Levels of Progression for Key Stages 1, 2 and 3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (NI Statutory Rule)

The Order specifies that the Levels of Progression to be used for assessing pupils in the final years of key stages 1, 2 and 3 in the cross-curricular skills of communication, using mathematics and using ICT, and the associated assessment arrangements.

It stipulates that the levels of progression and the assessment arrangements are to be set out in an Assessment Document prepared by CCEA, approved by the Department of Education and published by the Council. There is to be an Assessment Document in relation to communication and using mathematics for pupils in Key Stages 1 and 2 and a separate Assessment Document in relation to pupils in Key Stage 3 for these skills. There will also be two separate Using Information and Communications Technology Assessment Documents (one for Key Stages 1 and 2 and one for Key Stage 3).

It stipulates that it is the duty of the principal of the school to make arrangements for: an assessment of the Level of Progression achieved by each pupil who is in the final year of Key Stage 1, 2 or 3 in relation to the cross-curricular skills and for the results to be reported to CCEA in such form and by such date as it may require.

A number of important exemptions to the requirements of this Order are set out. It does not have effect in relation to a statemented pupil assessed as having severe learning difficulties. Nor does it apply where a pupil has been exempted from any of the requirements of Articles 5 to 9 of the 2006 Order by Article 14 (Development work and experiments), 15 (Exceptions by regulations), 16 (Pupils with statements of special educational needs) or 17 (Temporary exemptions for individual pupils) of the 2006 Order.

4.12   The Key Stage Assessment arrangements were designed to be both formative (assessment **for** learning) and summative (assessment **of** learning) and to be used for a range of different purposes at different levels as follows.

- **Pupil level**: as an integral part of the work of a teacher. This includes both assessment of learning, for example checking that a pupil has reached the expected standard, and assessment for learning, where assessment is used to inform teaching and learning, to identify where a pupil (or a group of pupils) is underachieving.

- **School level**: to allow school leaders to assess the performance of their schools, and to identify gaps and areas for development. Schools can benchmark themselves against others in similar circumstances, set targets and deliver actions to drive school improvement.

- **System level**: providing parents and carers, the public and government information on the standards being achieved in return for the public money being invested in them. It supports the identification of what is working well and where improvement is needed.

4.13   A system of robust central moderation by CCEA was introduced alongside the current arrangements in 2012/13, to provide confirmation that the standards which schools were applying in assessing their pupils' work were appropriate. This was introduced partly because of a past lack of confidence among teachers and school leaders about the consistency of approach to assessing pupils, but also because of the dual use of assessment information for system and school accountability.

Challenges

4.14   There were, however, from the outset significant challenges to the effective implementation of these arrangements, with trade union and wider professional opposition. From 2013/14, the teaching unions included industrial action in respect of assessment arrangements as part of their wider Action Short of Strike dispute.

4.15   Stakeholder opposition to the current arrangements has focussed on key issues: the perceived bureaucratic burden on teachers of the assessment exercises; the moderation process when first introduced; and the claim that the primary diagnostic and formative purpose of teacher assessment has been compromised by its dual use for accountability.

4.16   There are also significant concerns about the Levels of Progression. The Levels are too broad, resulting in pupils of very different ability falling into the same level and pupils remaining on the same level for a long period of time. This means they are not a stringent measure of progression – which calls into question the value of the levels as a tool for formative assessment. Some practitioners have reported introducing "levelling within the levels" so that they had a more stringent indicator that was reflective of the ability of individual learners.

4.17 There is also too much ambiguity or subjectivity in the level descriptors leading to widely different interpretations. This in turn raises concerns over the reliability of the levels and whether they mean the same thing across schools. As CCEA highlighted:

"…a general lack of familiarity with and value given to levels, assessment requirements and external processes such as moderation (original emphasis). There are concerns about the accuracy and reliability of teacher assessment and the breadth of the Levels of Progression, as well as the availability of reliable and robust assessment information" (CCEA, 2019, p.8).

4.18 In the period prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department listened to the views and concerns of the Northern Ireland Teacher Council and took steps to address its concerns around workload. For example, the requirement for individual pupil portfolios was removed from moderation as was the requirement for assessment tasks to be submitted for approval to CCEA.

4.19 Nonetheless, widespread opposition continued, indicating some of the more fundamental issues around the multiple purposes of the assessments had critically undermined current arrangements. It was clear before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic that Key Stage assessment arrangements were not meeting their intended purposes. As set out in the table below, only a minority of schools were reporting their outcomes to CCEA, and a negligible number were participating in the external moderation process.

Table 5 – Return of Key Stage outcomes (% of schools)

Year	Primary	Post-Primary
2012/13	77%	94%
2013/14	29%	52%
2014/15	20%	40%
2015/16	30%	66%
2016/17	16%	24%
2017/18	14%	32%

4.20 In addition, there was significant anecdotal evidence that many schools were simply not conducting Key Stage assessments at all and in turn not reporting outcomes to parents and carers. The Department of Education initiated a review of Key Stage assessment in 2019, but this was suspended during the pandemic.

4.21 During the pandemic, the Department formally disapplied statutory assessment in 2020/21 and 2021/22 due to ongoing school closures. The Department continued to suspend arrangements in 2022/23 and 2023/24 to reduce the burden on schools and because of the limited participation in arrangements.

4.22   As an interim measure in 2024/25, the Department began again to gather information at a system level on pupil performance in literacy and numeracy. Pupils in Years 4, 7 and 10 were assessed in Communication and Using Mathematics without moderation to ensure limited workload.

4.23   In 2024/25, there was a clear increase in participation which may be due to the ending of industrial action, no requirement for moderation, and a reduction in the areas assessed. However, it should also be noted that the data submitted to CCEA represents un-moderated teacher-assessed Levels of Progression. This along with response bias brings into question the veracity of the data submitted to CCEA and makes comparisons across and within schools problematic.

System-level check

4.24   In March 2025, the Department announced interim arrangements for statutory Key Stage assessment for a three-year period from the 2025/26 academic year. There will be a system level check in literacy and numeracy via written assessments designed and marked by CCEA.

4.25   System-level sample assessments are large-scale evaluations of pupil performance conducted at the national level. These assessments are designed to measure the effectiveness of educational systems without evaluating individual pupils or schools directly. Instead, they gather data from a representative sample of pupils to draw conclusions about overall educational quality, performance trends and educational policies.

4.26   The Northern Ireland assessments will be taken by a representative sample of pupils in their final year of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. Pupils will sit the first assessments in early March 2026. Outcomes will only be published at system level and will not be used to measure individual school performance nor published at pupil or school level. This will provide comparable information on standards in literacy and numeracy, and data will be available to schools for their own benchmarking purposes if they wish to have it. All Irish-medium schools and pupils in Years 4, 7 and 10 will participate in assessments each year over the three years. This approach will ensure appropriate and accurate data is available to inform the future development and support of Irish-medium education.

4.27   It is hoped that these end of Key Stage sample tests will have higher levels of reliability, validity and comparability, and remove an element of subjectivity which might inadvertently occur in teacher judgement. It also minimises bureaucracy and workload for schools. The tests will be very low stakes at school-level meaning there will be no pressure on schools to engage in test preparation.

4.28   Such system sample checks are not, however, without their issues. They suffer from an absence of any direct motivational wash-back into school and pupil performance. They do not provide feedback to parents and carers on each child, nor do they link with and inform teachers' assessments of their own pupils in the classroom. They effectively divorce system level accountability from 'in classroom' assessment practice.

Conclusion and key points

4.29   The statutory assessment framework in Northern Ireland has faced prolonged disruption and declining participation over the past decade, largely due to industrial action and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the system has lacked consistent, reliable national data on pupil performance at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 since 2013.

4.30   While the Levels of Progression were designed to support both formative and summative assessment, significant concerns emerged around workload, the moderation process and the tension between assessment for learning and assessment for accountability. These issues undermined confidence in the arrangements, leading to widespread non-compliance and ultimately the suspension of statutory assessment during and beyond the pandemic.

4.31   In response, the Department introduced interim system-level sample assessments from 2025/26 to restore a measure of national monitoring while minimising workload for schools. These low-stakes tests aim to provide more reliable and comparable information on literacy and numeracy standards without linking results to individual schools. However, while sample assessments can strengthen system-level accountability, they do not directly support classroom practice or provide individual pupil feedback, creating a disconnect between national monitoring and everyday teaching and learning.

4.32   Overall, while interim measures provide a pathway to re-establishing system-level insight, this chapter highlights the need for a long-term, coherent assessment model that balances reliability, stakeholder confidence, manageable workload and meaningful support for teaching and learning.

4.33   The combination of industrial action, absence of inspection and inconsistent statutory assessment leads to the position where the Department invests over £3bn in education annually with little evidence to demonstrate whether the expenditure is being used to best effect, is targeted appropriately, or is achieving the desired impact. Northern Ireland therefore lacks access to very basic information on pupil, school and system performance.

4.34   Re-establishing a clear and robust assessment framework is central to ensuring an effective education system in Northern Ireland demonstrating value to government, taxpayer and parents and carers as well as providing information that is crucial to monitoring the needs of pupils and teachers.

Chapter 5:
Assessment in Northern Ireland schools

Introduction

5.1 Assessment plays a central and deeply embedded role in the day-to-day life of schools in Northern Ireland. Across all phases and sectors, teachers demonstrate a strong professional commitment to using assessment to understand pupils' learning, support progression and inform classroom practice. The Panel's engagement with schools, teachers, sectoral bodies and Initial Teacher Education providers revealed a system in which assessment is widely valued, frequently applied, and, in many respects, used with considerable skill.

5.2 At the same time, the absence of a trusted statutory assessment system has created variability in practice, driving widespread reliance on commercial assessment tools and contributing to inconsistency in how assessment information is used within and between schools. This chapter summarises current practice, explores assessment culture, and draws together insights from the Panel's teacher survey to highlight both the strengths and challenges of the present system.

A strong assessment culture

5.3 The Panel had the opportunity to engage with and consult with a broad range of stakeholders including school visits, meetings with key arm's length bodies and Initial Teacher Education providers, a teachers' survey, and a call for evidence. The Panel experienced openness, transparency, engagement, professionalism and enthusiasm from all they met.

5.4 This engagement with stakeholders was highly informative and made clear the commitment in Northern Ireland both to the wide application of assessment and the effective use of the outcomes of assessment.

5.5 A very strong assessment culture was apparent in many schools with practitioners being very clear that a key purpose of assessment is to support and inform further learning. There was an understanding that assessment should also contribute to cohort development and progression in addition to supporting individual pupils. The nuanced way in which some individual schools utilised assessment to support progression in their context was also very clear.

5.6 This positive assessment culture was enhanced by evidence of considered assessment processes within a range of schools whereby there was clear thought and consideration given to the nature of assessments used, the timing of the assessments, the process for assessment implementation, the mechanisms used for assessment analysis and how

that analysis informed future learning opportunities for individuals as well as class and year group cohorts. More needs to be done to disseminate this excellent practice to all schools.

5.7   There was also clear evidence of the creation of assessment structures to support the use and development of assessment within schools. Many schools, large and small, had in place assessment co-ordinators who play a key role in advocating for the implementation of excellent assessment practices within their respective schools. The implementation of such structures in all schools would further enhance education delivery.

5.8   Assessment is a daily lived experience in many schools in Northern Ireland, with strong evidence of ongoing continuous informal assessment across the curriculum and professional judgements being made constantly by teachers and other staff to support next steps in learning for all pupils. The regular use of 'assessment check-ups' was also well evidenced, for example in relation to phonics and times tables. The importance of this aspect of assessment is well recognised among the profession.

5.9   There is a strong appetite for assessment within many schools and very clear recognition that assessment practice can support schools in their wider work. This is apparent in the widespread nuanced use of commercial assessments across many schools. There is also clear appreciation in many schools of the importance and value of high quality, detailed assessment reports from these commercial assessments.

5.10   Within the Irish-medium sector, there is a very strong appetite for linguistically appropriate and curriculum-aligned assessments. There is a deep commitment by staff to having tailored assessment for Irish-medium settings that is tightly aligned to the needs of the curriculum.

5.11   Many schools in Northern Ireland are very effective in the use of assessment data. Schools use internally generated assessment data to identify individual pupil, whole class and year group targets. Pupil level assessment is used both formatively to inform teaching and learning, and summatively to evaluate whether pupils have reached individual targets at key points in the year. The Panel witnessed effective assessment practice in many schools.

5.12   A remarkable feature of the Northern Ireland practice was the continuity of assessment practice even during periods of political uncertainty and industrial action with teachers maintaining their assessment approaches because they recognised the benefits to pupils, schools, parents and carers.

Commercial assessments

5.13   The lack of stakeholder buy-in to current statutory assessment arrangements has contributed to the widespread use of commercial assessments by schools. Many schools use standardised tests to provide diagnostic assessment results annually. This baseline is used to track pupil progress and to inform learning strategies and curriculum decisions.

Schools often map these outcomes against a measure of the child's ability in to order to identify underachievement.

5.14   The Panel also heard of the implications of purchasing commercially produced tests; with substantial sums of money being allocated by schools in the primary and post primary phases of education; in a climate where many schools are in a deficit budgetary position, this is not a healthy situation.

5.15   There is no definitive figure covering the amount spent on externally produced assessments by schools in Northern Ireland. However, if we take the lowest amount spent on externally produced tests the Panel heard from our conversations with schools of £4,000 and multiply this by the approximately 1,000 primary and post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, even at this very conservative level alone, schools are spending well in excess of four million pounds per year (NIRSA 2022/23).

5.16   Even apart from the cost and the burden on a school's budget, the heavy reliance on commercial standardised tests for assessment presents a range of challenges. First, schools administer and use these tests in different ways and at different times in the school year. Second, some schools routinely report the outcomes to parents and carers, others do not. Third, outcomes are not routinely transferred between primary and post-primary schools. Fourth, the commercial tests are not explicitly aligned to the curriculum in Northern Ireland, so the outcomes of these tests cannot be accurately combined for system level evaluation.

5.17   Since 2017/18, CCEA has been developing and piloting Computer Adaptive Assessments for literacy and numeracy. The Panel recognises how the underinvestment in the Northern Ireland education system is manifest in the slow progress in the development of these assessments. However, through the TransformED programme, the Department has committed to investing in the upscaling and the roll-out of CCEA's Computer Adaptive Assessments to inform effective formative and diagnostic assessment in schools and as a free-to-schools alternative to commercial assessments.

Views on assessment in Northern Ireland

5.18   The Panel launched a teacher survey on 2 October 2025 which was open for responses until 16 October 2025. In total 912 responses were received. The purpose of the survey was to gather teacher views on the current nature of assessment in schools and the desirability and scope of potential measures for change. The survey was publicised via social media and letters were issued to all teachers and schools.

5.19   The survey received very high levels of engagement across most questions, offering a rich picture of assessment practices and perspectives across Northern Ireland's education system. Respondents came from all school sectors, with the largest proportion drawn from the post-primary phase, including both grammar and secondary schools. A substantial number of primary school teachers also participated, alongside smaller but valuable contributions from special schools, early years providers and EOTAS settings.

5.20   Respondents were generally highly experienced: almost nine in ten had been teaching for over a decade, with only a small minority in their first five years of the profession. Over half held leadership or specialist roles, such as senior leadership, heads of department, SENCOs or literacy/numeracy coordinators. Taken together, the respondent profile provides a strong, system-wide perspective on assessment.

5.21   Across sectors, teachers reported using a wide range of assessment approaches. Teacher-designed formative assessment and summative tests remain the dominant tools in classroom practice, followed by observation and peer/self-assessment.

5.22   Many schools reported using the commercial standardised assessments highlighted earlier, with the GL suite (Progress Test in English (PTE), Progress Test in Maths (PTM) and Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT)) emerging as the most commonly used assessments. In many schools, these assessments are administered annually, although some use them more frequently. Where such assessments are used, teachers mainly rely on them to track progress over time, plan interventions for pupils who require support, identify gaps in learning and inform planning. These patterns reflect a clear emphasis on pupil-level diagnostic and planning functions.

5.23   Most respondents indicated that they found commercial assessments useful to varying degrees. Although a significant minority did not answer the question, the overwhelming majority of those who did respond judged commercial assessments to hold value in their practice.

5.24   Teachers were also asked to give their views on possible future statutory arrangements. Support for introducing a national baseline check was substantial at primary level though there was a significant minority of unsure or opposed respondents. There was stronger consensus at the start of secondary education, where nearly two-thirds of respondents favoured its introduction.

5.25   Views on the Levels of Progression were clear. Most respondents did not believe these should continue to be used, and the free-text comments reinforced this sentiment. Only a small proportion favoured retaining them.

5.26   When asked which subjects should be included in statutory assessment, respondents overwhelmingly selected literacy/English and numeracy/mathematics. These two subjects were endorsed much more frequently than any others and continued to dominate, even when additional commentaries were taken into account. Science, ICT/digital skills, and Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities attracted moderate support, while humanities, arts and languages were among the least frequently selected. Free-text suggestions tended to echo these patterns, occasionally highlighting cross-curricular skills or STEM-related domains, but in general reinforcing the centrality of literacy and numeracy.

5.27   The survey also explored teachers' use of assessment outcomes. Respondents reported using assessment information primarily to inform planning and teaching; to identify learners who would benefit from additional support or interventions; to track progress

over time; and to support whole-school data analysis. While assessments are used for accountability purposes such as reporting to parents and carers or for inspections, these were cited less frequently. Additional comments highlighted the importance of using assessment outcomes to support teaching quality, track pupil growth and meet individual learning needs.

5.28   Confidence in using assessment data was generally high. Two-thirds of respondents stated that they felt confident interpreting assessment information, and a further third felt somewhat confident. Only a very small minority reported lacking confidence. Teachers also indicated that prior assessment information passed between teachers or schools was useful, with around 90% rating it as moderately, very or extremely useful. This suggests that while the system lacks consistency in the sharing of information, where it is provided it is valued by practitioners.

5.29   Despite this confidence, responses revealed gaps in formal professional development on assessment. Almost half of all respondents reported receiving no assessment training during their Initial Teacher Education, and only a small minority had received in-depth preparation. Post-qualification professional development was more common, with roughly three-quarters having received at least some assessment-related professional development. Among those who did receive training, most found it useful, though frequently only moderately so. This points to a long-standing inconsistency in assessment training at both initial and early-career stages.

5.30   When asked what additional professional development or support would help them use assessment more effectively, teachers offered a wide range of suggestions. The most frequent requests related to practical professional development on analysing data, understanding different types of assessment, using commercial tools more effectively and applying assessment for learning techniques. Teachers also emphasised the need for support with SEN and differentiated assessment, moderation experience and greater clarity on expectations. Time for analysing and discussing data was also highlighted as a persistent challenge.

5.31   The final open-ended questions invited broader reflections on assessment. Responses were wide-ranging but several clear themes emerged. Many teachers expressed concerns about excessive workload and the volume of assessment currently expected. Others questioned the validity or usefulness of certain approaches, arguing that assessment should be meaningful, proportionate and aligned with teaching rather than an additional burden. Some advocated for more external marking or clearer system-wide guidance, while others highlighted the importance of informal observational assessment and everyday teacher judgement. There were also comments on the role of technology, including both concerns and opportunities relating to the increasing use of AI.

5.32   Overall, the survey provides a detailed picture of current assessment practice and professional attitudes across Northern Ireland.

Conclusion and key points

5.33   Assessment in Northern Ireland is characterised by a strong professional culture and a deep commitment to supporting pupils' learning. Teachers use a wide range of assessment approaches and generally feel confident interpreting assessment information. Many schools demonstrate thoughtful, structured and effective assessment processes, supported by a commitment to continuous improvement, even amid challenging circumstances.

5.34   However, the lack of a trusted statutory framework has created variability, driven reliance on commercial products and contributed to inconsistency in how assessment information is used and shared. Teachers also face gaps in training, concerns about workload and a desire for clearer expectations and more coherent system-wide arrangements.

5.35   There is strong support for curriculum-aligned statutory assessments that prioritise literacy and numeracy, reduce unnecessary burden and provide reliable, actionable information. The development and planned expansion of CCEA's Adaptive Assessments presents a significant opportunity to enhance consistency, support diagnostic assessment and reduce financial pressure on schools.

5.36   Taken together, these insights highlight both the strengths of Northern Ireland's assessment practices and clear areas where reform could strengthen coherence, capacity and educational outcomes for all learners.

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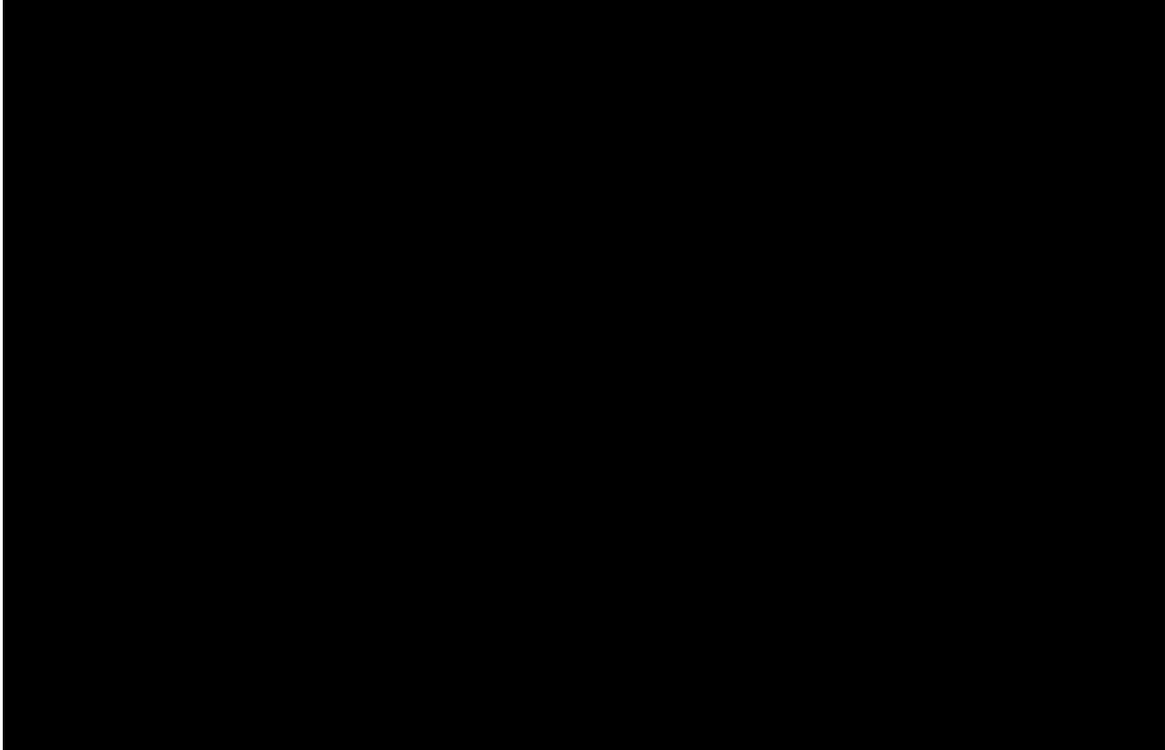
Chapter 6:
Wider international context and comparisons

Introduction

6.1   This chapter explores international evidence from a range of high-performing and rapidly improving education systems to identify lessons of relevance for Northern Ireland. By examining assessment policy, curriculum alignment, data use, and professional learning across key jurisdictions, including Estonia, Finland, Hong Kong, the Republic of Ireland, New Zealand, Portugal, Singapore and Sweden, the chapter highlights the approaches that underpin strong educational performance and equity, as well as the challenges that emerge when coherence or standards weaken.

6.2   The international comparisons presented here provide important context for the Independent Review of Assessment. They illustrate how different systems use assessment to support learning, monitor national standards, guide early intervention and inform policy development. They also show the consequences of reform when it is not grounded in evidence or is insufficiently supported by professional learning and system-wide clarity. The insights from these jurisdictions help to frame the key considerations for Northern Ireland as it seeks to design an assessment system that is coherent, equitable and future-facing.

Summary of international comparisons

Estonia

6.3   Estonia is the top European performer in PISA. Recent PISA test results show that schools that teach in Estonian did better than those with Russian as their study language. The results also suggest that basic education in Russian is a full academic year behind its Estonian counterpart.

6.4   Additionally, issues around assessment in Russian speaking schools mirror the issues for assessment in the Irish-medium sector in Northern Ireland. It highlights the need to secure linguistically appropriate assessments for Irish-medium pupils and to acquire robust data to develop further understanding of the impact of immersive language education on curriculum progression.

6.5   The curriculum for pre-school childcare institutions includes the development of general skills (personal, social play and learning skills) along with development in seven areas of learning and teaching including mathematics and language development. This is bolstered by provision for all children attending pre-school childcare institutions to have guaranteed access to speech therapists and special education teachers.

6.6   Progression of a child through pre-school provision is recognised via certification. Before entering grade 1, children take a brief readiness assessment to help teachers understand their developmental progress and identify those needing extra support. This highlights the importance of the early identification of pupils' educational needs, and the role of assessment in doing this.

6.7   Sample-based tests are given to about 10% of pupils after Grade 3 (in Estonian and mathematics) and after Grade 6 (in Estonian, mathematics, and one rotating subject). Although intended for system monitoring rather than individual evaluation, many teachers choose to give these tests to all pupils to track learning.

6.8   The importance of a coherent assessment framework and professional confidence in assessment outcomes is an important facet of this review. In Estonia, about 1% of national government funding for teachers' salaries is reserved for professional learning. Municipalities can add extra funding if they choose. Around two-thirds of this funding supports national education priority programmes, offered free to teachers by universities or other providers. The rest goes directly to schools to support professional learning and their School Development Plans.

6.9   The importance of professional learning is well recognised in Estonia and by the Panel: Initial Teacher Education, early career development and ongoing professional development are the cornerstones of the successful development of educational assessment practice in Northern Ireland.

6.10   In reference to Estonia and Ireland, the European School Education Platform (2024) states: "*These countries serve as guiding examples, showing policymakers the importance of prioritising teacher support and equitable access to education to offer a brighter future to European students.*"

Finland

6.11   Finland displays widespread use of targeted and effective formal assessment to support pupils at risk of falling behind. This is paired with using information from assessment to design special support where needed. Defined elements of learning in mathematics and literacy feature as an essential element of early years provision. The importance of robust data to support effective early intervention is a key learning point.

6.12   There is clear evidence that educational attainment has declined in Finland in recent years. Associated with that decline have been shifts in curriculum policy (to less specification in the national curriculum), shifts in governance (to more devolved curriculum-making in schools), major structural changes (school closures and funding reductions), and pressures from societal and economic changes. The Panel has examined these in detail, noting the important differences in Finland's practices during its previous improvement and its current decline.

6.13 Assessment policy and practice have remained remarkably stable, despite the major changes in governance of education and the precise arrangements for accountability. Finland's assessment policy and practice provide the state with information on national educational standards, allows monitoring of the performance of municipalities and schools, and provides information for parents. It is focussed on measuring progress and supporting learning and drives equity by highlighting pupils at risk of low attainment.

6.14 Providing information of this quality is important to ensure that all stakeholders can maintain an accurate understanding of the current educational landscape and base their actions on reliable evidence

Hong Kong

6.15 Hong Kong has shown a constantly high performance in PISA though with more recent fluctuations. Accountability is high in the Hong Kong education system and there is a strong culture of valuing education.

6.16 Support and direction for schools is extensive with access to centrally produced curriculum support materials, cross phase transfer information, and good quality continuous professional development.

6.17 The importance of professional development and school support, in effective and variable forms, is well appreciated by the review Panel and very relevant to Northern Ireland.

6.18 The school curriculum covers all phases and is carefully aligned from kindergarten to upper secondary education. The curriculum is constantly under review to ensure up to date content and is aligned to state provided assessments. This alignment of curriculum and assessment is very important in the current educational context of Northern Ireland.

6.19 There is a publicly stated emphasis on low stakes testing and a territory wide sampling regime to moderate and develop an understanding of expected standards. Territory-wide System Assessments (TSA) are used to sample standards across Hong Kong and provide a comparator for schools. Territory-wide assessments are not used to rank schools and schools are not allowed to use the outcomes in any form of promotion. The importance of the purpose and use of statutory assessment is a key consideration for the Panel.

6.20 Schools from outside the designated sample have the option to take the TSA. Schools have access to standardised assessments and the facility to use items for localised assessments. Schools accessing data and reports from the TSA to inform teaching and learning is central to quality assurance and is used as a comparator with system wide performance. This beneficial school support feature of the assessment system is acknowledged by the Panel.

Republic of Ireland

6.21   There is very clear evidence that education policy and practice within the Republic of Ireland changed partly because of the 2009 PISA shock. It is also clear that the Republic of Ireland has benefitted from the use of International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSAs) to sustain a clear focus on appropriate levels of outcomes for all pupils and inform improvement. The benefit of a Northern Ireland long-term commitment to the prolonged use of ILSAs is acknowledged by the Panel.

6.22   The Republic of Ireland's significant policy changes from 2009 have secured a consistently strong level of performance in PISA and other ILSAs but more importantly have identified key areas for further development so that all pupils within the nation can attain to their highest level.

6.23   The benefit of regular, data-informed policy reviews is a well-recognised feature of strong performing education systems. In the Republic of Ireland, the use of national assessments, educational research and ILSAs has provided the required data to inform target setting and contribute to the development of the new National Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy (2024–2033). The use of triangulation data to inform practical actions is a key feature of the education system in the Republic of Ireland.

6.24   The recent experience of the Republic of Ireland has provided beneficial lessons in relation to national standardised assessments, teacher professional learning, the effective participation in ISLAs, the implementation and review of national strategies and most importantly the effective utilisation of data from all the above to inform future practice so that all pupils are the beneficiaries.

6.25   In addition, those areas where the Republic of Ireland continues to focus on improving such as school type and male/female performance variations are points that this review needs to reflect on so that the outworkings of the review provide the best recommendations to promote the success of all children in all schools in Northern Ireland.

New Zealand

6.26   There is very clear evidence that education policy and practice within New Zealand have changed because of its recent downwards PISA trajectory – notably the 2022 outcomes but also because of their ongoing national monitoring. It is very clear that New Zealand has benefitted from the use of ILSAs to sustain a focus on appropriate levels of outcomes for all pupils and inform improvements as required.

6.27   New Zealand's fundamental current educational policy changes are of significant interest to Northern Ireland as they can provide a current comparator to our proposed changes. The trajectory of New Zealand in respect to a knowledge rich curriculum and enhanced data usage allied to assessment change will be of great interest and value to Northern Ireland policy makers.

6.28 In addition to the planned changes that New Zealand is embarking upon, there are several current features of the New Zealand educational landscape that are of particular interest to this review, including the deeply embedded commitment to early years' education in the 0–4 age range. This focus on the importance of quality early years provision is an important point for the Northern Ireland system.

6.29 The creation of high-quality data reports made available by a research division within the Ministry of Education is also particularly noteworthy. This facility delivers high-quality and contemporaneous research and reporting on various aspects of the education system. This is of interest and value to the current Northern Ireland review.

Portugal

6.30 Between 2000 and 2015, Portugal delivered the highest improvement scores in science and mathematics and the third highest improvement scores in reading in PISA. The increase during the 2000–2015 window is regarded as real (Nunes et al 2024) and is of interest to the Northern Ireland Review due to the radical changes in statutory assessment in Portugal during that time. The subsequent decline in results does not derive solely from the Covid-19 impact rather it coincides with moves away from statutory testing with strongly linked standards based on curriculum requirements.

6.31 Portugal illustrates the vital role of well-designed statutory assessment in raising standards and improving equity. It particularly underlines the value of data from statutory tests in identifying regional variations in educational outcomes and between-school differences, enabling the state to develop support strategies for schools and regions.

6.32 The Northern Ireland review notes the value of coherence between statutory assessments and curriculum content to support pupil progression.

Singapore

6.33 Assessment permeates the Singapore system: there have been successive evolutionary changes to arrangements, based on solid evaluation programmes. The jurisdiction has a history of data-driven evaluation of education and rapid evidence-based action on those evaluation insights. It makes use of new, emerging theory in education. Witness for example the development of Singapore mathematics, and more recently approaches to formative assessment, including shaping professional practice regarding discourse in the classroom.

6.34 Assessment features in learning materials and is very influential in day-to-day practice. Assessments in learning materials tend to be of high quality: curriculum-linked and driven by theory, such as variation theory (Baskoro 2021).

6.35   National examinations, tied to post-primary educational routing, are very high stakes and this has driven increased stress and pressure which is considered by both society and government to exceed acceptable levels (Poh 2018). This has led to major structural reforms. It should be noted that these reforms are not driven solely by issues of stress but were stimulated by the need for response to a raft of issues, particularly growing inequality in educational outcomes.

6.36   Assessment policy in all elements of education is closely scrutinised from classroom practice, through assessment in learning materials, to national examinations. This may be considered intrusive and 'top down' but is better described as 'steering through paternalism from close proximity' (Tan & Dimmock 2014). The careful balance between what professionals and the wider public find acceptable, coupled with a commitment to evaluation-driven and evidence-based policy has led to sustained and incremental improvement.

6.37   The Singapore example informs the need for the proposed Northern Ireland assessment system to be balanced, fine-tuned and consistently reflective of impact so that the outcomes are beneficial for pupils, parents, schools and the wider education system.

Sweden

6.38   Key features evident in the Swedish education system are the importance of coherence across curriculum, assessment, inspection and learning materials. The value of national assessment in establishing national standards and avoiding serious grade inflation in the system is a noticeable element of the Swedish system, and a key response to the breakaway inflation caused by a reduction in checks on standards, which resulted in a national crisis in education.

6.39   The main learning for the Northern Ireland review is the importance of adequate data on standards and coherence when trying to improve outcomes via curricular and assessment transformation, and the critical role of national standards in controlling grade inflation and protecting educational standards.

Conclusion and key points

6.40   International evidence illustrates that the world's strongest education systems share several common features that are directly relevant to Northern Ireland. Across Estonia, Finland, Hong Kong, the Republic of Ireland, New Zealand, Portugal, Singapore and Sweden, the most successful approaches rest on coherent alignment between curriculum, assessment and pedagogy; on strong and continuous professional learning; and on the robust and purposeful use of data to monitor progress, support early intervention and drive equity. These systems also demonstrate the power of clear communication and transparency in sustaining public trust, as well as the importance of regular review and refinement of assessment policy.

6.41   At the same time, the international examples warn that performance can deteriorate when coherence breaks down, when standards drift, when statutory assessments are removed without adequate alternatives, or when reforms are introduced without strong evidence or sufficient support for teachers. Several jurisdictions, including Finland, Portugal and New Zealand, show how reductions in curriculum clarity, weakened national monitoring and underinvestment in professional development can contribute to stagnation or decline. For Northern Ireland, these examples underline that stability, clarity of purpose and investment in teacher capability are essential if assessment reforms are to be effective.

6.42   Taken together, the international lessons point towards a future assessment system in Northern Ireland that is rigorous but balanced, coherent, not burdensome, and focused on both excellence and equity. They highlight the need for a strong early years' foundation, high-quality data across all phases, and a teacher workforce equipped with the skills and confidence to use assessment to support learning. Above all, they emphasise the value of a system that is transparent, evidence-driven and responsive, with a clear commitment to the progress of every learner.

6.43   A central message emerging from the international review is the importance of securing coherence across curriculum, assessment and accountability. High-performing jurisdictions such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Estonia and Sweden demonstrate that when these elements are aligned, teachers have clarity, learners benefit from consistent expectations, and system-level standards remain stable. Where coherence was weakened such as in Finland's shift towards a less specified curriculum or Portugal's move away from statutory testing, attainment declined and inequities widened. Northern Ireland must, therefore, ensure that its future assessment system is designed in close partnership with curriculum reform and provides clear, dependable signals about progression and standards.

6.44   Embedded throughout the international evidence is the critical role of high-quality, high-trust data. Systems such as the Republic of Ireland, Finland, New Zealand and Portugal use national assessments, sampling programmes and ILSA participation to maintain an accurate understanding of performance over time. These data sets support early intervention, guide school improvement and help policymakers identify emerging challenges before they become entrenched. The examples show that data does not need to be high stakes or published for individual school accountability to be effective; rather, it must be purposeful, accessible and valued. For Northern Ireland, improved and more consistent system-level data, especially in early years and Key Stage phases, will be essential to support equity, monitor standards and inform national decision-making.

6.45   Another consistently strong theme is the central importance of teacher professionalism. Estonia's long-term investment in professional development, Hong Kong's structured system of curriculum support, Singapore's evidence-driven approach to professional practice, and New Zealand's commitment to a well-qualified early years workforce all demonstrate that assessment literacy is built and sustained through deliberate, well-resourced effort. Assessment reform cannot succeed without teachers who are

confident in formative, diagnostic and summative assessment practices, and who understand how assessment links to curriculum progression. Northern Ireland will need to ensure that professional learning is prioritised in Initial Teacher Education, early career and established career stages if assessment is to drive improvement.

6.46 The international review also reinforces the importance of strong early years provision and early identification of learning needs. Estonia's readiness checks, Finland's early intervention structures and New Zealand's exceptionally high participation rates combined with a highly qualified early years workforce highlight the long-term benefits of strong early years systems. These examples suggest that early years' assessment in Northern Ireland must be strengthened to identify needs early, support smooth transitions and reduce later achievement gaps.

6.47 Finally, another key insight concerns the role of well-designed statutory assessment in promoting equity. Portugal's significant attainment gains between 2000 and 2015 were closely associated with statutory assessments that provided clear standards and allowed the state to identify variations in performance across regions and schools. The Republic of Ireland's post-2009 reforms similarly demonstrate how national assessments, coherent strategies and triangulated data can raise standards and close gaps. The message for Northern Ireland is clear: assessment can be a powerful lever for equity when it is well-aligned, well-used and understood by the system.

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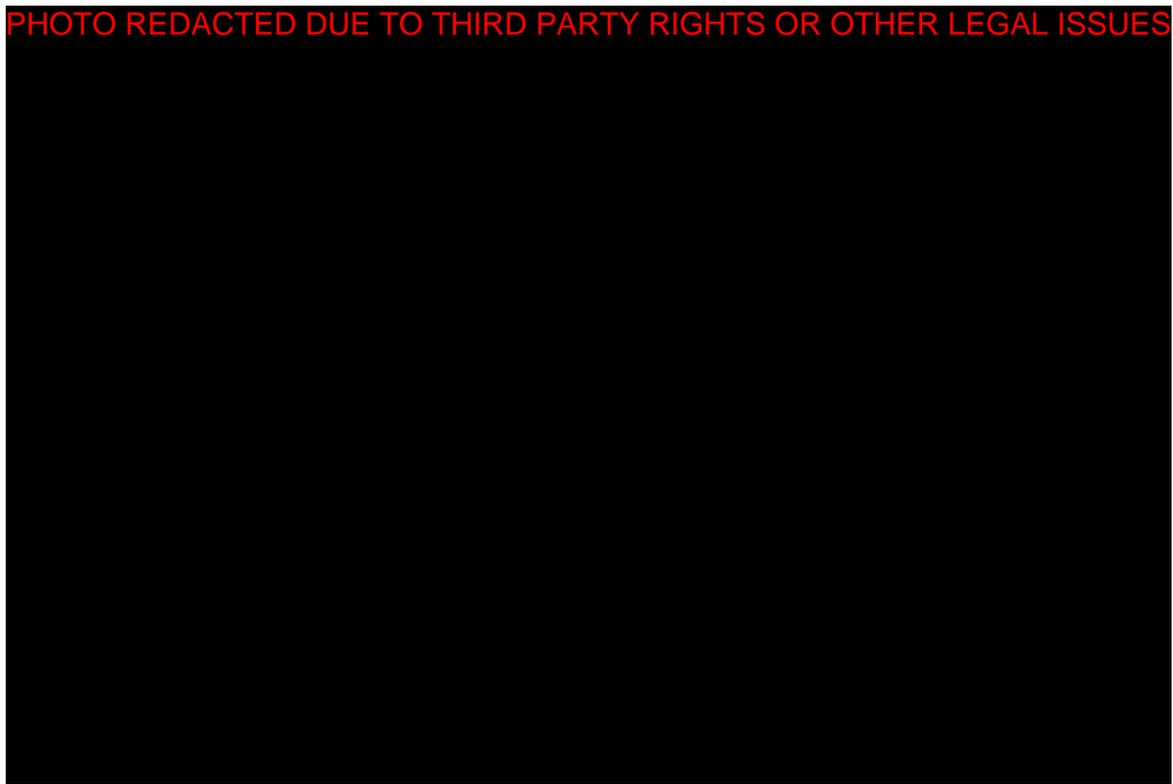
Part 3:
Proposals for reform

Chapter 7:
Assessment principles

Introduction

7.1 The Panel has developed a set of principles to inform and support assessment policy in Northern Ireland. They are designed to be useful at both system and school level. They have been informed by the Teacher Survey and Call for Evidence responses, and also by international standards and best practice in educational assessment. They should be regularly reviewed and updated in response to evolving policy, context and evidence on assessment.

7.2 The role of assessment in supporting learning is increasingly recognised, particularly for its contribution to strengthening cognition and memory (Polack & Miller, 2023; Roediger & Karpicke). As understanding of how learning occurs continues to advance through developments in cognitive science, the relationship between learning and assessment becomes even more critical. Ensuring strong alignment between the two not only enhances the effectiveness of assessment but also maximises its potential to reinforce and deepen learning.

7.3 The proposed assessment principles for Northern Ireland are grounded in this evidence base to ensure that assessment contributes significantly to raising attainment and improving equity, particularly through:

- supporting next steps in learning and progression for individuals, groups and cohorts

- highlighting where further, more detailed diagnostic assessment is required.

- providing data to support schools' planning and development, including professional development.

The Principles

	Principle	What this means
1	**Purpose-driven, inclusive and equitable**	Assessments must have clearly defined purpose(s) and be specifically designed to meet the stated purpose(s). They should generate information that supports the progression and development of every child across all educational pathways. Assessments must be designed to meet the needs of all pupils, including those with additional or exceptional learning requirements.
2	**Growth-orientated attainment**	Assessment should be grounded in the understanding that attainment is the combined result of the effort of the pupil and the quality of education. Assessments should promote learning, progression and growth rather than models of fixed ability or predetermined outcomes.
3	**Curriculum-aligned**	Assessments must align with and support attainment in the statutory curriculum for Northern Ireland.
4	**Fair, transparent and supportive of learning**	Assessment processes and outcomes must be transparent, building trust among pupils, parents, carers, educators and stakeholders. Reporting and data from assessments should be clear, with information that supports accurate interpretation and meaningful use of assessment outcomes. All assessment outcomes must be treated as consequential and used responsibly to enhance learning. Statutory assessment should complement high-quality school-based assessment practices, recognising their essential role in informing teaching and providing a fuller picture of pupil progress.

	Principle	What this means
5	**High technical quality: valid, reliable and free from bias**	Assessments should be based on clear constructs and appropriately sample the intended domain of attainment. They should assess what they are intended to assess, sample adequately from the relevant domain and be used consistently with their intended purpose and design. Assessment outcomes must be consistent and dependable; meaning that similar performance yields similar results across occasions and assessments. Assessment design must not unfairly advantage or disadvantage any individual or group.
6	**Efficient and proportionate**	All assessment processes should be low workload, cost-effective and proportionate providing value for money. They must deliver clear educational benefit relative to the cost, time and effort required.
7	**Agreed service standards**	All assessment providers must meet agreed service standards and ensure a sustainable supply of high-quality statutory assessments. All assessment outcomes and reports should be provided to agreed schedules and service standards. Publicly available information should include technical evaluations, reliability data, participation statistics and other evidence relating to assessment performance. Assessments must be monitored, evaluated and improved regularly. New elements and processes should be introduced only when they demonstrably meet the assessment principles and provide improvement to statutory assessment.
8	**Strong professional competence in assessment**	Initial teacher education and continuing professional development must support teachers to conduct assessment effectively, interpret outcomes accurately and take appropriate action based on the information generated.
9	**Clear communication with parents, carers and stakeholders on assessment and its outcomes**	Parents, carers and stakeholders must receive timely, clear and useful information about the purpose and nature of assessments and their outcomes, enabling them to understand results and support learners effectively.

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Conclusion and key points

7.4   Together the principles set out in this chapter provide a coherent framework for strengthening assessment policy and practice in Northern Ireland. Grounded in international evidence, practitioner insight and emerging understanding from cognitive science, they emphasise clarity of purpose, fairness, technical robustness and strong alignment with the curriculum. They also recognise the essential role of professional competence and effective communication with parents and stakeholders

7.5   Together, these principles promote a system in which assessment is purposeful, and equitable, and in which information is used responsibly to support the progression of every learner.

7.6   Implementing these principles consistently across the system will enhance trust, improve outcomes, and ensure that statutory assessment serves as a positive driver of high-quality teaching and learning. Ongoing review and refinement will be essential to maintain their relevance and effectiveness in a changing educational landscape.

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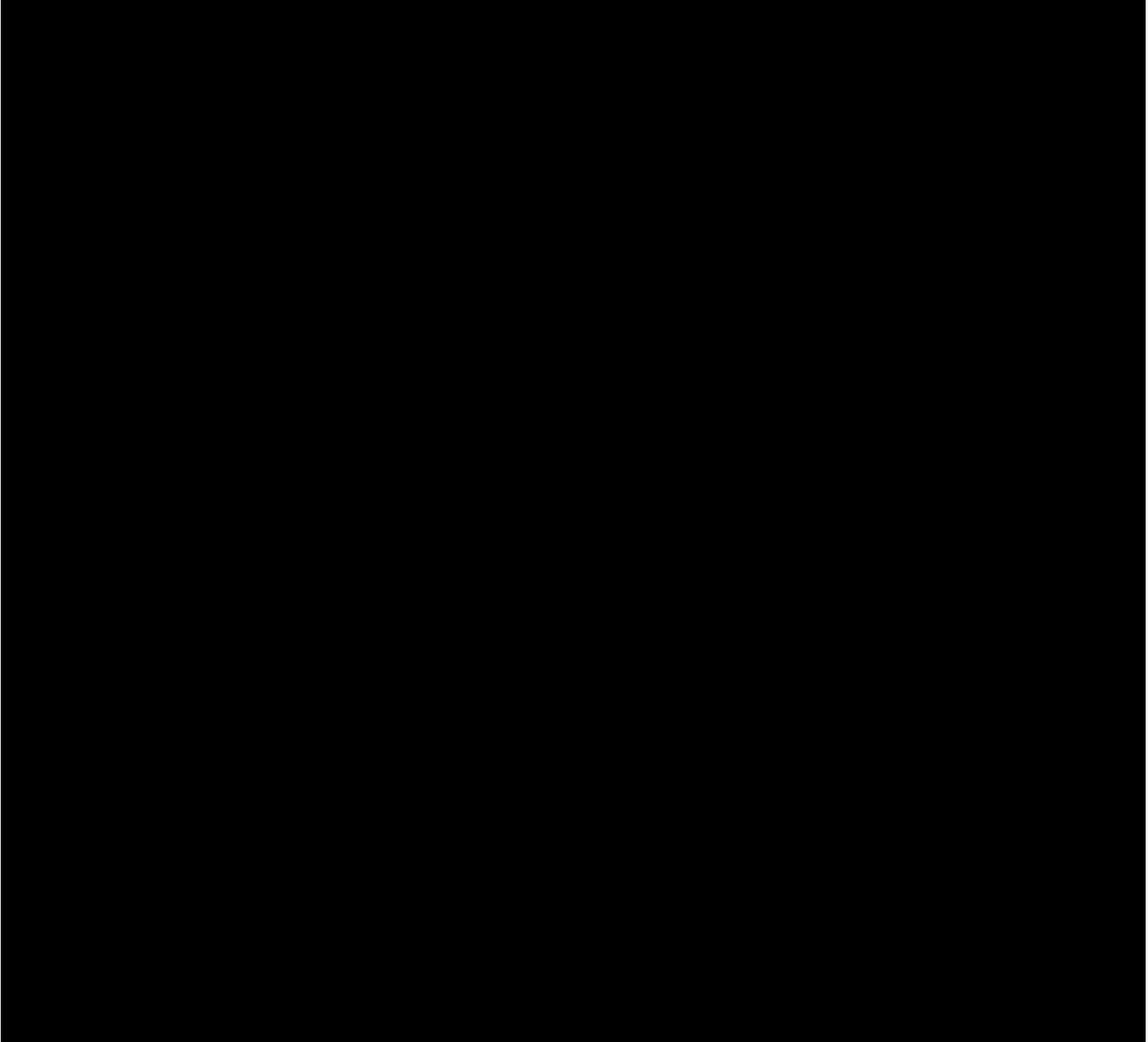
Chapter 8:
The new statutory assessment framework: scope and rationale

Introduction

8.1 The Panel undertook a detailed examination of the key elements required to establish a robust statutory assessment framework for Northern Ireland. In doing so, it applied the assessment principles set out in the previous chapter, ensuring that all recommendations align with the stated purposes of assessment and achieve an appropriate balance between workload, cost, technical quality and educational utility. The focus throughout has been on developing a coherent, high-value system that supports individual learners, assists schools in driving improvement, and provides reliable insight into system-level performance.

8.2 In determining the scope of statutory assessment, the Panel has been deliberately selective. While a broad curriculum is vital for a rich educational experience, statutory assessment must concentrate on those domains that are foundational to learning across the curriculum and that have the strongest evidence base for dependable measurement.

8.3 As such, the Panel recommends high-value low-workload, technically robust assessments in mathematics, literacy and science – areas central to attainment, long-term progression and the ambitions of the TransformED strategy.

8.4 Literacy and mathematics are essential not only for individual learning underpinning attainment across the curriculum but also for wider economic and social development. The focus on science comes from the trajectory of international evidence on attainment in science in Northern Ireland, which shows that it requires additional focus. The new Northern Ireland Curriculum is aiming to substantially renew science attainment in primary phase of education to provide solid progression to the post-primary phase and it is important that this focus is supported by the new statutory assessment framework. Data on Higher Education returns shows high returns of science and maths-related degrees emphasising their value and importance (Royal Society 2024).

8.5 In addition, the Panel emphasises the importance of assessing key aspects of early development, such as communication, early number skills, social development and executive function. Practitioners across Northern Ireland have expressed growing concern about school readiness and the increasing prevalence of developmental challenges. A focused, high-validity baseline check offers an essential opportunity to identify needs early and ensure that the right interventions and support are put in place as soon as possible.

8.6 The Panel also considered the nature and purpose of assessment across the statutory pathway, including the role of tests in reading fluency, comprehension, spelling, punctuation and grammar, and the place of writing within the new statutory framework.

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8.7 Finally, the Panel has also identified specific important areas that should not be included in statutory assessment – such as ICT/digital literacy/computing, creativity and higher-order thinking, and oracy – given the challenges of measuring these domains reliably at scale and the risk of narrowing practice.

Baseline check

8.8 Governments rightly have increasingly focussed on the importance of early years provision. The importance of learning prior to formal schooling has been established through very robust international and UK research, which shows strong links between life outcomes and the quality of early childhood experience from birth to five (Taggart et al 2015; Ofsted 2023, Crenna-Jennings 2018). High-quality early childhood experiences are strongly associated with improved life outcomes across cognitive, social, and emotional domains.

8.9 This is true not only of structured early years programmes such as SureStart – which showed significant beneficial later life impacts such as reduction of later hospitalisation (Canairo et al 2025) – but also for children's everyday experiences from birth. The characteristics of the environment in which very young children grow up – the 'curriculum' of the home – exert a stronger influence on later outcomes than socio-economic status alone (Walberg et al 1994).

8.10 The extent to which early home environments nurture language, interaction, cognitive development and emerging conscientiousness has been shown to predict educational outcomes more powerfully than socio-economic background (O'Connell & Marks 2022). In short, early development matters profoundly: the experiences, relationships and environments of a child's first years shape their long-term learning trajectory and life chances.

8.11 The Nordic countries have a history of a focus on early development (Alexiadou et al 2022). In both Sweden and Finland, there was an extremely long tradition of state requirement that the home would be the location of reading literacy. In Finland the expectation remains: children's and young people's literacy is adults' responsibility, with maternity and child health clinics creating reading routines for families (Lukukeskus Lascentrum 2024).

8.12 The Panel has also noted the importance given to the early years in high performing jurisdictions in the other case studies examined. For example, the pre-school National Curriculum in Estonia and Hong Kong's strong optional pre-school sector and high participation in subsidised kindergartens.

8.13 While there is general awareness of the importance of the first five years of life, public discussion of education tends to be focussed on what is happening in formal schooling; it does not adequately capture the extraordinary extent and impact of early learning from birth to six, which encompasses the emotional, social and cognitive development which forms the identity and abilities of each child.

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8.14 In respect of assessment, there are instruments and measures for both development of individual children and the settings which small children experience in the first years of life. However, there are significant 'boundary issues', and these have great political and social sensitivity: how much direct interest should the state take in early years development and to what extent and how should public policy engage with the quality of early learning in the family? Where should the boundaries of information, direction, support and intervention be? Public policy in this space exists in a complex set of responsibilities and duties shared and spread across different parts of the state including the health, education, welfare, and tax and financial benefit functions (Alexiadou et al 2022).

8.15 It is notable that the Public Health Agency (PHA) for Northern Ireland emphasises an evidence-based view of the critical nature of early development, the PHA website notes: "The early years have recently been called the 'foundation years' because they create the foundations on which the rest of life is built".

8.16 Northern Ireland has established Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education (CCEA 2018), which also is a key reference point for the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI 2025). It is comprehensive in scope regarding the management of early years settings, inter-agency collaboration, and curriculum content across a range of Areas of Learning. These include personal, social and emotional development, physical development and movement, language development, early mathematical experiences, the arts, and 'the World Around Us'. Importantly, the guidance also outlines approaches to gathering evidence on children's development and to sharing information effectively during transitions (CCEA, 2018).

8.17 However, there is scope to strengthen both the management and interpretation of developmental evidence, and strong grounds for introducing a new statutory assessment at the beginning of Year 1 to support a smoother and more informed transition into formal schooling. International research also highlights the importance of ensuring that assessment and information transfer encompass social, emotional and cognitive dimensions in a balanced way, and that some forms of information are more beneficial than others during transition. These considerations are explored further below.

8.18 Early years practitioners raised with us the lower-than-desired collaboration between agencies and staff, and the lack of access to helpful data and information from earlier development checks and observations of development.

8.19 It is essential to understand the breadth and inter-relatedness of early development. Cognitive outcomes associated with mathematics and literacy must develop in tandem with social and emotional development and in tandem with each other:

'…Early childhood and toddlerhood is the developmental stage when children develop at their fastest rate and are most influenced by their environments. This is also when the early literacy and numeracy skills create a foundation for future reading and mathematical skill development: Symbolic and nonsymbolic numeracy skills, assessed before school entry, have been shown to predict later mathematical skills…and early language and literacy skills have been shown to predict reading skills. Reading and mathematical development are

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deeply interconnected processes, and emerging evidence reveals both shared and unshared predictors of reading and mathematical skill development. At school age, the comorbidity of reading difficulties (RD) and mathematical difficulties (MD) is also common: The rate of the cooccurrence of these difficulties has been estimated to be approximately 30–70%…' (Salminen et al 2021, p.1).

8.20   There are many important implications of these research findings. Development of pre-mathematics and pre-literacy in infancy is vital. This occurs earlier than many realise. Support for early development is vital. Early identification of difficulties is possible and not supporting children with emerging early difficulties is likely to translate into later difficulties and increased costs. The implication for statutory assessment is that early assessment is vital, and that schools should have access to information from earlier developmental assessments. Early developmental assessments should result in action when problems are identified, and this action should result in reduction of risk of continued and later emergence of difficulties.

8.21   With growing concerns about children entering school without the expected levels of readiness, the rising prevalence of unmet or late-identified special educational needs, and the inconsistent transfer of developmental information both across education phases and between health and education services, the PHA's contribution to this agenda is increasingly critical. As the PHA notes, its approach is grounded in expanding scientific, neurological and economic evidence showing that creating the right conditions for early childhood development is far more effective – and considerably less costly – than intervening once problems have become established (PHA 2025).

8.22   Assessment of development 0–6 years is laid out in *Northern Ireland Healthy Child, Healthy Future – A Framework for the Universal Child Health Promotion Programme in Northern Ireland* (DoH September 2025). Health visitors lead on early developmental assessments prior to compulsory school age and school nursing teams take the lead for children of compulsory school age. From discussions with practitioners, the Panel's view is these development assessment are not shared consistently nor effectively across services. The assessments and completion rates are set out below.

Assessments and completion rates		
	2014/15	2023/24*
New baby review – first visit	85%	92%
6–8-week review	89%	94%
14–16-week health review	85%	92%
6–9-month contact	75%	91%
1 year health review	49%	62%
2–2 ½ health review	80%	88%

*All these rates suffered a reduction in the form of a dip during and following the COVID pandemic.

8.23   This sequence leads to the 3+ review under the 'Getting Ready for Toddler' programme, directed at collaboration between pre-school providers, parents and carers and health visitors. It includes attention to early recognition of specific needs which require additional service support. There are no published data on the extent and patterns of this referral. Such data might be valuable, given the rise in lack of school readiness, rise in SEN issues in formal education, and the link found in many studies between later emergent problems and earlier signs in social, emotional and cognitive observation and testing.

8.24   For the 3+ check, assessment uses the Ages & Stages Questionnaires: Social-Emotional, Second Edition (ASQ:SE-2), rather than the Ages & Stages Questionnaires, Third Edition (ASQ-3), which is the general developmental screening tool. The details of both assessments are set out below.

ASQ-3 General development	ASQ SE-2 Socio-emotional development
Communication	Self-regulation
Gross motor	Compliance
Fine motor	Social communication
Problem-solving	Adaptive functioning
Personal-social	Autonomy
Self-help and age-appropriate self-care	Affect
To screen for developmental delays	Interaction with people
Cut-off score to signal concern	To screen for socio-emotional challenges
	Cut-off score to signal concern

8.25   The decision to use the ASQ-SE-2 rather than the ASQ-3 is important, since developmental delays are signalled more significantly by the ASQ-3. This use of the ASQ-SE-2 shows a bias away from cognitive outcomes which was highlighted in the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) research (Sylva et al 2006).

8.26   This approach raises several important questions for the design of a potential Year 1 baseline check. A socio-emotional focus has importance given strong evidence that well-being and school connectedness contribute significantly to academic attainment (Cameron et al 2025) and are associated with lower levels of youth anxiety (Raniti et al 2022). However, there remains considerable uncertainty about what happens after the 3+ Review. In particular, there is limited clarity about how many children receive follow-up interventions, the nature and effectiveness of these interventions, their impact on school readiness, behaviour and early attainment, and the extent to which early socio-emotional findings influence later patterns of SEN identification, including type and prevalence. This lack of transparency has important implications for both system improvement and the design of a robust baseline check. In addition, there is evidence that a wider emphasis on cognitive development would be helpful.

8.27   In contrast, the Finnish early years curriculum (statutory) has for many decades included – within a play-based 'holistic' model – an important emphasis on cognitive outcomes as well as socio-emotional outcomes, particularly in literacy and pre-literacy and in maths and pre-maths (Mononen & Aunio 2013).

8.28   Multi agency working and ensuring that information from earlier assessments is always available for later decisions by teachers and schools is recommended by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF 2012). It is a key factor associated with improved pupil adjustment to formal schooling and improved outcomes (OECD 2019). It is a feature of Finnish education (Ahtola et al 2011) and links strongly to their model of high access to special support, accessed by a high proportion of young people (over 30%) at some point in their schooling.

8.29   Interestingly, in Norway, such communication was reported as being much less common than in Finland, with some evidence of negative impacts – 64% reporting no contact, 23% with contact giving information about school programme and the individual child, 8% with information about the school only, and only 6% with information about the child (Cook et al 2017). Where teachers received both types of information, children were one and a half times more likely to be rated as having positive social adjustment at school entry compared to other children (Cook et al 2017).

8.30   This research suggests that:

- There are risks in limiting transfer of information to specific groups, using limited information and using information in the wrong way.
- There should be established protocols for collaborative information sharing.
- The protocols should focus on interpretation of results and effective action linked to specific profiles of outcomes.
- There should be constant research on associations between the results of early assessments and later outcomes in order to refine the protocols.

8.31   This key issue of both doing timely assessments and ensuring valid and helpful use of the outcomes is something which needs to be emphasised in policy and strengthened in practice. The risks of not doing so are significant. In England "…all too often, children who are 'working below' national expectations are given arbitrary labels without a precise assessment" (Grenier 2020), and the English experience of both 'levels' and 'flightpaths' show how equity and attainment can be compromised by poor use of assessment outcomes (Gov.UK 2015; Didau 2019; Burns 2023).

8.32   Outside the ASQ-3 and ASQ-SE tests of development, assessment in early years settings for pupils tends to be observational and reported in a matrix record form; those with already designated SEN needs do tend to have more formal tests and closer recorded observation of development. Although observation across a wide number of dimensions of child development is both justified and possible, there are significant workload and consistency issues in this approach (Education Endowment Fund 2019); this led to a refinement of reporting in the Early Years and Foundation Stage assessments in England (DfE 2023).

8.33   The importance of early developmental checks and good management of information at transition is clear but the assessment processes must be valid, reliable and manageable, and the information produced must possess utility. For a possible baseline check in Year 1 it seems appropriate to retain a pattern of using mainstream assessments for effective and manageable assessment of the majority of young people, and then when concerning profiles of scores emerge, using additional specialist and focussed assessments.

8.34   In considering the introduction of a new baseline check and additional tests in the primary phase, there is important evidence that formal testing in primary does not in itself adversely affect well-being (Jerrim 2021).

8.35   In considering how statutory assessment can support early learning and the first years of schooling the following are vital to bear in mind:

- Importance – there is an extraordinarily strong link between the first few years of development and later outcomes (Taggart et al 2015; Crenna-Jenkins 2018).

- Emotional, social *AND* cognitive development – there has been a tendency in educational policy to associate early development with emotional and social development and under-rate early cognitive development, for example pre-reading and pre-mathematics (Sylva et al 2006).

- Rising problems – there is growing evidence that shifts in family practices and wider economic pressures are negatively affecting young children's early development and learning. This is reflected in declining levels of school readiness, increasing behavioural and developmental difficulties observed in early years and primary settings, and later-emerging special educational needs and reading difficulties (Savanta 2025; Dixon 2023; Catts et al 2013).

- Acting swiftly and effectively – the importance of assessment and using the outcomes well.

8.36   The experience of development of the Reception Baseline Assessment in England (RBA) is extremely important. The development work on the RBA showed that a short teacher administered test could produce reliable information at the level of the individual child, and this could inform action regarding next steps.

8.37   However, the Reception Baseline Assessment in England does not do this despite the potential to do so. Its stated purpose is to furnish the state with a body of information on the starting point of the cohort of young people admitted to the school. It is focussed, therefore, on providing information to the state on the value-added performance of the school. It is not optimised to produce dependable information at the level of every child. Schools are given very limited, overall reports from the data which is generated. The RBA was developed in a very specific political context, which placed acute limitations on the design.

8.38   The experience of designing the RBA showed that a short, well-designed and well-validated test could measure dependably in the key domains of number, calculation, pattern, measurement, language, phonological awareness, and comprehension. The content domains and tasks are set out below.

RBA content domain and tasks

Strand	Sub strand	Task
Mathematics	Number	Select a number of objects from a group
Mathematics	Number	Count a number of objects
Mathematics	Number	Identify numerals
Mathematics	Number	Order numerals
Mathematics	Calculation	Solve number stories involving partitioning and combining quantities
Mathematics	Pattern	Identify and continue patterns
Mathematics	Measure	Order and compare items by size
LCL*	Vocabulary	Name and identify pictures
LCL	Language skills	Repeat sentences containing different grammatical structures
LCL	Phonological awareness	Identify words with the same initial sound
LCL	Phonological awareness	Isolate phonemes from words
LCL	Comprehension	Understand a story

LCL = Literacy, Communication and Language (Gov UK 2025)

8.39   The RBA includes routing through questions to improve pupil experience and measurement. The test also is designed to assess short-term memory, operational complexity, abstractness and motor demand, through rating of the specific questions posed to and answered by each pupil.

8.40   The test is highly scripted with supplied objects for tasks, and a touchscreen device for pupils, with the teacher recording scores on-line for some items and auto-marking for others. The test is not timed but is designed for an administration time of around 20 minutes.

8.41   The initial design included assessment of executive function, giving a wider measure of the development of the child and the structure of their cognition. This would engage with working memory, cognitive flexibility, self-control and inhibition. This was dropped after consideration of the length of the test and concern that it could not stay within the approximately 20-minute timeline, and that the form of observation of executive function might not provide sufficient consistency in application and measurement. However, as outlined above, the test does measure some wider elements of cognition and psychomotor control through rating of the questions answered.

8.42   The information available to parents and carers highlights the following (Gov UK 2025):

What does participating in the RBA mean for my child?
The RBA gives your child valuable one to one time with their teacher at an early stage, helping them to understand your child better. It provides a helpful snapshot of your child's skills and abilities when they enter reception, allowing teachers to support your child in the most appropriate way
Will I receive feedback on my child's assessment?
Your child's teacher will receive a set of statements, which provide a narrative description of how your child performed in the assessment. Schools can choose whether to share these with parents as standard, but they must provide them to you on your request.
Example statements for parents:
'…can count up to 10 with understanding and recognise some numerals…'   '…has a good vocabulary and can communicate their needs clearly…'

8.43   Routine administration in the years following rollout (2016) has suggested that the test is being completed on average in less than 20 minutes. This does give a vital opportunity for two important refinements, each of which have major implications.

8.44   Firstly, in increasing the number of items, the reliability of the test at individual level can be enhanced. This may make a refined RBA not just a tool principally aimed at cohort data, but when combined with information from early developmental checks provide a more robust understanding of individual pupils':

- performance in key dimensions against age-expectations;
- any need for targeted support in specific areas;
- any need for regular monitoring of performance over and above normal checks;
- any need for further diagnostic testing; and
- any need for service referral.

8.45   Secondly, at present, due to the express purpose of the RBA in England there is no guidance on the interpretation of different score profiles, a valuable feature of psychometric and attainment tests (Franz et al 2017; Cadime & Mendes 2024; Santana-Monagas & Nunez 2022; Mellanby & Badger 2018). A test for Northern Ireland could carry this valuable function.

8.46   The use of the term 'baseline' check can suggest that learning starts at the outset of compulsory schooling but as the research quoted earlier in this chapter highlights, learning between 0–6 years is profound and vital. With elements of language and other key aspects of human development becoming more challenging after the age of 7 (Fandakova & Hartley 2020; Mellanby & Theobald 2014), there is not only the need to

understand what learning has occurred for each young person from birth to the start of formal schooling, but there is a very small window to identify deficits and challenges and to provide support which can be readily capitalised on by the child.
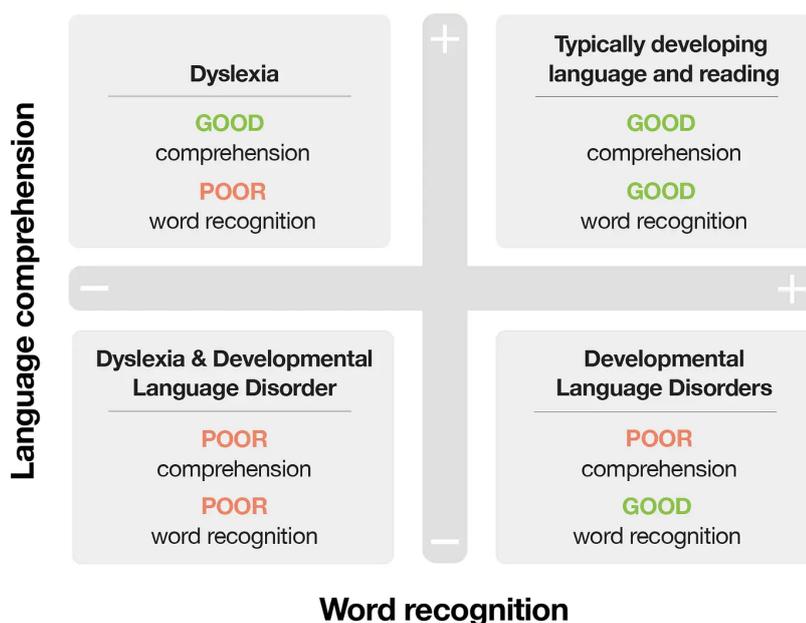
8.47 Deficits and challenges can of course arise through organic issues such as autism (Fandakova & Hartley 2020) as well as paucity of early experience (Sylva et al 2006). Leaving things until later is a problem for social justice, finances, as well as the individual and for schools, parents and carers and the state.

8.48 The baseline check can include elements of non-verbal and spatial reasoning alongside maths, and literacy communication and language. This will give a wider measure of ability. Early tests of ability are not as stable or predictive as tests taken later in childhood. They display "…low stability in preschool children, rapid increases in stability in childhood, and consistently high stability from late adolescence to later adulthood…" (Breit et al 2024, p1). However, they are still valid and worthwhile tests (Moraweitz et al 2024) in young children in the 4–6 range.

8.49 Despite lower stability, the extent and depth of early learning, and the combination of the results with outcomes of earlier development checks makes such assessment on entry to the primary phase a valuable addition to the information available to schools.

8.50 A key empirical question is whether combining information from three sources – (1) early developmental checks, (2) the outcomes of a refined and extended Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA), and (3) a phonics reading score can produce a valid and dependable measure of underlying ability that could serve as a reference point throughout a child's education. If such a combined indicator proved robust, it could remove the need for later ability testing in both primary and secondary schooling.

8.51 As this remains a hypothesis, the Panel recommends designing and implementing an extended RBA and integrating its results with earlier developmental checks and assessments recorded through the proposed Record of Development and Education Northern Ireland. A five-year research programme should then be established to evaluate the predictive power, stability and validity of this combined ("compendium") dataset by comparing it against established ability tests.

8.52 During this period, the Panel advises commissioning a five-year research and development contract to compare the compendium data (baseline scores, phonics results, and related measures) with existing ability assessments. This work should provide schools with detailed reports and clear guidance on interpreting outcomes. If, following this evaluation, the compendium dataset demonstrates sufficient reliability and predictive strength, separate ability testing later in primary and secondary education would no longer be required.

The purpose of statutory testing of reading

8.53   The importance of statutory testing of reading cannot be underestimated, and this chapter outlines the rationale for testing reading within a statutory framework and the lessons learnt from international research.

8.54   Assessments such as the Icelandic Fluency test (Skolapraedir 2024) are carefully limited in their focus. They do not aim to test everything which each learner is learning in respect of literacy. They are not focussed on curriculum coverage. They do not aim to fully diagnose the nature of difficulties or impediments to reading which children are experiencing.

8.55   The Icelandic Fluency tests are not comprehensive diagnostic assessments. Rather they are focussed on how a child's general proficiency level relates to other children of the same age, and how it aligns with curriculum goals regarding the level of proficiency which should be attained by that age.

8.56   Well-designed statutory tests can provide an *initial* diagnostic function beyond 'not reached threshold'. In aligning with the research on the Simple View of Reading, assessments can include careful, separate focus on word recognition and on comprehension (Elfenbein 2020). Scoring both word recognition and comprehension allows the following identification of proficiency and impairment in reading as set out in the Table 6 below.

Table 6 – Identification of proficiency and impairment in reading

Figure 8: Profiles of reading abilities—adapted from Catts et al. (2005)

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8.57   The resulting scores then enable teachers to 'pass' young people who have reached minimum proficiency, use further diagnostic tools and assessments to understand the nature of impairments and the appropriate support actions required; examine the spread of attainment in the learner group, and reflect on their educational practices and provision.

8.58   The Education Policy Institute (EPI 2024) report that Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 results in England between 2009 and 2018 have not improved since the introduction of the phonics screening check fails to recognise three things: scores may not have improved, but they have declined less than in other similar nations. Secondly, the check has allowed identification of groups which are underperforming and the background characteristics of those groups, allowing 'at risk' children to be identified, and supported – as well as identification of overall standards and equity gaps. Such insights would not be possible without assessment. Thirdly, assessment alone does not raise standards or reduce gaps rather it is the affirmative action taken as a result of obtaining dependable evidence on attainment which raises attainment and closes gaps (Walker et al 2015).

8.59   In addition, the crucial nature of the 'first phase' of literacy learning from 6 months to 6 years means that schools must have an evidence-based fix on what children have acquired during that crucial phase, with all the variability which arises across different contexts and settings.

8.60   Using the phonics check in conjunction with the reception baseline check produces powerful data on action regarding support and further monitoring of progress. In Iceland, the reading fluency check, highly focussed and implemented frequently across grades (see more details below), has been welcomed by educators and parents and carers and used as a basis for action.

8.61   In Finland, checks of this kind feed into closer monitoring and support for children with developmental delay and other challenges. Finland has a history of early identification of needs and high rates of monitoring and tailored support. This is supported by 'part time special education' in three tiers of intensity – accessed by around 30% of young people and which may include high attaining young people who have experienced absence, as well as young people with emergent developmental needs (Niema & Mietola 2023; Jahnukainen et al 2023). With a pattern of early recognition through assessment, high rates of involvement in varied but tailored support, SEN provision has seen increasing needs post-COVID and has experienced budget constraints, but it is not at the level of crisis in SEN seen in other nations (Hoh 2025; Sibieta & Snape 2025).

8.62   From this, the Panel recommend the following:
    •   Assessments which focus on fundamental elements of reading proficiency and accurately assess against benchmarked age-appropriate standards,
    •   Assessment which is undertaken at a time which enables further support to be provided,
    •   Assessments which support the design and refinement of learning programmes which support all learners in attaining benchmark standards,
    •   Guidance on exclusions from assessment and on score interpretation.

8.63   This leads to the following specific recommendations on literacy:

Phonics check at Year 2 (mandatory)

- Test form – a limited and unpredictable set of words and pseudo-words (c40–60) in an increasing scale of difficulty – words read to test administrator.

- Scaled score with year-on-year linkage.

- Benchmark Northern Ireland norms, pass mark.

- Test window taken by end of June Year 2.

Reading fluency checks in Years 3, 4 and 5 (following attaining required phonics level)

- Test form – words read per minute.

Word recognition and comprehension test at Year 4 (mandatory)

- Test form – options to be developed – paper/online/teacher administration.

- Scaled score with year-on-year linkage.

- Benchmark Northern Ireland norms.

- Test window taken by the end Year 4.

Word recognition and comprehension test at Year 7 (mandatory)

- Test form – paper/online/teacher administration.

- Scaled score with year-on-year linkage.

- Benchmark Northern Ireland norms.

- Test window taken by the end of Year 7.

Reading comprehension test at Year 10 (mandatory)

- Test form – paper/online/teacher administration.

- Scaled Score with year-on-year linkage.

- Benchmark Northern Ireland norms.

- Test window taken by the end of Year 10.

CCEA adaptive reading assessments Year 2–Year 10 (optional)

- Test form – online adaptive.

- Scaled score with year-on-year linkage.

- Benchmark Northern Ireland norms.

- Continuously available.

Fluency, comprehension and spelling punctuation and grammar tests

8.64   Internationally, there is strong evidence of a protracted decline in reading amongst young people as well as change in family culture which erodes early acquisition of reading. Ultimately it is of course the quality of learning programmes in schools and the learning support given to individual pupils which can counter this, giving all young people the literacy which is so important for their development and future. Assessment plays a vital role in supporting this, particularly through identifying needs, fine tuning support and motivating pupils.

8.65   In the post-primary phase, there is an urgent necessity to identify reading needs on entering Year 8. In these first years of post-primary, the Panel has been cognisant of issues of late-emerging poor readers (Catts et al 2013), tail-off of commitment to reading, and restrictions on reading comprehension posed by an inadequate knowledge base across subjects.

8.66   To help in supporting identification of depressed reading attainment the Panel is not only suggesting sensitive use of Year 7 and Year 10 statutory assessment tests, but also the availability of fluency checks and comprehension tests.

Fluency

8.67   There is important evidence on this issue from Iceland. There, in a small system (c4000 pupils per year cohort), the government has over the last decade secured the widespread use of an optional test of reading fluency, focussing on words per minute of correctly sounded words. Fluency tests take different forms, as the Panel outlines below. The choice of this particular model was evidence-based, and is now highly regarded by parents and carers, pupils and schools, and provides vital intelligence to the state.

8.68   Recent correspondence with Icelandic officials advised that current practice is that pupils sit the reading fluency test three times each year: in September, January, and May. The test is available in September for first grade but is only administered to 20–35% of children at that time. Otherwise, the three-timepoint policy applies for grades 2 through 10. The age range of participants is from 6 to 15 years. The participation rate is approximately 90% at other timepoints, though slightly lower in grade 10. The test remains voluntary and a high participation rate continues.

8.69   Young people read common passages: pupils in grades 4 and 5 take the same test, grades 6 and 7 another, with one test for junior level. Evaluation and development have focussed on careful selection of appropriate passages and examining patterns of attainment across groups. Scoring is a simple but robust measure: words per minute. Guidance is clear and based on robust evaluation.

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8.70　This has encouraged a stronger focus on reading in Iceland and enhanced school-parent relations. Teachers have reported that the tests reveal insights into unexpected deterioration or improvement of reading in individuals of which they would be unaware without the tests. This is a commentary on the current state of development of reading amongst young Icelanders, in a society with a long history of commitment to literacy:

'…*according to information from the Directorate of Education, 66% of pupils in 3rd grade were below the desired middle benchmark of 100 correctly read words per minute in the spring of 2024; 92% of 3rd-grade pupils in the country were assessed. When looking at the results of the 5th grade that same spring, it can be seen that 69% of pupils are below the desired middle benchmark of 140 correctly read words per minute and thereof 35% below the minimum criterion of 90 correctly read words per minute. The results are from 91% of pupils in 5th grade in Iceland. These numbers indicate that a significant portion of our pupils struggle to read effectively for successful learning. It is unlikely that these pupils will engage in deep reading and reflection, thus resulting in a lack of growth in their reading skills to match the increased complexity of the text.' (Skolapraedir 2024)*

8.71　When the Panel look at how clear the connection between fluency and comprehension is and how much research has been done in this area, it is clear that Northern Ireland can use fluency test results considerably better to strengthen pupils' reading skills.

8.72　Fluency tests do vary significantly in form and function, from a passage-based test of the kind used in Iceland, to grammar-focussed tests, tests which involve sentence transformation, to clinically-oriented tests to detect a decline in cognitive function which ask subjects to list categorially-related words (e.g. names of animals) and/or words beginning with a specific letter (e.g. F, A or S). Scoring also can vary, measuring pauses, repetitions etc.

8.73　While the more complex forms have diagnostic value for cognitive function (Henderson et al 2023; Shao et al 2014), the simpler form, of tests based on reading passages, carry considerable potential for universal use with all pupils at all stages of education and can play a key role in reducing inequalities and increasing attainment.

8.74　There is a frequent assumption that reading speed is unrelated to comprehension, but this is not the case. Fluency derives from decoding ability combined with word familiarity, i.e. with wider aspects of cognition than simple decoding. There is a clear link between fluency and comprehension at a cognitive level.

8.75　Recent research by the Fisher Family Trust is significant. A simple and readily administered on-line tool comprising a passage taking one minute to read aloud was used on a sample of 110,000 primary pupils (700 schools and 340,000+ assessments). It examined trajectories of fluency scores across primary, and this displayed a reasonably high correlation between fluency and comprehension (Hilton et al 2024). They concluded, in line with practical experience from Iceland, that 'Oral fluency (in Primary) is correlated with Key Stage 2 reading comprehension outcomes and, given that oral reading fluency is quick and easy to measure, it's likely to be an extremely useful indicator for schools to measure' (Hilton et al 2024).

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8.76   This is consistent with a series of studies which found the same strong relationship (White et al 2021; Duke & Cartwright 2021; Rasinski 2004). In addition, and of considerable significance, the high variation in scores in each year group combined with the correlation with comprehension lead them to recommend:

'…in particular, the low level of reading fluency of the lowest quartile of readers is likely to indicate a reading difficulty that will impact this group across the curriculum. Monitoring the oral reading fluency of the lowest quartile of readers, in particular, and addressing this deficit as early as possible, should be a concern of government and schools alike. Fluency teaching and fluency practice throughout the school years, including a focus on oral reading fluency through repeated reading, choral reading, partner reading and all other fluency strategies are likely to be very supportive of a pupils' overall reading development.' (Hilton et al 2024).

8.77   Fluency tests are easy to administer, can be administered with fidelity and consistency, and are easily scored. Further, the scores are intelligible to the general public (words per minute), they are sensitive measures, and age scales can readily be developed. They are also relatively simple to construct, evaluate and update. Cost-benefit ratio is high: they produce highly valuable data for low workload for pupils and teachers.

8.78   Studies show that there are ceiling effects by Year 11, and the complexity of texts may mean that reading speed reduces across years. However, the continued high dispersion of results in later years means that it remains important in Year 10 to test fluency in order to target necessary support.

8.79   Currently available as technology-supported tests, short fluency tests may in future become fully automated tests, decreasing workload and costs further, as well as increasing an already advantageous cost-benefit ratio. The Panel, therefore, recommend that fluency tests be developed and used in both Irish-medium and English, and be administered in two ways across the system:

Mandatory
- If pupils reach the required standard in phonics in Year 2, then they will take mandatory fluency checks in Year 3, 4 and 5.

- Alternatively, if a pupil does not meet the required phonics standard in Year 2 then it is repeated and three years of fluency checks follow from that point.

Optional
- Fluency checks available for all years from Year 2 to Year 10.

Comprehension

8.80   As outlined above, recent research demonstrates a strong relationship between short measures of reading fluency, typically assessed through correctly sounded words per minute, and reading comprehension (Ridel 2007; Hilton et al 2024). Although the link is robust, the causal mechanisms are likely to be complex (Dehaene 2010). One possibility is that when decoding becomes automatic, readers free up working memory to focus on constructing meaning from text.

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8.81   Another is that rich background knowledge enables faster word recognition, consistent with theories that emphasise the role of an extensive mental lexicon built through repeated verbal exposure. A further explanation is that both processes operate together, creating a mediated relationship between fluency and comprehension (Kim et al 2012; Cadime et al 2024).

8.82   While the precise mechanisms continue to be explored, this complexity does not diminish the central point: reading has profound positive impacts and tends to generate a self-reinforcing cycle of improvement (Cremin & Scholes, 2023; Willingham, 2006). For these reasons, education systems should prioritise wide reading, frequent, varied engagement with text, as well as deep reading that fosters analytical and critical thinking.

8.83   This has an implication for statutory assessment: testing comprehension signals the importance of reading. It produces evidence on the analytic capabilities which young people bring to texts. Scores from comprehension tests correlate to a considerable extent with fluency testing but testing comprehension as well as fluency adds further valuable information on the literacy of individuals (Shapiro et al 2008).

8.84   Test forms and content regarding reading comprehension are well established. Score interpretation is robust. However, challenges do exist and must be recognised: comprehension tests tend to take time, design is problematic (avoiding bias and exposure effects), the consistency of marking can be problematic: and current human marking is time-consuming.

8.85   There also is a key finding from John Jerrim's work on assessment within a large Multi-Academy Trust. He found that end-of-Year 7 maths scores (the first year of Key Stage 3 in England) predict performance in English tests at the end of year 8 to a greater extent than scores in English (Jerrim 2024). In this vein, Benton and Sutch (2013) show the reasonable but not high predictive power of Key Stage 2 test outcomes in predicting GCSE outcomes.

8.86   These collective findings indicate the importance of critical use of test outcomes, something which the Panel wishes to enhance through recommending the existence of the Northern Ireland Reporting Unit (See Chapter 11), which would ensure high quality reports, enhance test refinement and support to teachers in their interpretation of assessment outcomes/data and progress.

8.87   The seeming fallibility in absolute prediction of later outcomes is not surprising. Many things happen over time to individual pupils in terms of acceleration and decline of learning. Education does make a difference and should do so, and the Panel's emphasis is on test outcomes to support learners, not use them as infallible determination of their futures and potential (TNTP 2024).

8.88   Based on this evidence, the Panel recommends comprehension tests should be included as part of the assessment framework for both English and Irish-medium learners at

Years 4, 7 and 10. This is important in signalling the importance of wide reading and the acquisition of skills in analytic reading. These should be auto-marked tests to avoid escalation of teacher workload. It is a possibility attitudes to reading can be collected to provide additional insight at individual, school and population level (Mullis et al 2023).

Spelling, punctuation and grammar

8.89   Evaluation of pupils' writing over the past decade shows a consistent link between enjoyment of writing and higher attainment (DfE 2012). Research also highlights that teaching grammar in meaningful, contextualised ways has a positive impact on the development of pupils' writing. Studies of spelling, punctuation and grammar assessments similarly indicate that pupils often enjoy learning grammar (Safford 2015), and that while these tests can predict overall writing performance, spelling emerges as a particularly strong predictor of written composition (Daffern et al 2017). Taken together, these findings reinforce that assessment in this area not only signals its importance but also shapes classroom practice in productive ways (Safford 2015).

8.90   The importance of the link between spelling and functional writing is all-important in the context of declining writing literacy globally (OECD 2018) and given there are concerns about the serious impact on cognition of 'off loading' of writing onto automated tools – automated composition, spelling-correction, grammar-correction etc (Gerlich 2025; Kosmyna et al 2025).

8.91   Based on this evidence the Panel recommends that tests of spelling, punctuation and grammar are included within the statutory assessment pathway, and that these should be auto-marked tests in order to avoid any increase in teacher workload.

Writing as an element of the statutory framework

8.92   As part of statutory arrangements, the Panel is also recommending that a Writing Repository should be created to allow schools to lodge examples of pupil writing. This low-workload initiative will enable schools to benchmark writing standards against other schools, including those in similar contexts and encourage internal scrutiny of writing development.

8.93   It is proposed that this will not be an assessment of writing at key points in the system but a beneficial comparative tool. It is suggested a school submits no more than five short, unmarked samples, showing the range of writing quality. Schools and pupils would not be identified by the repository.

8.94   Just as reading provides a vital foundation for wider learning and development, writing is more than 'making marks on a piece of paper'. (Marano et al 2025; DfE 2025). Reading builds knowledge and understanding, supports thinking, increases cultural capital, and opens up a million worlds. Writing develops vocabulary, complexity of thought, expression, planning, monitoring, evaluation, a sense of audience, creativity, fine motor skills, and social engagement.

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8.95   In earlier years of education, writing contributes fundamentally to development and attainment, in later years it refines thinking and contributes to progression, identity formation and social connection (NLT 2018).

8.96   The importance of writing as a key foundation skill is emphasised in the Department's Literacy Framework for Primary Schools. Writing is a vital skill for learning, communication, creativity and participation in society, requiring explicit teaching because it is not biologically innate. The framework emphasises that writing is a cornerstone of literacy and plays a vital role in both education and everyday life. It is not only a means of communication but also a powerful tool for thinking, learning and self-expression. The framework also stresses the importance of fluent handwriting for freeing cognitive resources for higher order thinking.

8.97   Yet writing is in decline. Successive National Literacy Trust surveys detect a halving of writing enjoyment amongst 8 to 18-year-olds in the last 15 years since 2010, decreasing over 20 percentage points (NLT 2025). Writing enjoyment is at historically low levels in 2025. Decline was particularly evident in primary school children.

8.98   The impact of this should not be underestimated. Caroline Roaf's work showed that young people who wrote faster were more likely to be high attaining, and not just because they were high attaining, but because writing externalises thinking – allowing young people to think about how and what they are thinking, allowing teachers to understand more deeply how a young person is thinking, allowing teachers to give more precise feedback and encouragement (Roaf 2003).

8.99   PISA has emphasised reading and general creativity over writing, something now increasingly considered to be a serious omission (Szabo 2023; Caroll & Benton 2018). PISA 2022 did include writing requirements, but to assess creativity.

8.100   The European Survey on Language Competences included assessment of writing across 14 European Union nations in 2011 but has not been recently re-administered (Costa 2015). Norway implemented national assessment of writing in 2014 but abandoned this in 2026 due to cost (Graham et al 2020).

8.101   From 1980 to 2014, Cambridge Assessment conducted a series of 10-year reviews of pupils' examination scripts (Massey & Elliott 1996; Elliott et al 2016). These studies tracked long-term shifts in pupils' written English, revealing notable declines in punctuation accuracy and some weakening in spelling over time. Yet the research also identified improvements in several constrained aspects of writing such as sentence structure and vocabulary control particularly in the later cohorts. Importantly, this uptick in performance coincided with periods when national qualifications and statutory assessments in England placed greater emphasis on the quality of written expression, suggesting that policy focus may have contributed to observable gains in writing proficiency.

8.102   Writing is of course indirectly assessed in testing and qualifications around the world, as a collateral effect of teacher and examination assessment of any subject which requires expression in writing as a response mode, for example history, geography or sociology.

8.103   Statutory assessment of writing in England has suffered from constant variation in assessment approach from Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar overlays on national examinations to direct assessment in primary and lower secondary phases. Teacher workload and poor reliability have been key issues. Writing was assessed on a statutory basis in Key Stage 1–3 until the cessation of Key Stage 1 writing assessment in 2022/3 and Key Stage 3 assessment in 2008. Key Stage 2 alone now comprises a teacher judgement of pupils' writing achievement. Large language models for standardisation are being tested in 2025/6 (STA 2025).

8.104   The Key Stage 2 writing submission and moderation process is highly complex, involving numerous workload intensive administrative steps across two consecutive years. It requires heavy coordination across schools, moderators and local authorities to complete multiple rounds of submissions, checks and confirmations.

8.105   Of course, normal exam entry, coursework moderation in GCSE and assessment in vocational qualifications also has complexity but the low reliability of marking (Allen 2016; He et al 2013), the adverse impact on diverse approaches to writing and the high workload/resource requirements make the Panel very concerned about requiring an assessment of writing in statutory assessment in Northern Ireland.

8.106   Yet the evidence regarding the vital importance of writing in young people's cognitive and social development and the evidence on the resurgence in writing as a result of it featuring in statutory assessment suggests that it is essential to introduce some measures on writing in statutory assessment in Northern Ireland. The Panel is also very mindful of the importance of encouraging high-quality writing and the adverse washback which can arise from formal assessment.

8.107   The Panel is also mindful of the potential workload burden, and the fact that new technologies of assessment look likely to arise soon. These include manageable approaches to comparative judgement and the prototype use of Large Language Models (LLMs) for marking.

8.108   The Panel is, therefore, recommending the establishment, within statutory assessment requirements, of a Northern Ireland Writing Repository. This would have the following features:

• Statutory submission in Years 4, 6 and 8 of examples of writing in primary and secondary education from every school in Northern Ireland. Submission in other years would be optional but encouraged.

• A set of precise protocols would be developed, requiring submission of a limited number of examples of sample writing at 'typical' and 'exemplary' levels, with a brief accompanying rationale for submission.

- The Panel advises that writing samples should be handwritten, but this should be kept under review.

- Schools would be able to access samples of writing on demand from the repository, including from like schools. This would allow them to compare standards of writing relevant to the quality of writing in their own setting.

- Samples thus accessed would be anonymous in respect of pupil and school identity, both in terms of metadata and in terms of content (e.g. sample of writing would not include autobiographical or other information elements which would allow identification of the pupil and/or school).

- There is potential for ETI to review submissions to the Repository and give advice on trends in standards of writing.

8.109   The Repository would be low workload and of high benefit. It would signal the importance of writing, and high quality in writing. It would swiftly build an extraordinary bank of samples of writing, providing dependable evidence on standards over time. As a part of statutory assessment infrastructure, it would support further development work on formal assessment of writing using new technology and new measurement approaches when these become more mature.

Elements not included in the Northern Ireland statutory assessment pathway

8.110   Beyond assessing the core elements of the curriculum, there are additional aspects of human performance all associated with learning that have attracted increasing attention in both research and practice. However, having considered the available evidence and the practical value of such measures, the Panel advises that these areas should not, at this stage, be incorporated into separate, statutory assessments. The key considerations are outlined below.

ICT and computing

8.111   ICT/digital literacy/computing science will not be included in the proposed statutory assessments. The Panel explored in detail the issue of assessing ICT, digital literacy and computing science as part of the statutory assessment pathway. While digital literacy has become a fundamental aspect of social and economic life, and computing science a key professional area, assessment of digital literacy is a technically demanding area which both history and research show has had an unstable and troubled history. There is a history of 'innovations' in digital assessment which had high aspirations but were short lived, (QCA 2005) and now AI has arrived to add further challenge (Corbin et al 2025).

8.112   At this stage in the significant move to a more robust statutory assessment framework for Northern Ireland, any inclusion of ICT in the initial framework recommended by the Panel would appear to unnecessarily increase teacher workload, add to risks of a failure of assessment, and could compromise the strongly evidence-based gains promised by the revised assessments of maths, science and literacy, and the baseline check.

8.113   Aspects of the digital world now being considered for the revised Northern Ireland curriculum, such as digital safety and well-being, are absolutely vital for young people, and the state and schools need to be extremely responsive to what is needed in education to equip young people with the skills and knowledge which they need.

8.114   However, it is vital to recognise that the precise curriculum content in schools is likely to continue to change quickly. It is right that responses from schools and the state to outside changes in technology and its use – which come thick and fast – need to be rapid. International scrutiny of national curricula over the past twenty years shows the rate of change in the content of the digital area is so much more rapid than in subjects such as science and maths. Additionally, the exact scope of the digital curriculum has been contested and is expressed very differently in different national settings.

8.115   The Panel can, for example, see these issues in the latest specification from Estonia, the most digitally enabled education system in Europe (and a high-performing system). It organises the curriculum around five 'dimensions' namely information and data literacy (e.g. articulating needs); communication and collaboration in digital content creation (e.g. creating, improving and editing, understanding copyright, giving understandable instructions to computer systems); safety and problem-solving (Mehisto & Kitsing 2021).

8.116   There are two significant issues. Firstly, it was formulated before the rise of AI. Secondly, the highly generic categories of communication and collaboration, and problem-solving are evidenced through learning using very different practical approaches and techniques in different schools, depending on hardware and applications used. This specification of digital literacy/competence has indeed, like many national curricula, changed repeatedly, and swiftly.

8.117   Internationally, there have been serious pendulum swings between computing, ICT, and digital literacy (Wohl 2024) with industry and sector bodies critical of each successive change (Brown et al 2014).

8.118   These issues are repeated through different national curricula (Fowler & Vegas 2021). Notably, the 2014 Computing Science curriculum specification in England was hailed as leading edge in the first few years of its implementation (Brown et al 2015). However, concerns quickly arose about the focus on computer science versus ICT and within three years of its introduction the dated nature of the specification was evident (BBC 2017).

8.119   Across high-performing curricula internationally, there is a consistent emphasis on applied digital skills – for example, editing graphics and text, writing simple code to perform defined functions, storing and retrieving data, and creating or manipulating

tables, charts, and spreadsheets. These practical skills sit alongside key underpinning concepts that shape the wider digital landscape, such as understanding algorithms and their purposes, how code operates, the principles of feedback and control, and issues of digital safety and copyright.

8.120   Given their relative stability over time, this foundational knowledge could, in principle, provide a suitable basis for statutory assessment. However, there are important additional considerations that must be taken into account before determining whether such assessment would be appropriate or beneficial at this stage.

8.121   Statutory assessment should be developed when it makes a unique contribution to the system. It should exist where it contributes valuable functions in addition to the statutory curriculum and other key system elements such as national qualifications at 16 and 18, inspection, learning materials and professional development.

8.122   Statutory assessment requires stability in the constructs to be assessed; the interpretation of the outcomes should be of high integrity and be useful; the assessment processes should be dependable; and it should have good workload-utility balance. This accords with the principles for assessment laid out in this report.

8.123   The Panel believes that statutory assessment of digital literacy would fall short of these criteria, particularly in respect of lack of stability in key constructs, problematic score interpretation and high workload. The Panel, therefore, does not recommend its inclusion in the pathway.

8.124   The Panel recognises that the Northern Ireland curriculum is mandatory for schools, and so digital literacy will be a key requirement of schools. The Panel recognises that schools will need support in the ongoing assessment of pupils' developing digital literacy and their progress through the schools' specific learning programmes. High quality learning materials should link to the new Northern Ireland curriculum and include dedicated assessments. Additional optional curriculum-linked assessments can be made available through arrangements such as the CCEA Adaptive Assessment environment. Crucially, the all-important certification of employment-related digital skills continues to be available through academic and vocational qualifications at 16 and 18.

Creativity and high-level critical thinking

8.125   Both 'creativity' and 'high-level critical thinking' have received considerable attention in discourse around educational improvement and education policy (Vincen-Lancrin et al 2019). There is, however, much contestation and confusion around both (Craft 2010; Jewdokimov 2013; Treckek-King 2024).

8.126   On the basis of contemporary evidence, the Panel has determined that these do not need dedicated assessments. Rather, they are categories that should be addressed in the curriculum and in pedagogy, and will feature naturally in well-designed routine,

subject-specific, curriculum-linked statutory assessment. This builds on the strong commitment in Northern Ireland to the foundational knowledge in subject disciplines.

8.127   There are two important technical reasons for this position: the extent to which creativity is rooted in routine cognitive processes, and the dependence of both creativity and high-level critical thinking on a solid and elaborated foundation of subject-specific knowledge (Deheane 2021).

8.128   While some analyses have pitched knowledge and creativity against each other (Robinson 2013), the most recent OECD survey of creativity as part of PISA, showed a strong positive relationship between nations' high scores in discipline knowledge and high scores in creativity (OECD 2024). This is entirely consistent with contemporary cognitive science, which emphasises that creativity requires 'cognitive resources' – accumulated knowledge deriving from effective learning and widespread experiences (Deheane 2024).

8.129   Furthermore, creativity is a consistent feature of human cognition at all ages and stages – the drive to experiment with new approaches to tasks, to entertain divergent thoughts, to consider new and unusual possibilities and act on them (Kaufman & Sternberg (eds) 2020; Weir 2024). It is a daily part of cognition; put simply, it arises when a person creates unusual links between existing stored memories. The greater the accumulation of knowledge, the greater the possibility of creativity resulting in new knowledge and action which is useful in the real world and in further study.

8.130   It is routine and relatively easy to be creative but challenging to produce creative thoughts which advance knowledge and action. Being creative in a context of inadequate knowledge can give rise to dysfunctional actions or misconceptions – unhelpful for both thought and action.

8.131   Due to its dependence on accumulated, relevant knowledge, creativity is extraordinarily context and subject-specific (Kaufman & Baer 2002). When trying to master number bonds from one to twenty, the idea of 'I maybe can just count them out on my fingers' is limiting and unproductive. Some creativity is downright harmful, for example when handling dangerous tools and materials. Conversely, when writing poetry, the novel idea of a green cow can be amusing and provocative. In history, making new links between ideas of the geography of a nation and its resistance to invasion can create important insights for a young person.

8.132   It also is the case that creativity can be encouraged or suppressed, for example by disapproval of peers and adults, social norms and institutional conventions. (Davies 2022; Medium 2025).

8.133   The highly context-specific nature of productive creativity means that it is an intrinsic part of thinking and action in each area of the curriculum. This understanding of 'creativity' and the empirical evidence on the importance of a wide and developed base of discipline knowledge, has led the Panel not to recommend any dedicated, separate tests of 'creativity' as a part of statutory assessment.

8.134   A similar decision has been reached regarding 'high-level critical thinking'. The ability to analyse and understand unfamiliar problems is an important goal of education (Hare W 1999; DE 2025). Some education programmes do not require young people at all stages to apply their knowledge to unfamiliar tasks, while other programmes include this. Singapore Maths, for example, very deliberately includes it. After being introduced to a technique such as adding fractions, the programme includes assessment which demands repeated solution of formally-expressed questions which are carefully varied, and follows this with carefully-framed verbally-stated problems which require the young person to identify how the technique of adding fractions appears in the described context, and how the application of the technique provides an answer (Ng 2022).

8.135   A key aspect of the explanation of the capacity for high-level critical thinking is the limitations of working memory. Complex tasks cannot be completed if component elements required are not present in long-term memory. This is true across disciplines. In maths, a task involving complex working with ratio will be far too challenging to complete using working memory if facts such as 5x5=25 are not automatically available from long term memory. In literary analysis, if the concept of 'metaphor' is not established in long term memory, any task involving identification and analysis of the use of metaphor in literary works will be problematic. The person will need to relearn what a metaphor is as part of the task. This is neither efficient or effective.

8.136   High-level critical thinking requires knowledge resources to be held in long term memory. Sophisticated and wide-ranging knowledge held in long term memory is essential for 'high-level critical thinking' particularly 'cross disciplinary thinking'. It is not separate to or different in kind to routine cognitive processes used within subject disciplines. There are many implications of this in terms of elevation of attainment and improvement of equity. However, for the Panel, this has suggested that no dedicated, separate assessment of 'high-level critical thinking' is required as a part of the framework of statutory assessment. This position not only aligns with research evidence but also ensures that unnecessary workload for teachers is avoided.

8.137   Finally, it certainly is the case that 'high-level critical thinking' should be a goal of education (Hare 1999; DE 2025), should be an element of the new curriculum, and should be assessed through stage-appropriate, well-designed items within both subject-based statutory assessment and subject-based examinations at 16 and 18.

Oracy

8.138   Oracy is receiving increasing international attention (Knight 2024; DfE 2025; Kaldahl 2020; Skaftun & Wagner 2019; ESU 2017). It refers to the language used in speaking by people, between people, and the nature of conversation and exchange in the classroom (Mercer 2025). It is considered important since it signals social capital, it elaborates and grounds thinking, and high-quality discourse in the classroom is associated with improved outcomes (Alexander 2013; EEF 2025).

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8.139 Evidence for the impact of oracy is substantial. The Education Endowment Foundation, for example, identifies oral language interventions as highly cost-effective, with very strong evidence of improving attainment by more than six months on average (EEF 2025a).

8.140 When considering assessment, we must always ask fundamental questions such as: *What is the evidence for the construct? Is it real? What kind of thing is it?* Clear constructs such as multiplication or medical skills are straightforward to define and assess. Others, such as creativity, general intelligence, or empathy, are more nebulous, harder to specify, and contested. Oracy sits between these categories.

8.141 There is strong evidence that oracy is real, meaningful, and multifaceted. At its core, it involves purposeful communication: expressing ideas clearly, understanding others, and responding appropriately. However, our understanding of oracy now extends far beyond basic communication. It includes forming relationships, participating in communities, pursuing truth, making others feel welcome, and critically analysing language. It supports understanding of rhetorical devices, ambiguity, consistency, logic and even forms of manipulation.

8.142 A wide research base shows oracy is essential not just for communication, but for reading development, effective learning, and a sense of belonging in school (Mercer 2013). Early vocalisation ('baby babble') is foundational for cognitive and social development (Albert et al 2017). Broader language development is closely linked to human thought and long-term life outcomes (Knight 2024). Together, this provides a strong scientific foundation for recognising oracy as a real and significant construct.

8.143 Research since the 1970s, and particularly in the last decade, demonstrates that high-quality oral exchange is characteristic of high-performing education systems (Stigler & Stevenson 1991; Crehan 2016). Oracy influences how pupils experience belonging in school (Raniti et al 2022), encourages reflection on learning (Deakin-Crick & Yu 2007), and shapes cognitive development, academic attainment, and personal identity. Its scope is therefore broad, both in form and in impact.

8.144 Classroom interaction plays a central role. High-performing systems actively curate classroom questioning. Teachers use questions to stimulate thought, explore misconceptions, and understand progress in learners' thinking (Wiliam, undated). This links oracy closely to a system's assessment culture, a central concern of the Panel.

8.145 The Panel considered whether oracy should be assessed through dedicated statutory tests or checks, both to recognise its importance and ensure that every child's progress in spoken language is systematically monitored.

8.146 After reviewing evidence on the many forms of oracy, its presence in some existing assessments, and the new curriculum's emphasis on rich vocabulary and high-quality oral exchange, the Panel recommends that oracy should not be introduced as a standalone statutory assessment at this time.

8.147 Dedicated assessment would create unnecessary burden and risk narrowing oracy to a performance activity, rather than embedding it across high-quality pedagogy. The new curriculum's focus on disciplinary language, the Writing Repository, and strengthened reading assessments will support the development of elaborated language, thereby indirectly reinforcing oracy.

8.148 Although 'oracy' should not become a formal, separate statutory assessment, it remains an essential element of both individual development and effective educational environments. The Panel believes that their recommendations for the baseline check will directly support oracy, and that comprehension and fluency checks will contribute indirectly. Oracy should be explicitly reflected in the aims and content of Northern Ireland's new curriculum, in new teaching and learning materials, and within professional development and Initial Teacher Education.

Additional constructs of interest

8.149 There are further aspects of human performance which can be dependably assessed, and which relate to, and explain, educational attainment. Principal amongst these are school connectedness, and metacognition and learning dispositions.

8.150 School connectedness relates to how connected a young person feels in relation to peers, teachers and the school (Battin-Pearson et al 2000; CDCP 2009). Higher levels of a sense of connection are strongly associated with attainment and progression. Ideally, the Panel would like all young people to be highly connected in this way. This suggests that it should be routinely assessed. However, it is volatile. A young person can experience events and incidents inside and outside of school which cause their sense of school connectedness to crash. It is also dependent on school ethos and so measuring pupils' sense of school connectedness may be signalling something fundamental about the school, not the child.

8.151 The Panel believes that whilst school connectedness is extremely important and can be reliably assessed its measurement should remain as a tool for schools to deploy, not be part of statutory assessment. Schools can evaluate school connectedness when they are concerned about individual young people, and/or as a self-evaluation tool when they feel that school culture may be shifting.

8.152 Metacognition and learning dispositions have been well-researched and are associated with attainment and progression (EEF 2025b). Metacognition refers to 'thinking about thinking and learning' and can include elements of executive function such as self-regulation (Katyal & Fleming 2023). EEF's framework for metacognition and self-regulation includes a seven-step model as follows:

1. Activating prior knowledge

2. Explicit strategy instruction

3. Modelling of learned strategy

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4. Check understanding of strategy

5. Guided practice

6. Independent practice, and

7. Structured reflection

8.153   An Education Endowment Foundation research review suggests that intervention on metacognition has low cost, strong evidence and high impact (EEF 2025). 'Learning dispositions' similarly engages with the sense of how a young person approaches learning, and their sentiments about it (Carr & Claxton 2002), and overlap significantly with metacognition theory, research and practice.

8.154   Ruth Deakin-Crick's work on learning dispositions is very significant in supporting decisions about whether learning dispositions should be formally assessed (Deakin Crick & Yu 2007). The research shows that learning dispositions are related to attainment, and are measurable – with the scales demonstrating 'a significant degree of stability, reliability and internal consistency over time'.

8.155   Most significantly for the Panel's consideration of what should be included in statutory assessment, the research emphasises the importance and utility of assessing learning dispositions for supporting pupil self-assessment and for institutional review and development. Considering the review's remit, the principles for assessment (particularly workload), and the established research on learning dispositions, the Panel again highlights the importance of the assessment of learning dispositions for pupil and school development but does not recommend its inclusion as a separate element of statutory assessment.

SEN learners

8.156   Across education systems, high quality provision for children and young people assessed as having SEN for extended or shorter periods of their lives is supported by wide ranging guidance and research-based practices.

8.157   There also is a substantial body of research on SEN, including the tendency to underestimate the capabilities of individual young people (Florian L & Black-Hawkins 2011; Ofsted 2021).

8.158   The Panel's advice and recommendations on the way in which Northern Ireland statutory assessment should be configured to best support young people with SEN has been framed in the light of this guidance and research.

8.159   A key element of SEN reality is the diversity of presentation of need, with the specifics of an individual's needs being the all-important factor. The Panel is aware that this presents service challenges but informs our recommendations regarding assessment both to support existing good practice and to offer new facility for assessment.

8.160   Due to the importance of being sensitive to the exact needs and attainment of individuals, the Panel cannot give a more specific recommendation than to advise that pupils with SEN are admitted for statutory assessment wherever this is suitable and appropriate, making all necessary use of the support provided by special arrangements and assessment aids.

8.161   Best practice must be observed and maintained, and communication and sharing of best practice is essential. The Panel is aware that this will be supported by the ongoing SEN Reform Agenda and the Five-Year Delivery Plan. Alongside this, the Panel recognises the importance of additional assessment outside statutory assessment including diagnostic assessment.

8.162   The CCEA Prerequisite Skills, more commonly known as Q Skills, are an assessment resource used by teachers of children in SEN settings. The skills described in the resource build towards Level 1 in the current cross-curricular skills of Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT. The Q Skills provide a broad and inclusive framework for assessing learners, taking into account age, cognitive ability, learning difficulties and other significant complex needs.

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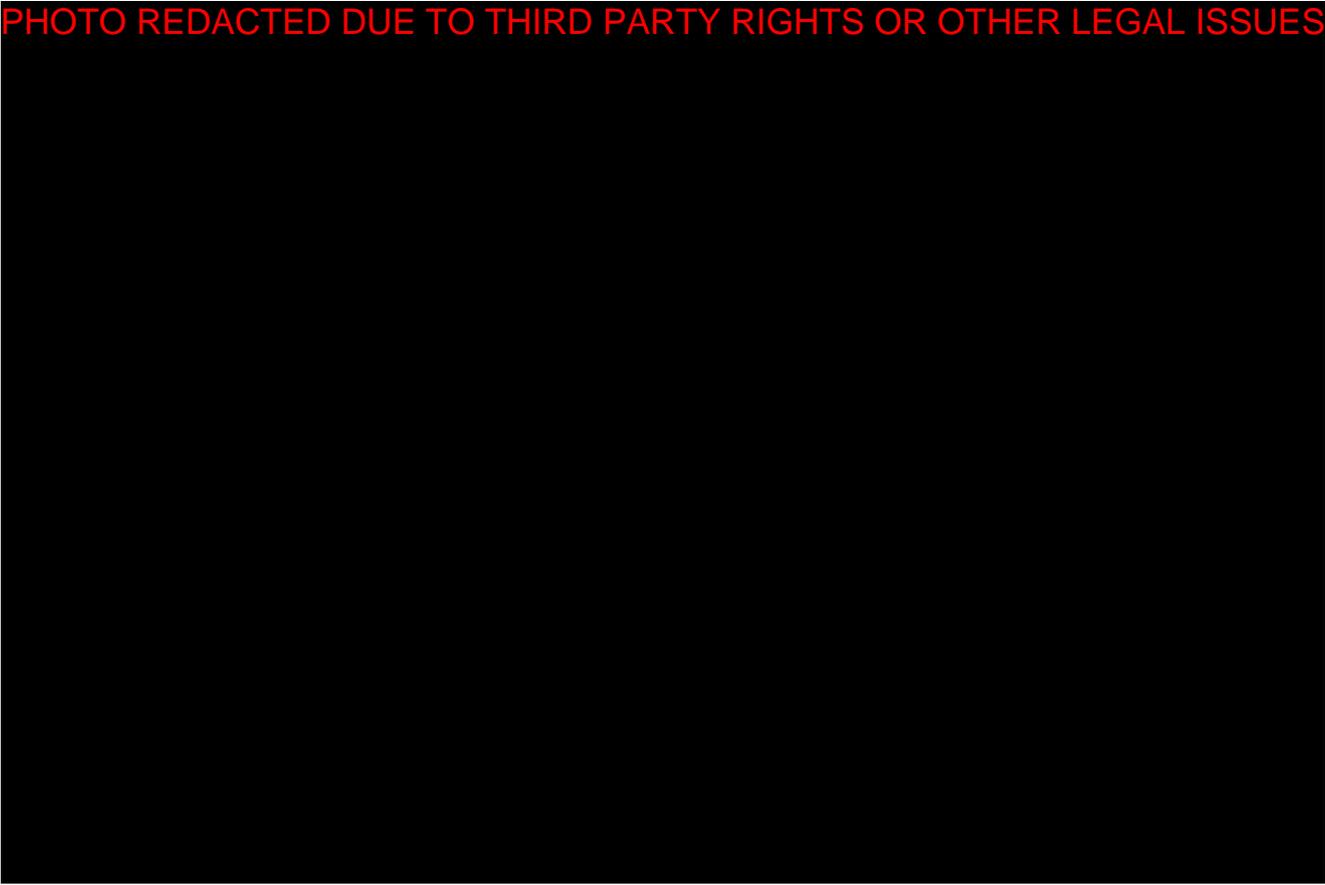
8.163   The requirements outlined in the Q Skills for Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT align with the mainstream Levels of Progression and are broken down into five skill areas. These range from Experience (Q1) to Consolidate (Q5). Within each of the skill areas, learners' progress can be demonstrated by moving through the Q Skills as well as decreasing levels of support from adults within a skill.

8.164   The Q Skills recording software is designed to complement the Q Skills assessment resource. The software allows learners' progress to be tracked, measured and reported, enabling teachers to support the individual needs within their classroom.

8.165   The Q Skills, schools' dedicated assessment systems for recording a wide range of achievements including attainment inside and outside the formal curriculum are very important but often school specific. The Panel's recommendations for a Record of Development and Education Northern Ireland allows accumulation of evidence of attainment and the outcomes of diagnostic assessment, which will bring a new breadth and sensitivity to assessment in the SEN space across the education system. The Panel suggests that the Q Skills framework should continue to be available and used, with outcomes recorded in the Record of Development and Education. It should, however, be kept under review in the light of the continuing review of SEN provision and the development of the new National Curriculum.

Conclusion and key points

8.166   This chapter has set out the Panel's rationale for a renewed statutory assessment framework for Northern Ireland that is purposeful, coherent, evidence-based and proportionate. In establishing the scope of statutory assessment. The Panel has remained firmly aligned with the principles outlined in the previous chapter: assessments should serve clear educational purposes, support learners' progress, provide dependable information for schools and the system, and maintain an appropriate balance between workload, cost and technical quality.

8.167   A central conclusion of the Panel's work is that statutory assessment must focus on domains that are foundational to learning and for which strong evidence supports reliable measurement. This underpins the recommendation for high-value, low-workload assessments in literacy, mathematics and science, which are core areas that drive attainment, support long-term progression, and align with the ambitions of the TransformED strategy.

8.168   The chapter has also articulated the case for a new baseline check at the start of Year 1, recognising both the profound importance of early development and the need to ensure that schools have dependable, actionable information at the earliest stage of formal education.

8.169   The chapter has emphasised that early childhood development – social, emotional, cognitive and linguistic – is a decisive foundation for later outcomes. The Panel has examined the role of early developmental checks, international practice, and current

gaps in information transfer between health, early years and primary education. On this basis, it recommends a strengthened approach to early assessment that supports early identification, timely intervention, and more effective collaboration across agencies.

8.170   The Panel has also reviewed the role and purpose of reading assessments across the statutory pathway, noting the importance of phonics, fluency and comprehension in securing literacy. The recommendation for a structured sequence of statutory reading assessments reflects both international evidence and the need to support early identification of difficulties and progression through the primary and post-primary years.

8.171   Alongside this, the Panel proposes the establishment of a Northern Ireland Writing Repository to strengthen writing standards without imposing the workload and reliability challenges associated with standalone writing tests.

8.172   In defining what should not be included in statutory assessment at this stage, such as digital literacy, creativity, higher-order thinking and oracy, the Panel has been guided by the need for stability of constructs, interpretability of outcomes, technical robustness and workload considerations. While these areas are vital elements of the new curriculum, and essential to pupils' development, the Panel concludes that they are best advanced through high-quality curriculum design, pedagogy and school-level assessment, rather than through statutory tests.

8.173   Finally, the chapter has reaffirmed the importance of ensuring that statutory assessment supports all learners, including those with SEN. The Panel highlights the need for sensitive interpretation of assessment data, appropriate use of special arrangements, and continued reliance on high-quality diagnostic and school-level assessments alongside statutory measures.

8.174   Taken together, the Panel's recommendations in this chapter provide the foundations for a statutory assessment framework that is coherent, proportionate and forward-looking; one that strengthens early identification, supports progression, reinforces core skills and preserves space for the breadth and richness of the curriculum. This framework is designed not only to assess what matters, but to enable the system to act early and effectively in support of every learner, helping to secure the ambitions of the wider TransformED reforms.

Chapter 9:
Key elements of the assessment pathway

Introduction

9.1 A coherent statutory assessment pathway from Year 1 to Year 10 is essential to supporting high-quality learning, early identification of need, and sustained progression for every pupil. Drawing on robust domestic and international evidence, the Panel proposes a streamlined set of assessments that focus on the core building blocks of literacy, numeracy and science, while remaining tightly aligned with the new Northern Ireland Curriculum.

9.2 The pathway balances educational value, technical dependability and manageable workload. Each assessment is designed to be short, purposeful and low-burden, providing reliable information for pupils, parents and carers, teachers and system leaders. While initial implementation will require preparation, the long-term effect will be a more efficient, clearer and more supportive assessment system.

The pathway

9.3 The Panel recommends a clear assessment pathway which sets out assessment opportunities from Year 1 to Year 10. This pathway should include:

- **Year 1:** Baseline check
- **Year 2*:** Phonics check
- **Years 3 to 5:** Annual reading fluency check
- **Year 4:** Literacy and numeracy assessments
- **Year 5:** Multiplication check
- **Year 7:** Literacy, numeracy and science assessments
- **Year 10:** Literacy, numeracy and science assessments

*If pupils do not meet the required standard in the phonics check in Year 2, then it needs to be retaken when ready. When the phonics standard is met, it is followed by 3 years of reading fluency checks.

9.4 The framework is designed to provide reliable information for pupils, parents and carers, schools and policymakers on the key areas of literacy, numeracy and science. These assessments will be closely linked to curriculum content and the Year 4, 7 and 10 assessments will relate scaled scores to an expected standard rather than broad curriculum levels.

9.5   Workload has been a key consideration in developing this framework. The Panel recognises that there are initial workload implications in implementing new arrangements; this is of clear concern to schools. The Panel anticipates a short increase in workload during initial preparation and startup of the new arrangements, then a decline after they are established.

9.6   The Panel has designed the new framework to enhance information to pupils, parents and carers, schools and the state, and to be a dependable feature of education arrangements. As set out later in the report, recommendations include enhancements to continuing professional development on assessment, and an enhanced assessment component within Initial Teacher Education.

Purpose statement for each element of the assessment pathway

9.7   This chapter sets out the specific purpose of each assessment above, clarifying what it is designed to measure, how it supports learning, and how its outcomes should be interpreted within a coherent and dependable system.

9.8   These purpose statements are extremely important. There is frequent confusion regarding the measurement purpose of assessments and this can lead to serious errors in score interpretation and inappropriate use of assessment outcomes (Newton 2007).

9.9   For example, some assessments are designed to spread scores with the aim of discriminating between all candidates; by contrast other assessments focus on a key threshold in performance to differentiate between those who pass that threshold and those that do not; yet others focus on ensuring that candidates possess attainment in large or all areas of a domain. Purpose matters and affects both the design of assessment, and the nature of valid and invalid inferences from the resulting scores.

Baseline Check

Purpose Statement
This is an ability-focussed assessment producing accurate estimates of ability in key areas of communication, number sense, interpersonal skills and cognitive function. Scores establish how a pupil sits in relation to age expectations and whether there are areas of concern which require further assessment and action.

9.10   The baseline check builds on well-established models around the world. Administered in Year 1, it will provide vital information on individual pupil's development on entry to formal schooling, allowing early recognition of needs, information on the readiness of the classes entering a school, and a metric for schools to establish their 'value-added'. It will be simple and quick to administer and needs no moderation. The scores allow identification of pupils where further focussed diagnostic testing is required to identify specific needs.

Phonics check

Purpose Statement
This is a threshold assessment to ensure that all pupils have reached a desired threshold of mastery. Scores identify those who have not reached an adequate standard and will need additional support and learning to be adequately prepared for progression to the next stage of education.

9.11   The phonics check, which will be taken by the end of Year 2, builds on international best practice in systems where the science of reading has been used as a focus for improvement. It is quick and easy to administer, and the score is simple. It needs no moderation. It gives a valid and reliable check on reading attainment at a crucial time in pupils' development. It allows schools to identify pupils in need of additional support and reinforces the importance of high-quality reading programmes. The phonics check plays a key role in securing early reading.

Reading fluency checks

Purpose Statement
This is an ability-focussed assessment, which can be taken annually from Year 3 onwards. Scores produce an accurate estimate of a pupil's reading ability, establishing how they sit in relation to age expectations and, through repeated administrations, their rate of development of reading over time. It allows identification of those in need of additional support and additional diagnostic assessment of reading difficulties.

9.12   Reading fluency checks are extremely simple and quick to administer, needing no moderation. The score (correct words read per minute) is a clear standard in its own right and is a highly valuable and valid measure of reading development.

9.13   If a pupil reaches the required standard in the phonics check in Year 2, this is followed by reading fluency checks in Years 3, 4 and 5. If a pupil does not meet the required phonics standard in Year 2, then the phonics assessment is repeated when the child is ready. Reading fluency checks are then conducted for three years from the time the standard is met. To complement the statutory assessments, optional reading fluency checks will be available for all years from Year 2 to Year 10.

9.14   This approach builds on international examples of leading-edge practice. It can be repeatedly administered through compulsory schooling to trace the development of a pupil's reading skills. Reading fluency checks are a vital element of the drive to reverse the current global decline of literacy.

Comprehension tests

Purpose Statement
This is an ability-focussed assessment, with scores differentiating pupils' ability to infer meaning, analyse context, analyse authorial intent and identify text features. The test is designed to be sensitive to the range of different pupils' ability rather than operate as a threshold assessment.

9.15   The comprehension tests, to be taken in Years 4, 7 and 10, will be easy to administer, short and can be auto-marked, requiring no marking load or moderation. They build on well-established models around the world and are valid and reliable tests of literacy. The proposed assessments are staged at key points in schooling allowing schools to review pupils' progress and identify where additional support is required. As with the reading fluency checks, the comprehension tests are crucial in reinforcing reading during a period of international decline in literacy.

Science and Mathematics

Purpose Statement
These are curriculum-linked assessments, sampling from the subject domain, and focussing on the fundamentals of the subject domain. Sampling and variation in focus in successive assessments encourages full curriculum coverage. Scores produce estimates of understanding across key elements of the subject; item score analysis indicates areas of strength and weakness in understanding of subject fundamentals – facilitating further support and diagnostic assessment.

9.16   In Year 4, the number and four operations test in Mathematics is a short, early check of fluency in basic mathematics. It will be short and requires no moderation. The report from the test will be designed to reveal areas of strength and any areas of insecure skill and understanding. Many pupils are insecure in number, and this can become evident in post-primary. The check will support identification of gaps and will guide support for both year cohorts and individual pupils.

9.17   The statutory tests in mathematics and science in Years 7 and 10 will be important curriculum-linked tests, allowing measurement of pupils' progress against the new curriculum content. They can be auto-marked, requiring no marking load or moderation. Contemporary research suggests that with good design, these tests can be relatively short, sampling across the domains of mathematics and science, preserving measurement accuracy without the washback effect of narrowing the curriculum. The science test is particularly important in Year 7, to re-establish the importance of early understanding of core science.

Multiplication check

> **Purpose Statement**
> This is a mastery-focussed assessment. Tightly focussed on high facility in recalling multiplication facts. Scores indicate whether a pupil has reached an expected threshold in mastery of multiplication facts. It will allow identification of those in need of additional support and diagnostic assessment.

9.18   The multiplication check, which will be taken in Year 5, will be quick and easy to administer and will mirror existing school tests. The score will be simple and requires no moderation. The check reinforces the importance of memorisation of times tables and foundational knowledge of number bonds; these are the essential building blocks of secure mathematical skills. The test outcomes identify where additional support is required.

Writing Repository

9.19   Emphasis on the quality of writing is essential, as writing also is decaying globally. At present, however, assessment of writing is very labour intensive and has reliability problems. The Writing Repository does not, therefore, require assessment of writing. Rather it allows anonymous comparison of examples of writing from all years and across schools thereby supporting writing development in schools. It will also allow overall trends in the quality of writing to be observed at system level and in turn inform support and guidance to schools on approaches to quality improvement. It will not provide judgements of the writing of every child but help schools in establishing secure approaches to quality writing.

9.20   Schools will be required to submit no more than 5 short, unmarked samples, showing the range of writing quality in Years 4, 6 and 8. Submissions are optional but encouraged for other year groups.

Conclusion and key points

9.21   The assessment pathway outlined in this chapter provides a coherent, evidence-informed structure for monitoring progression from Year 1 to Year 10. It is designed to be purposeful, low-burden and tightly aligned with the curriculum. The pathway strengthens early identification of need, reinforces essential literacy and numeracy foundations, and delivers dependable information for pupils, parents and carers, teachers and the wider system.

9.22   By clarifying the purpose of each assessment, the framework supports valid interpretation, reduces unnecessary workload and ensures that assessment contributes meaningfully to learning rather than distorting it.

9.23   The key points in regard to the proposals are set out below.

- The new pathway offers a sequenced set of short, focused assessments from Year 1 to Year 10, targeting the core skills most essential to long-term attainment and equitable progression.

- Purpose statements ensure clarity about what each assessment measures, how results should be interpreted, and how they support next steps in learning.

- The model reflects strong domestic and international evidence, favouring assessments that deliver high validity and utility with minimal workload.

- Short-term preparation will be required, but once embedded the system is designed to reduce teacher workload, increase consistency and support more reliable decision-making.

- The pathway strengthens the information available to pupils, parents and carers, teachers and policymakers, supporting informed action at all levels of the system.

- The proposed design of statutory assessment ensures alignment with the new Northern Ireland Curriculum; recommended enhancements to Initial Teacher Education and wider professional development further support teachers to use assessment effectively and confidently.

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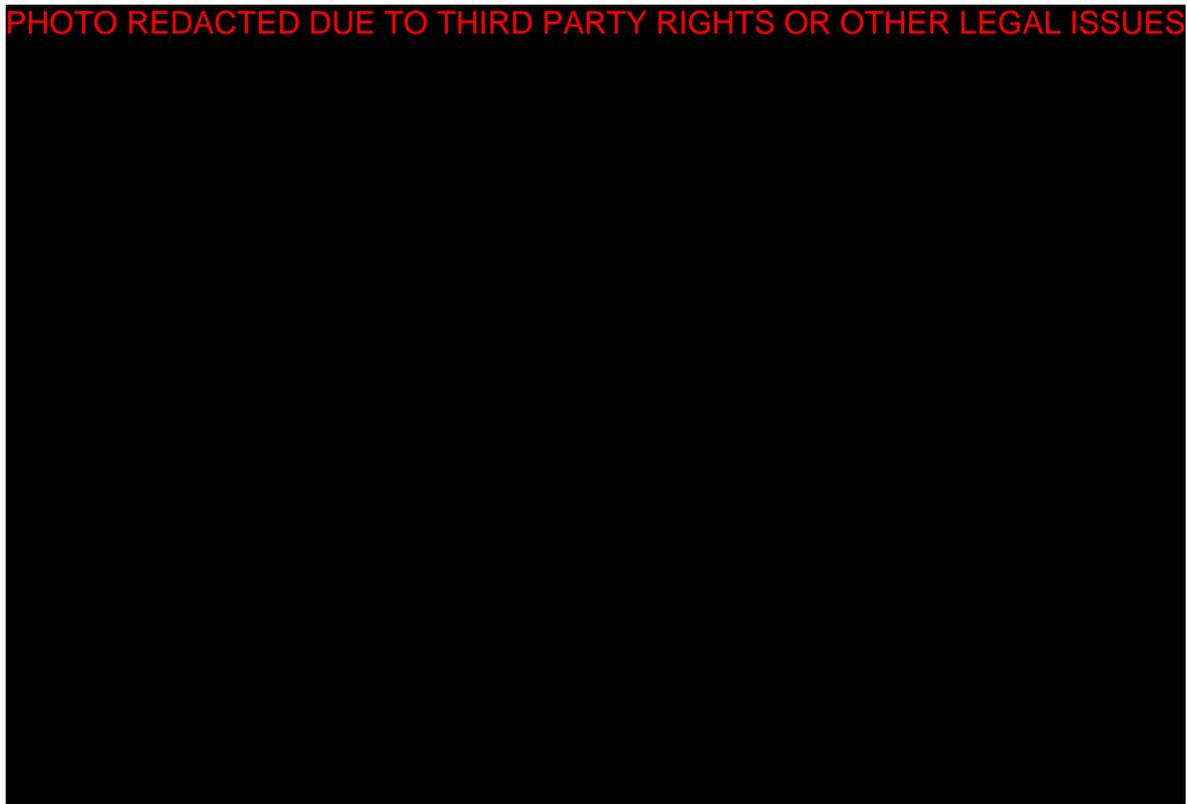
Chapter 10:
Standards in statutory assessment

Introduction

10.1   Clear, trusted educational standards are the foundation of a credible statutory assessment system. Yet "standards" is not a single idea: it can refer to the difficulty of questions, the curriculum content assessed, the awarding rules used to convert raw marks to reported results, the quality of candidates' responses, the overall attainment inferred from grades or scores, the expectations set by the curriculum, the overall outcomes in a system, and even the quality of teaching that enables those outcomes. When these distinct meanings are blurred in public debate, discussions about fairness, consistency and change over time can become confused and contested.

10.2   This chapter clarifies the concept of standards, illustrates why careful maintenance matters for public confidence, and sets out a practical approach for statutory assessment in Northern Ireland that combines longevity, transparency and technical robustness. It proposes overarching criteria rather than one prescribed technical method for maintaining standards, supported by appropriate equating, governance and communication so that reported results remain comparable and meaningful over time.

Standards

10.3   It is essential to have clarity about educational standards and how they are determined. 'Standards' can variously refer to:

- **Standards of demand:** the level of difficulty of an assessment and the challenge which it presents to candidates.

- **Content standards:** the curriculum coverage of an assessment or set of assessments.

- **Awarding standards and 'standardised' scores:** relating performance in a given assessment or set of assessments to determine a final grade or score. This can involve adjusting the raw score from an assessment to align it with a criterion such as a grade description or to link the raw score to a standardised score.

- **Outcome standards:** what candidates have actually produced in response to the demands of an assessment.

- **Standards of attainment:** the final results – grades or scores – which candidates have achieved and from which overall attainment or ability is inferred

- **Curriculum standards:** the goals and expectations laid out in the statutory curriculum and expressed in the curriculum of individual schools

- **Standards of teaching:** the quality of the learning processes and learning experiences which candidates have experienced

10.4   The problem of many discussions in the press and within education is that these different issues are often confused, or people engaged in debate use the same word 'standards' in different ways (Isaacs et al 2018; Cambridge Assessment 2010).

10.5   Discussions about standards often engage with issues of fairness and consistency, standards over time, and standards between subjects (Newton 2007). The discussion can be hampered by the fact that some of the processes used by agencies to derive final grades or scores can be highly technical and lacking in transparency.

10.6   For the new statutory assessment arrangements in Northern Ireland, the Panel outlines arrangements which are intended to enjoy public confidence and should be in place for decades to come. Longevity in arrangements is important, since this allows educational quality to be monitored and duty to children sustained. This requires clarity in purpose and process, alongside both value and dependability of the assessments and outcomes.

10.7   In a system committed to raising overall standards of attainment, we would both wish and expect statutory assessment scores to improve over time. However, this raises a critical concern: are rising scores the result of genuinely higher attainment, or have the assessments themselves become easier?

10.8   Sweden provides a cautionary example. Over an extended period, teacher-awarded grades rose significantly while PISA results simultaneously declined. This divergence led to a substantial loss of public confidence and ultimately contributed to a national crisis regarding educational standards. To restore trust and ensure consistent monitoring of attainment, Sweden introduced new nationally standardised tests, marked by teachers but centrally designed, to re-establish reliable benchmarks for performance.

10.9   England provides a further example. During the early 2000s, there was accumulating concern that, in both statutory assessments and in GCSE and A-level qualifications, awarding standards had declined (Statistics Commission 2005; Cambridge Assessment 2010). Multiple sources of evidence suggested that this was the case. In response, the national regulator OFQUAL introduced a statistically driven model of 'comparable outcomes' for national qualifications.

10.10   In the context of a very large pupil population of around 800,000 pupils per year (Northern Ireland, Wales and England), there would be a tendency for a stability in the relationship between prior attainment at 11 measured by the national tests and attainment outcomes at 16, and again in the relationship between GCSE and A level outcomes. This is a form of 'cohort referencing'.

10.11   It holds standards in place by assuming a stable relationship *in general* between scores at different ages – individual pupils can of course buck the trend, but the relationship would be assumed to be true overall. The comparable outcomes approach played a valuable part in stabilising awarding standards in both GCSE and A Level, working to prevent the downward drift in awarding standards.

10.12   In this context, demand standards (the difficulty and challenge of questions) might decline making the qualifications easier but the awarding standards (what raw mark would equal which grade) would be held firm by equating grades with outcomes in earlier assessments.

10.13   The downside of this approach is that whilst it restrained inflation and allowed 'carry over' of awarding standards when new specifications were introduced, it was incapable of responding to a genuine systemic rise or deterioration in the performance of the overall pupil population or any sub-population of the overall cohort.

10.14   Due to this limitation, two National Reference Tests (NRT) in Maths and English Language were trialled in 2016 and introduced in 2017. It is administered in February or early March to a national sample of pupils (around 350 of the 3,400 schools in England) who are about to take GCSEs. Schools are required by law to participate. These tests established a baseline for national standards.

10.15   The NRTs are sensitive to increases or decreases in attainment, with the results forming the basis for adjustment of the grading of GCSEs which otherwise would be based principally on the 'comparable outcomes' predictions. The NRT items are repeated year on year, and wide curriculum coverage is ensured through having six test booklets – a pupil only takes one of these six – with the booklets linked through common items. OFQUAL first used the NRT to make adjustments in 2019 but then came COVID-19 and the suspension of exams for two years. Despite changes in NRT outcomes, these were not used to adjust examinations outcomes in 2024 (EPI 2024).

10.16   The English Government and OFQUAL communicate in detail about the awarding processes and the role of the NRT, and the processes are well understood by the press (see for example Schools Week 2025; TES 2025).

10.17   Any government interested in improving the quality of education needs to be able to monitor standards and determine whether outcomes are improving. They also need to determine whether they are improving for all pupils or only some. It needs to maintain awarding standards so that it is always the case that two pupils in different years but with the same attainment receive the same final score. This is vital for consistency and fairness, and for public trust.

10.18   Equating processes are statistical techniques used to ensure that assessment scores remain comparable from year to year, even when different versions of a test are used. By adjusting for variations in difficulty between test forms, equating allows results to be placed on a common scale, so that a score in one year means the same as the same score in another. This provides confidence that changes in attainment reflect real differences in pupil performance rather than differences in the tests themselves.

10.19   Robust equating enables the state to monitor trends over time, evaluate the impact of school practices and policy decisions, and identify variations in outcomes across the system: functions that are essential for promoting equity and raising standards in education.

10.20   Regrettably, equating processes are not only necessary but also complex. While the press in England may have responded well to the government's and the regulator's communications on these matters, little is known about the depth of teachers' and parents' understanding. It is clear in comment from the USA that misunderstanding can be deeply entrenched (New York Times 2024).

10.21   Technical procedures for monitoring and maintaining standards also differ with different forms of testing and assessment. Cambridge Assessment (Cambridge Assessment 2017) identified three main models of assessment as set out below.

Models of Assessment

Banked Items

Design – validation – pre-testing – banking (with meta data) – administration – outcomes

This model allows accumulation of items where the difficulty (demand standard) is known. Tests then can be assembled on the basis of an established level of difficulty, with items being reused and a range of equivalent items being present in the bank. This allows precise test content to vary, but demand standards to remain the same. Adjustment of standards through an awarding process should not normally be needed in this model, but items should be constantly monitored and retired when over-exposed or misbehaving in measurement properties.

Items in this model are typically objective items (questions that have one clearly correct answer and can be marked consistently without requiring examiner judgement), which are auto-marked, but manually marked short answer open response items can operate within this model.

Awarding-Based Models

Design – review – administration – outcomes – awarding – endorsement

Items are not typically pre-tested and so a judgement is made as to whether an item is appropriate to the curriculum and is likely to measure well.

Item performance is usually subjected to scrutiny after administration, and the scores in components and on the qualification overall are scrutinised using data derived from the awarding session, previous sessions, and other bodies of data such as prior attainment of candidates. Proposed final outcomes are scrutinised or 'endorsed' in England by the national regulator Ofqual.

Performance-Based Models

Specification of standards/objectives – identification or specification of opportunities to collect evidence – judgement – moderation

Typical of vocational and professional qualifications and activity-based elements of academic qualifications for example science practical's, geography field studies, physical education.

Assessment is based on simulated or naturally occurring activities which allow assessment against stated assessment standards or objectives

A proposed approach to standards in statutory assessment in Northern Ireland

10.22 The Panel recognises that, over time, statutory assessment in Northern Ireland will inevitably evolve through changes in item types, refinements to the curriculum, advances in assessment modes and technologies, and improvements in equating and comparison methods. Despite this natural progression, it is essential to establish a long-term, stable approach to setting and maintaining attainment standards that can serve Northern Ireland for decades rather than years.

10.23 For this reason, the Panel recommends the establishment of a set of overarching criteria for maintaining standards, rather than prescribing fixed technical procedures for each assessment. This will ensure both consistency over time and the flexibility needed to respond to developments in assessment practice.

Criteria for Maintaining Standards in Statutory Assessment

i. Ensuring continuity of standards through robust equating

Equating processes must link test standards securely over time, ensuring that changes in scores reflect genuine changes in attainment and not differences in test difficulty. Discontinuities in equating methods should be avoided. Where a change in approach is necessary, it must be subject to strong governance, justified by a clear rationale, and fully documented.

ii. Sensitivity to system-level trends and individual fairness

Equating methods should be capable of detecting real improvements or declines in system-wide attainment, while continuing to provide fair, dependable and interpretable results for individual pupils.

iii. Use of multiple equating methods where appropriate

Where feasible, informative and cost-effective, more than one equating approach should be used—for example, common-item equating, Item Response Theory approaches, and bookmarking. Multiple methods support greater confidence in trends and consistency.

iv. Retention of test data for continuity and scrutiny

To ensure transparency and allow future recalibration if required, granular test data should be archived for every test administration. This includes test papers, scripts, scoring guides and all related documentation so that historical scores remain interpretable by future analysts and administrators.

v. Strong ongoing governance of standards

Standards maintenance must be overseen by a dedicated governance structure. The Panel recommends establishing a technical working group on attainment standards, comprising independent psychometric experts, statutory test providers, ETI representatives, officials and teaching workforce representatives.

This group should:

- keep methods under active review,

- advise on when changes are necessary,

- oversee implementation of any changes,

- consider outcomes from international assessments, and

- publish an annual report on standards monitoring and maintenance.

This will help ensure transparency, consistency and public confidence.

vi. Full documentation and clear public communication

All methods used to monitor and maintain standards should be clearly documented. There should be transparent communication with the public and the profession to support understanding of how standards are maintained and how assessment outcomes should be interpreted.

The importance of scores

10.24   The Panel emphasises the importance of using numerical scores rather than grades or levels for statutory assessment. Numerical scores are used extensively in assessment in Northern Ireland schools, who are conversant in their use.

10.25   Scores better support the purposes of all users, from pupils, parents and carers to schools and the state. Scores are used in large transnational tables and better support processes such as age and sub-group analyses. They can better support the inclusion of error estimates when this is deemed appropriate. They also support improvement in attainment standards over time. Finally, the transpositions which are essential to equating and comparability work are enhanced by the use of scores.

10.26   In the context of good maintenance of attainment standards over time, there is a mutual interest in dependable data from assessments. Parents and carers, and pupils require information on attainment to support progression and inform family interaction with schools. Schools require dependable information on attainment to self-monitor and undertake comparisons which allow improvement. In funding education with public money and requiring children to attend school by law, the State has a well-grounded interest in the quality of education, in equity and patterns of attainment.

10.27   The Panel believes key consideration should be given to the use of standardised scores, age referenced (but not age standardised) equated year on year.

Scaled scores

10.28   It is proposed that a given score in a test will be linked to a scaled score. This enables scores to be linked between tests and between years. It will enable standards to be identified and maintained over time, and every young person's performance linked to that identified standard.

10.29   Each person's score will not be adjusted for age. However, their score will be positioned against age-expectations according to month of birth, and this will be reported, either graphically, or in words (e.g. 'below age expectations', 'significantly above age expectations' etc), or both.

10.30   Each person's score will not be adjusted for the year cohort's performance. However, their score will be positioned in relation to their cohort's distribution of scores. Their position in cohort will be displayed graphically and reported as rank order to be determined by the Reporting Unit.

10.31   All item performance data will be available. The reporting system will be able to provide the item, the person's score, and other interpretative data such as the cohort performance on the item. The reporting system will provide reports according to the needs of schools and the state.

Conclusion and key points

10.32   Maintaining standards is not about holding the system still; it is about ensuring that improvements in scores genuinely reflect improvements in learning, and that like performance is rewarded with like outcomes across cohorts and years.

10.33   Learning from international experience, this chapter recommends a standards strategy for statutory assessment built on scaled numerical scores, sensitive equating methods, and clear governance, including a technical working group and full documentation – to preserve comparability, support fairness and sustain public trust.

10.34   By adopting overarching criteria for standards maintenance in statutory assessment, Northern Ireland can accommodate curriculum renewal and assessment innovation while protecting the integrity of reported outcomes. In short, the proposed approach enables the system to recognise real progress when it occurs, diagnose issues when it does not, and communicate both with clarity to pupils, parents and carers, teachers and policymakers.

Chapter 11:
Supporting the new statutory framework

Introduction

11.1   This chapter explores how Northern Ireland can strengthen the infrastructure, processes and professional capacity needed to support educational assessment. The Panel's work has consistently highlighted that while assessment practice in Northern Ireland's schools is often sophisticated, the overarching systems that underpin the collection, interpretation and transfer of information about children's development remain fragmented and underdeveloped. In particular inconsistent approaches to information sharing and the absence of a coherent longitudinal record create barriers to timely support and informed decision-making for children and young people.

11.2   Research demonstrates that many learning needs, including those that emerge later in schooling, can be identified earlier when assessment information is gathered systematically and interpreted effectively. For children with SEN or complex profiles, the ability to capture and communicate narrative, developmental and contextual information is especially important. Schools, health services, and families all share a common interest in better systems for understanding a child's progress, ensuring continuity of support and allowing professionals to work from a shared evidence base.

11.3   The chapter therefore considers how a Record of Development and Education for Northern Ireland could provide a single, accumulating, high-quality digital record to support transitions, strengthen early intervention and reduce avoidable workloads for teachers. It also examines the essential role of clear protocols, consistent practice and professional development in ensuring that such a record is used well and interpreted responsibly.

11.4   Alongside this, the chapter sets out the case for a Reporting Unit that can improve assessment reporting, enhance validity in the use of outcomes, and support schools and policymakers in drawing sound conclusions from data.

11.5   Finally, the chapter explores the implications for this Review for Initial Teacher Education and ongoing professional learning. While teachers in Northern Ireland demonstrate strong commitment to assessment, the Panel found significant variation in training and specialist knowledge across the workforce. A more systematic approach to the development of assessment expertise beginning in Initial Teacher Education and continuing through early career development and career long professional learning is essential. In particular, developing knowledge and understanding of the theory and practice of educational assessment is vital.

Record of development and education Northern Ireland

11.6   TransformED places a strong strategic emphasis on enhancing the outcomes of all young people, at all stages of their education. A substantial body of research shows that many learning difficulties and emerging challenges, such as later-appearing reading difficulties or specific learning needs, can be detected much earlier in a child's development (e.g. Catts et al 2012 on later emerging poor readers; Horn & Packard 1985 on learning difficulties). This reinforces the need for timely, well-structured information to support early action.

11.7   There is also compelling evidence that early identification of specific needs and intervening promptly can significantly reduce later incidence of resource-intensive, acute needs (Children's Commissioner 2020; Stanford 2020). This suggests it is vital that information is collated, well-curated and readily available to professionals, particularly as pupils move through the education system.

11.8   The early years of a child's life involve support from many different services, making effective collaboration and the timely sharing of information essential. Ensuring that accurate, relevant data follows the child helps professionals take appropriate action, supports families, and promotes efficient use of public resources. It also reduces unnecessary workload for teachers and other practitioners and contributes to a better, more coherent professional working environment (Children's Commissioner 2020).

11.9   In Northern Ireland, legislation requires the transfer of information at points of transition (The Education (Pupil Records and Reporting) (Transitional) Regulations 2007). However, information transfer in Northern Ireland remains underdeveloped. There are also particular concerns from the special education sector that they need to devise bespoke recording methods at school level, resulting in varied practice due to the absence of established system-wide protocols.

11.10   A comprehensive record is especially important for pupils with SEN. Pupils may be making extremely important steps in areas such as executive function and daily functioning, and although these may not register in statutory assessment instruments such as phonics checks and Key Stage tests, they are vital in respect of development. Recording this progress should not in any way reduce ambition for pupils with SEN or limit their engagement with curriculum expectations and formal assessments whenever possible. Rather, it complements statutory assessment by providing a fuller, more accurate picture of each pupil's learning and development.

11.11   The Panel has been consistently mindful of the need for an inclusive system. The Panel believes that its recommendations for statutory assessment and their supporting arrangements will deliver greater equity and support children with SEN. However, there are some pupils, who due to their complexity of need, may be unable to access the proposed statutory assessments and will need to avail of the temporary exemption arrangements.

11.12 The exemption framework has been in place for many years and should now be reviewed to ensure enhanced inclusion wherever possible. In the interim, it is essential that best practice in SEN assessment is shared widely across the system to promote equity and consistency.

11.13 Given the evident gaps in information capture and transfer, the Panel recommends establishing a Record of Development and Education for Northern Ireland – a digital, longitudinal record of development and attainment that follows every child. This is a vital, cost-effective means of supporting developments in statutory assessment, ensuring more effective and early identification of specific needs and the effective transfer of information thereby reducing the workload of professionals.

11.14 However, this is a challenging area in which the creation of a record alone will not deliver the necessary enhancements to equity and attainment. It is important to recognise that recording practices are influenced by professional judgement and organisational culture, including tendencies such as the "rule of optimism".

11.15 The rule of optimism can lead to significant information being omitted, minimised or not shared. This may undermine relationships, reduce professional confidence and limit effective support for pupils (Department for Education 2016). Clear protocols are needed to counteract these risks.

11.16 For the new record to be effective, there must be robust protocols governing what information is collected, how it is curated, how it should be accessed, and what actions should follow. These protocols must be supported by comprehensive professional development so that practitioners can make confident, consistent and evidence-based decisions.

11.17 The Panel has also recommended the establishment of a **Northern Ireland Reporting Unit** to strengthen interpretation and use of statutory assessment information. This will enhance the quality and clarity of data used within the Record of Development and Education, but further measures are needed to ensure that the record is used effectively.

11.18 Effective judgement requires spotting patterns in developmental and attainment data whether emerging trends, anomalies or signs of need (ACER 2021; Horn et al 2015; Russell 2021). It also requires interpreting individual data within wider school and system contexts, such as teaching practices, school culture or organisational processes (Jessiman et al 2022).

11.19 This is an underdeveloped and complex area of educational practice, yet essential to inform a rigorous approach in schools to identifying needs rather than relying on hunches or justifying a decision that has already been made. It is, therefore, important to build a rich picture of pupil needs by gathering and reflecting on a wide range of data and generating credible interpretations of that data. It is vital that practitioners take time to reflect on what might be causing the problem and challenges. When interpreting data, it is key to triangulate evidence from different sources and avoid setting out to confirm preconceptions (Sharples et al 2024).

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11.20   Research from Australia highlights how many education systems have underdeveloped routines for using assessment data. Studies found that data practices were often reactive rather than planned, with frequent policy and tool changes preventing the development of consistent processes. Schools lacked standardised procedures for collecting and analysing data, and data use was not well integrated into teaching practice. The evidence suggests that data should be embedded purposefully and practically, and that when new data processes are introduced, existing demands should be reduced to avoid adding further workload (Raffe & Loughland 2021).

11.21   The Panel does not prescribe a single delivery model for wider support in interpreting and acting on the Record. However, such support must be established and is likely to involve multi-service governance and collaboration with Initial Teacher Education providers and professional development organisations. Protocols will require rigorous design, supported by ongoing evaluation and research.

11.22   As a digital record, technology-supported scrutiny and use of the record is likely to develop swiftly. AI systems are beginning to provide workload reduction for professionals in making records and in extracting information to make judgements about action (Rothera 2025; Swindon Borough Council 2024; Hoe et al 2013).

11.23   The system must also recognise the importance of a "fresh start" for some pupils. For learners with difficult prior experiences, a reset in expectations and identity can be transformative. School connectedness, identity and peer relationships interact strongly with attainment (De Moor et al 2023; Lorijn et al 2020). The record must therefore support, not hinder, pupils in beginning anew.

11.24   Similarly, care must be taken to avoid rigid 'flightpaths' that lock pupils into predetermined trajectories. Valuable work on 'value-added' and tracking pupil progress has highlighted unfortunate practice which overdetermines a young person's progression, for example, by over rigid setting which prevents them from being exposed to more demanding material; leading to a cycle of self-fulfilling low expectations.

11.25   The Panel, therefore, recommends establishing a coherent, accessible Record of Development and Education for Northern Ireland, containing all relevant developmental, narrative and statutory assessment information across phases. This record will support early identification, reduce duplication, enhance transitions and equip professionals with the evidence they need to support each learner effectively.

Education Reporting Unit

11.26   In developing statutory assessment for Northern Ireland, the Panel advises adopting an extended definition of test validity that considers not only whether an assessment measures what it intends to measure but also how the results are interpreted and used. Under this view, the entire chain from administration to action forms part of validity (Cambridge Assessment 2010):

Test administration→Scoring→Final score generation→Reporting→Interpretation→Action

11.27   For assessment information to benefit young people, reports must be clear, intelligible and practically useful. This requires careful attention to the purpose, design, content and language of reports so that users understand what the outcomes mean and what actions may be needed to support learning.

11.28   Different users rely on assessment information for different purposes (Newton 2007). These users include: pupils, teachers, school leaders, parents and carers, government agencies and departments. Although they draw on the same underlying data, their needs vary. Teachers may use scores to understand a pupil's progress, plan support, or compare performance across groups. Schools may use the same information to monitor trends or benchmark against similar schools. Government bodies require aggregated data to understand system-wide standards, equity, and the impact of educational policy.

11.29   As assessment data serves multiple purposes, different forms of reporting are required from item-level feedback for classroom use to summary analyses for system monitoring. Notably, teachers' workloads can escalate when reports are unclear, incomplete or require significant manual compilation. It is also essential that any externally produced reports include transparent explanations of how reference data (e.g. norm-referenced data) are compiled to avoid misinterpretation.

11.30   It is clear from our discussions with schools that there is wider use of more formal assessment instruments as children progress through schooling than in the other three jurisdictions of the UK, and considerable sophistication in the interpretation of assessment outcomes. Schools value standard reports but often require tailored or more flexible reporting tools. Usage also varies considerably across schools and subjects, highlighting the need for consistent, high-quality support.

11.31   Scrutiny of the 'next steps' sections of a range of assessment reports from different agencies, providers and nations indicates that 'next steps' guidance is very underdeveloped. It is an underdeveloped field in educational research, despite the importance of better supporting teachers in the interpretation and use of the outcomes of assessment (Swaffield 2011; Wiliam 2013).

11.32   Technology will increasingly shape assessment, reporting and interpretation. While automated reporting tools offer significant potential, they also present risks if reports lack technical quality or if users apply them without sufficient guidance. High-quality reporting must remain grounded in sound assessment principles, regardless of technological advances.

11.33   To address these issues, the Panel recommends establishing an independent Education Reporting Unit for Northern Ireland. This Unit would produce all statutory assessment reports for all user groups and provide professional development on interpreting and using assessment information.

11.34   The Unit is required urgently to improve current reporting practice. In the medium term, it will help support evaluation of reform under TransformED, and in the long term ensure that emerging technologies and new reporting tools meet high technical standards. It will also play a central role in identifying and disseminating good practice across the system.

11.35   Separating test administration from reporting would further strengthen accountability and quality assurance. The Unit could be established either as an executive function within the Department of Education or as an independent body.

11.36   In addition to producing reports, the Unit would provide targeted professional learning for all user groups. For example, it could host an annual conference focused on interpretation of assessment outcomes, the effective use of reports and implications for practice.

11.37   In combination, the Record of Development and Education Northern Ireland and the Reporting Unit provide the infrastructure for increasing sophistication and utility in the use of assessment outcomes.

Initial Teacher Education and professional development

11.38   Educational assessment is universally recognised as central to effective teaching and learning (Shaffner 2008; QCDA 2011; Wiliam 2013; CCEA 2014; Wong & Kaur 2015; Gov. UK, undated; Independent Review of Education 2023; Toko 2024). It is the primary mechanism through which teachers, pupils and policymakers gather information to guide decisions and improve outcomes. This centrality was strongly affirmed in the Panel's discussions with teachers and school leaders across Northern Ireland. However, despite the importance of assessment, the Panel repeatedly heard concerns about the preparedness of early-career teachers in both the theory and practical application of educational assessment.

11.39   The General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) provides the statutory framework of Teacher Competences (GTCNI 2011), which underpins all accredited Initial Teacher Education programmes. The framework sets out twenty-seven competences teachers should possess including assessment as an element of their professional skills and application.

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11.40   Assessment competences are presented under Professional Skills and Application. It states teachers will:

- focus on assessment for learning by monitoring pupils' progress, giving constructive feedback to help pupils reflect on and improve their learning.

- select from a range of assessment strategies to evaluate pupils' learning and use this information in their planning to help make their teaching more effective.

- assess the levels of pupils' attainment against relevant benchmarking data and understand the relationship between pupil assessment and target setting.

- liaise orally and in written reports in an effective manner with parents or carers on their child's progress and achievements.

11.41   Each of the Competencies are supported by phase exemplars covering a range of learning stages: Initial Teacher Education; Induction; Early Professional Development; Continuing Professional Development, Collaborative Practice and School Improvement.

11.42   Initial Teacher Education in Northern Ireland mirrors the wider UK system with several routes to qualification. All programmes delivered are based on the GTCNI Teacher Competences. Courses are available at undergraduate level (four-year B.Ed.) and postgraduate level (one-year PGCE).

11.43   Initial Teacher Education is delivered across four accredited institutions – Queen's University Belfast, St Mary's University College, Stranmillis University College, and Ulster University – each with differing areas of specialisation. Programmes cover primary, post-primary, further education and Irish-medium routes. Some prospective teachers train outside Northern Ireland and more latterly Coventry University Group's National Institute of Teaching and Education has focused its attention on Northern Ireland with its distance learning courses.

11.44   While recruitment remains strong overall, particularly at nursery and primary and also for many subjects at post-primary, shortages have emerged in recent years in a number of subjects at post-primary (mathematics, physics, chemistry, IT and technology and design, as well as in the Irish-medium sector) prompting the Department to introduce student bursaries in these subjects.

11.45   However, despite the range of provision and the content and aspirations of the Competency Framework, the Panel heard from numerous participants in school visits that the depth and quality of educational assessment content provided in Initial Teacher Education was insufficient. Some newly qualified teachers had encountered key concepts such as validity and reliability during training, but had limited opportunity to apply this learning in practice.

11.46   As stated above, the provisions found in Initial Teacher Education courses across the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland are aligned with statutory frameworks and competences. This approach is common in other jurisdictions such as Hong Kong and Estonia. However, competences associated with educational assessment are often vague and open to interpretation.

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11.47 This may be further compounded by the restricted amount of time available in Initial Teacher Education courses to explore educational assessment in sufficient depth: this may be particularly true in one-year postgraduate courses. From our discussion with ITE providers, the course duration clearly plays a significant part in what can be covered. Research confirms these pressures. Research has found that attempting to extend assessment content within Initial Teacher Education risked overwhelming trainees, reinforcing the need for continued development during induction and early professional development (Walker 2020).

11.48 Course duration varies internationally. For example, Ireland offers a two-year postgraduate Master of Education, while Estonia requires a four-year Master's route. These longer programmes provide more capacity for deep study of assessment. In Northern Ireland, shorter PGCE courses increase the reliance on strong placement experiences and robust early-career professional development.

11.49 There is also a challenge in securing the employment of professional Initial Teacher Education educators with the appropriate expertise and experience in the theory and practice of educational assessment. This is further compounded as some Northern Ireland Initial Teacher Education providers also have smaller student numbers, limiting the breadth of assessment expertise available internally. A collaborative, shared core curriculum across institutions could help address this. This approach aligns with recommendations from *Aspiring to Excellence* (Sahlberg et al, 2014), which advocated for greater cooperation across Initial Teacher Education providers to strengthen the overall quality of provision.

11.50 It was also noted that the term *"initial"* should be better understood within the wider continuum of teacher development. Newly qualified teachers rely heavily on the support of colleagues in placement schools and during their early career years. Despite strong enthusiasm among providers and schools for greater alignment, the current system does not offer sufficient opportunities to create a cohesive developmental pathway that links Initial Teacher Education with induction and early-career professional learning.

11.51 Support for a more coherent approach to link aspects of educational assessment covered in Initial Teacher Education with early career development through continuous professional development is strong, with suggestions that such provision should be mandatory.

11.52 The Panel, therefore, advocates the development of a common core content for the study of educational assessment at the initial stage and importantly across the early years of career development.

11.53 This issue extends beyond early-career staff. The Panel also heard that the lack of access to professional development in the field of educational assessment and the failure to implement a statutory assessment during the last decade means that many teachers who have been in the profession for some time have not had the opportunity to develop their knowledge and understanding.

11.54   As one senior leader indicated, currently the development of assessment practice is wholly reliant on the level of expertise available in any one school. This has contributed to a lack of trust and confidence in teacher-based assessment across the system.

11.55   These concerns were voiced across all phases and sectors of education including early years and SEN settings. These conversations are supported by the outcomes of the Teacher Survey. With the caveat that there is no suggestion that findings of the survey are based on a representative sample, they do provide a valuable insight into perceptions of teachers and school leaders.

11.56   Sixty-seven percent of survey respondents felt confident in interpreting assessment data to inform their teaching with the remaining either somewhat confident (29%) or not at all confident (2.7%). However, the survey found that just under 50% of respondents stated that their Initial Teacher Education did not include training on assessment practices with a further 39% stating this was included but limited. Only 11% stated that assessment practices were included in depth.

11.57   Since entering the profession, 20% of respondents reported that they had received regular training in educational assessment, with 53% stating occasional training and 25% recording no further training. Of those who received additional training, the majority of respondents found the training moderately useful with 23% stating that the training was very useful and just under 8% stating extremely useful.

11.58   The survey also asked respondents to indicate the types of support and training that would support more effective use of assessment. Of those who answered this question (49% of all respondents), areas such as commercial assessment training (15%) and moderation (12.5%) were noted. Those who answered 'other' forms of support included data analysis and how to interpret data, how to use data to inform planning and the difference between formative and summative assessment.

11.59   In terms of the overall provision, the teacher survey showed an unbalanced approach to training on assessment at the initial stages of teacher education and beyond, which raises questions over the appropriate understanding and uses of assessment in school settings.

11.60   These findings mirror those from England. The NAHT (2014), the McIntosh Report (2015) and the Carter Review (2015) all emphasised the need for substantial improvement in assessment training within Initial Teacher Education, induction and ongoing professional development.

11.61   The Panel witnessed a tangible assessment culture in schools in Northern Ireland with a very clear appetite for continuous development and the sharing of expertise in educational assessment. Initial Teacher Education providers are equally keen to engage in offering wider support to schools.

11.62   Given the time and resource constraints in Initial Teacher Education programmes noted above, the importance of the other professional learning stages is heightened.

Continuous professional development for all teachers in the theory and practice of educational assessment would be of real benefit to the teaching and learning process.

11.63   The schools that the Panel visited frequently referred to their assessment lead or co-ordinator, which again shows the level of engagement with educational assessment found in schools in Northern Ireland. However, the role of assessment lead often forms part of a wider and often demanding range of responsibilities. Whilst this is understandable, especially in smaller schools, a more systematic programme of support, development and sharing good practice would strengthen the role. The NAHT has, for example, called for an independently accredited lead assessor in every school. Such an approach would bolster the position of assessment leads and provide wider opportunities to extend the quality of assessment practice in schools across Northern Ireland through the support they can provide to their teaching colleagues.

11.64   From our conversations with teachers and school leaders, there is a very clear commitment to the role of assessment leads and a desire for professional development. This is evident in previous experiences in Northern Ireland. For example, in 2021, the CCEA commissioned the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors to develop and run an Assessment Support Programme for assessment leads in Northern Ireland's post-primary schools to assist in the school-based awarding of general qualification grades during the COVID-19 period. Each post-primary school or college was offered two places on the course with settings taking part in a mixture of on-line and discussion group sessions over six weeks. It was also noted in our conversations that the contents of the support programme had been subsequently used to provide in-school training for departmental heads.

11.65   There are real opportunities to build on the strong assessment practice already found in Northern Ireland's schools whether that be in the form of bespoke qualifications for assessment coordinators, collaboration or sharing good practice. The assessment culture found in schools in Northern Ireland is a real strength of the education system. There is however a clear appetite to take this further. The provision of a more coherent approach to ITE and early career development supported by a core curriculum of assessment theory and practice along with opportunities for continuous professional development and sharing expertise would take the system to new heights.

11.66   In light of the evidence, the Panel, therefore, advocates:

· The development of a core curriculum in educational assessment for use across all Initial Teacher Education providers and embedded into induction and early-career development.

· A re-examination and further development of the framework of GTCNI Teacher Competences to provide clearer expectations and stronger links to the core assessment curriculum.

· A dedicated programme of support for assessment coordinators, including structured professional development and opportunities for networking and collaboration.

Conclusion and key points

11.67   Taken together, the evidence considered in this chapter points to a clear and urgent need for Northern Ireland to modernise and integrate its approach to educational assessment, information transfer and professional learning. The Panel concludes that the absence of a coherent digital record, combined with inconsistent practices for interpreting and sharing assessment information, constrains the system's ability to identify needs early, support learners effectively and make equitable decisions.

11.68   Establishing a Record of Development and Education for Northern Ireland will provide the foundational infrastructure needed to address these issues ensuring that every child's developmental, narrative and assessment information travels with them and is available to those responsible for their learning and wellbeing.

11.69   However, infrastructure alone will not be sufficient. To realise the full benefits of improved assessment arrangements, the system requires a dedicated mechanism for high-quality reporting, robust interpretation and ongoing professional guidance. A Reporting Unit can fulfil this role by producing accessible, technically sound reports for all users, supporting schools in making evidence-informed decisions and enabling policymakers to monitor standards, equity and system performance over time.

11.70   Strengthening the professional capacity of teachers and school leaders is equally essential. The Panel finds that variability in Initial Teacher Education content, limited opportunities for early career consolidation and uneven access to professional development undermine the consistent application of assessment principles across the system. A core curriculum for assessment theory and practice, applied across Initial Teacher Education and early career stages, alongside dedicated development for assessment leads, will help build a confident and expert workforce able to interpret data responsibly and use assessment to improve learning.

11.71   In summary, the reforms outlined in this chapter – an integrated developmental record, a Reporting Unit, strengthened competencies and a coherent approach to professional learning – form a mutually reinforcing set of measures. Together, they provide a foundation for a more resilient, consistent, equitable and evidence-informed assessment system.

Chapter 12:
Assessment in Irish-medium education

Introduction

12.1   An important feature of the Northern Ireland education system is Irish-medium education where Irish is the primary language of instruction. It is offered from pre-school through post-primary, and it operates on an immersion model, meaning children, often from English-speaking homes, are immersed in Irish across the curriculum.

12.2   There are currently 30 Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland and a further 10 Irish-medium units attached to English-medium host schools. Of the 30 schools, 28 are primary and two are post primary. Of the 10 Irish-medium units attached to English-medium host schools, seven are primary and three are post-primary. There are over 7,500 pupils enrolled in Irish-medium education including pre-school.

12.3   The Panel proposes a rapid development project to produce Irish-medium curriculum-linked assessments in mathematics, literacy and science. The provision of these assessments is not only vital for statutory assessment but also for research into different patterns of attainment and progression which may be present in settings which include the demanding acquisition of a second language. The provision of Irish-medium equivalents to the phonics check and multiplication check should be relatively simple and fast test-development projects.

12.4   The development of an Irish-medium version of the baseline check is more demanding, and the Panel advises this should be a special component of the development project for the baseline check.

12.5   A focussed and well-funded development effort is needed to provide statutory assessment for the Irish-medium community. The analysis in this chapter provides a clear specification for the development work, which must be delivered at pace. The Panel determines that an 18-month period for development of a substantial item bank, initial validation for draft tests and delivery through the CCEA adaptive platform should be the target. We outline governance for the work later in this chapter.

Purpose of Irish-medium testing

12.6   The proposed statutory assessment landscape includes assessment of literacy, numeracy and science. For writing, it includes collection of selected examples of pupil writing in a Northern Ireland writing repository. Irish medium assessments should mirror the content and purpose of English medium statutory tests, enabling dependable measurement of curriculum learning rather than language proficiency alone.

12.7   It will, therefore, not only assess Irish language competence but assess performance across key areas of the curriculum where that content has been delivered principally through the medium of Irish. The assessments and subsequent score analysis should allow equating of standards between Irish and non-Irish-medium settings and over time. The scoring model for Irish-medium settings should follow the same model as for non-Irish-medium settings.

Key Issues

12.8   Our work with Irish-medium educators suggests that there are four impediments to the development of appropriate new statutory assessment arrangements. These are examined in detail below:

- lack of high-quality assessment items (questions in particular);
- different sequencing in the school curriculum;
- different rates of progression associated with first language and second language development; and
- development of strategy in relation to 'standard' Irish and Irish dialect

Lack of high-quality assessment items

12.9   The Panel examined assessment items which tended to be translations from established items in English. Irish-medium educators drew the Panel's attention to items which are likely to function badly in their pupil's assessments, and lead to invalid outcomes. Translation poses significant challenges.

12.10   In running large scale international surveys, the OECD and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) have had to invest hugely in translation processes (Grisay et al 2007), building up significant technical expertise in an area that remains controversial and practically troublesome (Zhao et al 2018; Jerrim et al 2022). Technical training, manuals, pre-testing and item analysis are elaborate and carefully validated.

12.11   The OECD guidelines were developed in close collaboration with world-leading assessment and measurement experts at ETS Princeton, and processes are aligned with the APA Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, (OECD 2018). Similar processes were followed for the TIMSS and PIRLS items (Ebbs et al 2021).

12.12   This is an exceptionally complex area of test development. Large-scale international surveys such as PISA invest heavily in high-quality translation – and rightly so – because accurate cross-country comparisons depend on it. However, even with these substantial investments, the consequences of measurement error in PISA are relatively limited: while countries may face reputational costs, the outcomes do not directly affect the

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individual pupils who participate. In contrast, the stakes in Irish-medium assessment are both moral and practical. Any inaccuracies in measurement have immediate and personal consequences for individual learners, influencing their progression, support, and educational opportunities.

12.13   Translation of existing items in English is one approach only. It ensures linking between English and Irish-medium items, but translations still require validation regarding comparability. By contrast, for the origination of unique Irish-medium items, Irish-medium learning materials can and should be used to derive assessment items for a Northern Ireland Irish-medium bank. The source material used by developers should include schools' own materials. The items must be curriculum-linked and meet established criteria regarding item form and performance. With items derived from this method, equating methods then need to be employed to ensure comparability in test standards between Irish-medium and non-Irish-medium statutory tests.

12.14   The poor supply of high-quality items for Irish-medium settings is a serious impediment not only to effective and fair statutory testing, but also to research on patterns of learning in Irish-medium settings. Conversely, a very large number of assessment items allows many processes and opportunities to be opened up.

12.15   At present, claims regarding curriculum sequencing, progression, age attainment etc cannot be researched in detail due to the absence of effective assessment. When robust, comparable assessment can be put in place at all ages, the precise nature of learning progressions in Irish-medium settings can be established, to the benefit of learners, and to educators designing and evaluating learning provision.

12.16   All the actions which the Panel recommends depend on a very substantial increase in the supply of high-quality Irish-medium items. This unlocks so many opportunities and improvements. We recommend that the CCEA adaptive assessment project should focus on mass production of high-quality Irish-medium assessment items in all subject areas, but focussing in the first instance on mathematics, literacy and science. There is a need to audit CCEA capacity for undertaking this additional development work, which will require high levels of measurement expertise.

12.17   Learning materials created by Irish-medium schools and learning materials used by Irish-medium schools should be analysed as a source of items and as the basis for item development. Copyright issues will pertain for some material; the normal processes for securing permission for use should be used in those instances. With due protection of material ownership, AI should be exploited for item development from learning materials (Huseyn undated; McNulty 2023).

12.18   In addition, collaboration with the State Examinations Commission (SEC) and the Department of Education and Youth in the Republic of Ireland should continue and be focussed on increasing the number of assessment items for Irish language at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3.

12.19   Early years assessment and Year 1/2 baselining remains challenging, but attention to early language development is increasing – for example the 2024 rollout in Ireland of the Early Talk Boost programme is important. Although this is not Irish-medium, the strategy is beginning to create parallel Irish-medium provision, and close contact with this programme should be set up with the purpose of increasing the bank of items to be used in assessment.

12.20   Work should focus on development of a large bank of Irish-medium items for the CCEA adaptive assessment application. Items should then be administered on a formative basis for the purpose of supporting learning and at the same time collecting item performance data. This would then allow extraction and re-use from the bank for the content of statutory tests. The large number of items would allow sampling from the assessment domain to be sufficiently unpredictable such that previous item exposure and 'question spotting' would be unlikely to be a problem.

12.21   The Panel also recommends a clear governance arrangement for the development work consisting of Irish-medium educators, parents and carers, CCEA, DE, CnaG and one international measurement expert.

12.22   The Panel recommends that this development programme be established as a joint Ireland-Northern Ireland Research and Development collaboration, and we suggest that EU support may be available for this important development work, since it will serve as an exemplary project for other specific mixed language communities in other national settings.

Different sequencing in the school curriculum

12.23   Irish-medium schools and units follow the same Statutory Curriculum as other schools, but within the general requirements of the curriculum, time allocation and focus is typically distinctive due to the addition of Irish language and literacy. Schools exercise the flexibility available in the current Northern Ireland Curriculum.

12.24   A number of factors can lead to different sequencing of content and time allocation in Irish-medium settings compared to other community schools: more time and 'curriculum space' is needed for language development; cultural interests associated with Irish-medium identity driving a different pattern to curriculum coverage; and integration of language learning across the curriculum.

12.25   Research on this is present but limited – e.g. 2017 An analysis of models of provision for Irish-medium education; 2019 The Irish language in education in Northern Ireland 3rd edition. The 2023 report Fair, shared, supported? Examining expectations and realities for Irish-medium practitioners highlighted assessment shortfalls as a quality issue in provision, along with problems of identifying and using appropriate materials and technology.

12.26 There are important insights from research into potentially elevated outcomes in Irish-medium settings in the Republic of Ireland (Parsons & Lyddy 2009; Irish Times 2018; Gallaher & Hannah 2002).

12.27 For assessment, distinctive curriculum sequencing and focus invokes the important principle of 'opportunity to learn', a key issue which has been emphasised in respect of the large transnational surveys of attainment (Cogan 2015, Cogan L & Schmidt W 2015). Where assessment attempts to measure things which pupils have not had an opportunity to learn, measurement accuracy is compromised.

12.28 While discretion in the curriculum can affect the balance of learning in any school – Irish-medium or other – a distinctive pathway through the Northern Ireland Curriculum is more characteristic of Irish-medium schools, particularly in respect of language and literacy content. While requirements for end-of-key stage outcomes are common across all schools including Irish-medium schools (and therefore statutory assessment at the end of key stages can aim to assess things common across schools), there are views in Irish-medium schools that alignment only emerges fully in Key Stage 4. This is not sufficiently researched and can indeed be explored with precision if in future there is supply of sufficient assessment items.

12.29 It is important to note three further issues which require insight from assessment data and targeted evaluation, since they relate to potentially systematic differences between cohort characteristics and outcomes in Irish-medium settings and non-Irish-medium settings. Firstly, that the distinctive immersion approaches in Irish-medium pre-school and schools may impact progression and attainment. Secondly, that acquisition of bilingualism may have cognitive and other impacts which may be systematic in the cohort. Thirdly, that the different content, sequencing and content progression could give rise to different motivational effects in the Irish-medium cohort, which may be systematic in relation to attainment (DE 2008).

12.30 Systematic effects in the cohort need to be recognised when equating tests. When a sub population manifests a different profile of attainment to other parts of that population, the causes of that variation need to be understood. Mistakes can be made if they are not. For example, if test 1 for one group shows an overall elevation in outcomes in respect of a nominally equivalent different test 2 for another group, it may be that test 1 is easier. Or it may be that different factors are at play in group 1, elevating their attainment. There is sufficient evidence of difference in provision and learning to be concerned that these kinds of differences may be in play (DE op cit). Understanding these factors is something which is an essential component of a statutory assessment system designed to produce robust evidence of attainment within and across an education system as a whole.

12.31 Comparison of curriculum materials (maps, grids, lesson plans) and timetables will provide the basis of curriculum coverage, essential to establish Opportunity To Learn for assessment instrument development and informing when certain items will be valid, or not. Feedback from the deployment of the CCEA adaptive tests will be vital, but only when the bank contains sufficient high-quality items.

12.32   Sensitive theory-based evaluation work will be required to support effective equating of tests and test outcomes across Irish-medium and non-Irish-medium settings. This work can proceed in tandem with the item development work.

Different rates of progression associated with first and second language development

12.33   Irish-medium settings serve learners with diverse language profiles, strongly shaped by home language and early exposure to English and Irish. As a result, classes often include mixed groups with very different balances of English–Irish development, which creates distinctive pedagogical and assessment challenges (RSM McClure Watters et al 2016). Supporting pupils with emergent learning difficulties within this dual-language context adds further complexity (Verbeek et al 2023).

12.34   In bilingual contexts, access to curriculum content typically tracks the trajectory of language acquisition. Simultaneous or concurrent acquisition of two languages can proceed at a different pattern and pace from monolingual development, which has implications for when and how pupils can demonstrate subject understanding (Viafara 2013).

12.35   Apparent lags can be artefacts of measurement: children engaged in early bilingual acquisition may seem to have weaker vocabulary if assessed in only one language. When total conceptual vocabulary is counted across both languages (excluding overlaps), these differences often disappear (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams 2013).

12.36   These realities are crucial for assessment strategy in Irish-medium education and for equating outcomes between Irish-medium and English-medium schools. Judgements about ability and attainment must consider competence in both languages, which is equally vital in the diagnosis of speech, language and communication needs (Byers-Heinlein, op. cit.).

12.37   Accordingly, diagnostic assessment in this area should:
   - measure language abilities in each language;
   - integrate strengths and needs into a coherent profile across sounds, words, grammar and discourse in both languages;
   - determine whether any delay/disorder is present in one or both languages;
   - judge linguistic/cognitive capacity relative to bilingual and monolingual peers of the same age; and
   - guide targeted interventions to specific sub-domains, potentially in one or both languages (Byers-Heinlein, op. cit.).

12.38   To support valid screening, diagnosis and monitoring in Irish-medium settings, assessment programmes require a sufficient volume of high-quality items tuned to bilingual development. Well-constructed item banks enable sensitive, reliable tests that can underpin early SEN identification and ongoing support.

12.39   Because language acquisition interacts with content learning, progression rates through curriculum content are likely, on average, to differ from those in non-Irish-medium settings and show greater between-pupil variation. High-quality ongoing assessment of attainment and rate of progress is therefore essential.

12.40   Achievement norms and expectations should be calibrated for Irish-medium contexts rather than imported wholesale from English-medium schools. Equating standards across the system is technically demanding, but the end-point expectations should remain the same: full curriculum coverage and high attainment at 16 and 18.

12.41   Analysis of Opportunity to Learn must be an explicit strand in evaluating progression in Irish-medium settings, to avoid mistaking *"not taught"* for *"not attained."* Addressing current evidence gaps will require large, well-validated item pools purpose-built for the Irish-medium context. This is the foundation for robust, valid and informative assessment that supports both equity and high standards.

Development of strategy in relation to distinct Irish dialect

12.42   Irish-medium schools report issues of pace and technical validity of assessment items, deriving from phonemic variation associated with dialect. This is a further issue which affects item development and deployment and is likely to be complex in its distribution in the pupil population and in its impact on item behaviour. Links with the Republic of Ireland assessment authorities and their expertise is important on this issue and should be incorporated into the development work.

12.43   A deliberate strategy on dialect needs to be developed and is outside the scope of this review. Avoidance of terms and expressions which occur in dialect is unlikely to be an entirely adequate approach, since dialect can affect areas of key concepts and ideas.

12.44   The revision of the Northern Ireland Curriculum allows a consideration of these issues of common corpus, standard Irish and issues of exposure to multiple dialect forms. This could include establishing a common corpus for key concepts in the curriculum, specifically in the areas relating to statutory testing: mathematics, literacy and science.

12.45   The Republic of Ireland has negotiated these matters in the TEG (Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge Certificate) by using a corpus which incorporates elements from all major Irish dialects, encouraging exposure to the three main dialect groups, and linking to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The latest work on standard Irish in school settings in the Republic of Ireland has used an approach of focussing on standard Irish but including a limited number of items which use key dialect vocabulary and content.

12.46   Dependent on dialect item quantity in a specific test, item function modelling will be helpful during the development work in order to optimise measurements and ensure validity.

Standards in Irish-medium statutory assessment

12.47   It is clear from trend data that demand for Irish-medium schooling has been increasing and Irish-medium pupils as a proportion of the total pupil population will most likely increase over coming years, particularly in a context of declining overall school enrolments.

12.48   This has implications for the model of standards in the sector; it further reinforces that standards in Irish-medium settings should be criterion-referenced rather than cohort-referenced, since there is likely to be structural changes in the composition of the Irish-medium school population.

12.49   The differences which we have identified above regarding progression and pedagogy plus the potential different background characteristics of those increasingly requesting access to Irish-medium education means, the Irish-medium cohort may over time display difference in value-added and other aspects of attainment. Standards-setting for statutory assessment in this changing context is technically demanding and should be recognised as being so by the agencies responsible for standards and reporting.

Conclusion and key points

12.50   To ensure fairness, consistency and educational integrity, the statutory assessment system for Irish-medium schools must be fully aligned with that of other sectors. This requires that new statutory arrangements come into effect for the sector only when a robust supply of high-quality, Irish-medium assessment items is in place.

12.51   Establishing such a foundation will depend on a dedicated development project, led by CCEA, with strong governance and a clear focus on creating an item bank suitable for formative online adaptive tests. Only items with verified measurement characteristics should progress to statutory use.

12.52   Collaboration will be essential. Development work should be undertaken jointly with authorities and measurement specialists in the Republic of Ireland, drawing on EU development funding wherever feasible to support this cross-jurisdictional effort.

12.53   At the same time, achievement norms tailored to Irish-medium learners must be developed, recognising the distinct dynamics of first and second language acquisition and the unique contextual factors influencing pupil progression and attainment within the sector.

12.54   While the overarching aim is to implement revised statutory assessment arrangements for Irish-medium settings as swiftly as possible, this can only happen when the required assessment materials reach the standard necessary to ensure validity, reliability and equity. Development work should therefore move forward with urgency.

Part 4:
Delivery and next steps

Chapter 13: Considerations for implementation

Chapter 14: Overall conclusions and future direction

Overview of Recommendations

Chapter 13:
Considerations for implementation

Introduction

13.1   The Panel's recommendations are rooted in the extensive evidence gathered through discussions with practitioners, survey findings and wider engagement across the education system. A consistent message emerged: Northern Ireland requires a coherent suite of statutory assessments, complemented by high-quality non-statutory tools, to support continuous insight into pupils' learning progression. The proposals build on the strong practice already evident in schools, while seeking to introduce greater standardisation, closer alignment with the curriculum and reductions in both cost and workload.

13.2   Delivering such a system, however, demands rigorous processes and effective governance to secure validity, reliability and value for money. While assessment development and administration inevitably carry financial and operational costs, these can be significantly reduced through well-designed instruments, clear oversight and economies of scale.

13.3   Central to this vision is the development of assessments designed specifically for the Northern Ireland context reflecting local needs, curriculum structures and professional expectations. To ensure quality and public confidence, these assessments should be developed through a centrally commissioned and regulated model, applying recognised standards in test design and delivery.

13.4   This chapter sets out the key considerations required to achieve such a system. It outlines the processes involved in developing and delivering high-quality assessments; examines the governance and regulatory arrangements necessary to ensure integrity and public trust; assesses the financial implications of implementing the proposed approach; and considers the role of objective, auto-marked items in reducing workload while maintaining validity. The chapter also reflects on how adverse implementation effects, such as curriculum narrowing, can be mitigated through well-designed assessment strategies and wider system supports.

Developing and delivering high quality assessments

13.5   To minimise workload and ensure efficiency, the Panel is proposing assessments that take advantage of technological facilities wherever possible and take the minimum amount of time to administer. Nevertheless, the assessments must be of the highest quality and reflect the principles the Panel has laid down in this Report. Given the importance and impact of all forms of educational assessment the development process must be robust and transparent.

13.6   Test development, used here to cover all forms of educational assessment instruments, follows stringent procedures designed to produce valid and reliable outcomes. Validity is as much about inferences drawn from test outcomes as the technical attributes of the test instrument.

13.7   Test development is rightly a complex endeavour and given its place in the development of qualifications and statutory assessments, any approach must hold public and professional confidence. Good practice in test development is guided by clarity of purpose and the intended inferences to be made of the outcomes.

13.8   It is important for Northern Ireland to learn from test development elsewhere. Here, the Panel sets out the example of the Standards and Testing Agency (STA), an executive agency of the Department for Education responsible for the development of statutory assessments in England but there are others internationally.

13.9   The STA adheres to the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing published by the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association and the National Council on Measurement in Education. This approach fosters transparency in test development through the publication of procedures, and validity and reliability evidence.

13.10   Details of the test development process are published on a yearly basis through a Test Development Handbook (see STA 2024). The Handbook covers a range of technical and other issues including the stated purpose of the assessments, the test development and delivery process, standard setting, and assessment validity. The Handbook is written for test developers and those interested in assessment including schools.

13.11   The Handbook is augmented by the publication of technical appendices, a validity framework along with test frameworks for each assessment primarily written for the use of test developers. Each framework sets out:

· *what will and will not be assessed by the test;*

· *how each element of the subject will be assessed;*

· *the structure of the test; and*

· *the standard a child will be expected to achieve in the test (STA, 2015).*

13.12   The statutory assessment process and the work of the STA is in turn regulated by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) against a regulatory framework (Ofqual 2018). This aspect is returned to below.

13.13   Key features of the test development process include an item validation trial (IVT) and technical pretest (TPT). The IVT determines the suitability and level of difficulty of items as appropriate for the target age group. The IVT samples a large volume of items although items with higher predictability, for example items focusing on numeracy, go through to the TPT. The TPT is a larger trial and presented in booklets that reflect the live test specification. This provides qualitative and quantitative data on item performance.

13.14   An overview of the process is provided in Table 7 and more specific details of these processes can be found in the STA Test Development Handbook (STA 2024). In the trialling system used by the STA, it is mandatory for selected schools to take part in the trial for statutory and non-statutory tests. However, the trials are not used to report on pupils or schools. This approach strives to ensure that the tests are valid and reliable and is an approach supported by the Panel.

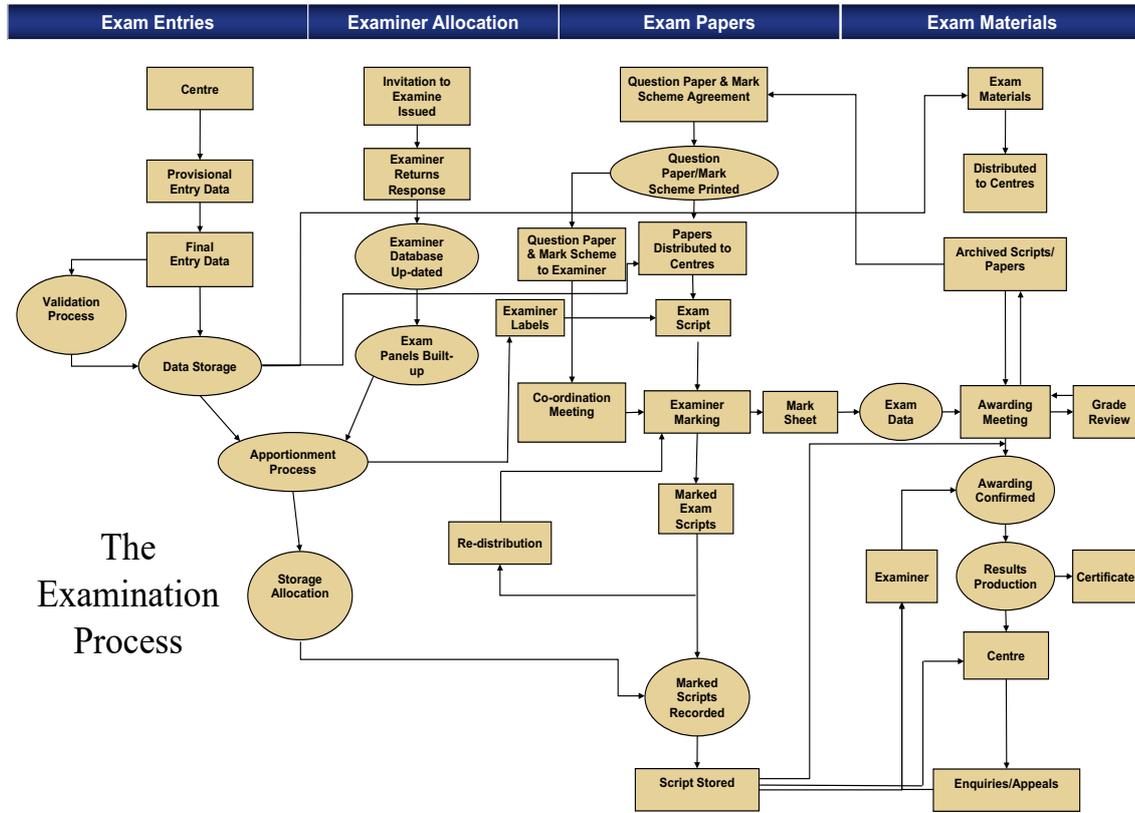## Table 7 – Overview of the test development process
(Source: STA 2024)

Item origination	Expert review 1	Item validation trial	Expert review 2
• Items and mark schemes drafted • Small-scale trial in school	• Panels of experts review items • Amendments made in response to their feedback • Items grouped into trial test booklets • Mark schemes developed	• Securely administered trial • Approximately 300 pupils trial each item • Teachers complete questionnaires • Marking and psychometric analysis • Items are amended in response to outcomes • Mark schemes refined	• Panels of experts review items again • Amendments made in response to their feedback • Items grouped into tests • Mark schemes refined and compiled

Technical pre-test	Final test construction	Modified test development	Live test administration	Final thresholds set
• Large-scale, securely administered trial designed to gather reliable statistical data • Approximately 1,000 pupils trial each item • Marking and psychometric analysis • Anchor test used for equating	• Test booklets constructed according to the published test specification • Final review by experts • Final mark scheme development • Design work on final test and mark scheme and proofing process before handover to print	• Standard test modified by experts to produce versions in braille, modified large print and enlarged print • Guidance produced for administering test to pupils with hearing impairments	• Live tests printed and delivered to schools • Tests administered in schools • Markers trained in accurate mark scheme application • Marking takes place	• Standard-setting or standard-maintenance procedure, using data from TPT and live tests • Final performance threshold marks determined • Scaled scores applied to pupil's raw scores and results returned to schools

13.15   The process of test development has of course to be supported by a distribution, administration, marking and awarding system. Such a system broadly mirrors that used for general qualifications such as the GCSE and is a system familiar to awarding organisations and schools across numerous jurisdictions.

13.16   A high-level presentation of the examination process typical of delivery systems for qualifications is presented in Table 8 with an overview of a system used to deliver statutory assessments shown in Table 9.

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Table 8 – The examination process

| Exam Entries | Examiner Allocation | Exam Papers | Exam Materials |

The Examination Process

Table 9 – System for the delivery of statutory assessments

Note: the timings given to the stages of the process are indicative of the sequencing of the process only.
(After a National Assessment Agency internal document 2006).
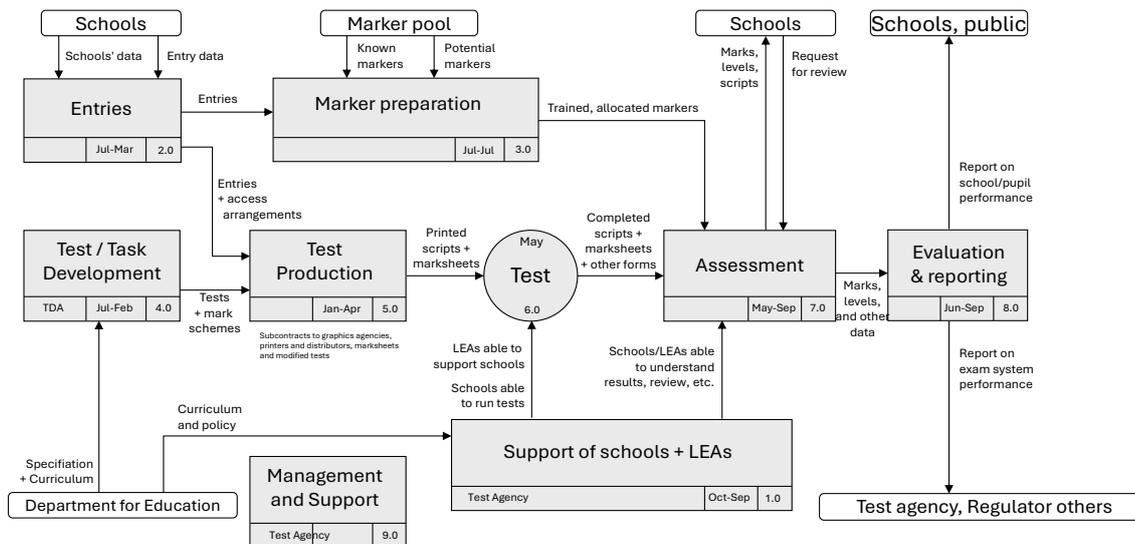
13.17   The test development models noted above are typical of systems used across the world and developed over time in the light of technological opportunities and lessons learnt from years of administrative experience.

13.18   However, the exact scale and design of each test instrument must be adapted to fit its stated purpose. For example, the Panel is proposing short easy to administer tests using technological delivery and auto-marking wherever possible.

13.19   As noted in the systems illustrated above, the development and delivery of statutory assessments must be robust and transparent and be supported by the appropriate resources including expertise in assessment design and delivery.

13.20   The Panel notes the extended time it has and is still taking to develop the CCEA Computer Adaptive Assessment. In addition, the Panel notes that CCEA has wider responsibilities particularly in regard to qualifications awarding which raises concerns over their resourcing and capacity to develop the statutory and other assessments the Panel is recommending. The Panel, therefore, advocates a full audit of CCEA's capacity to develop and administer statutory assessments.

13.21   There are a number of possible models or hybrids of models that could be adopted or adapted to develop and administer statutory assessments in Northern Ireland. For example, assessments such as the baseline check can be developed by contractors with a track record in the field. The phonics and multiplication checks developed by STA could be used. Alternatively, tests could be produced in-house by CCEA using their expertise in the development of qualifications.

13.22   In order to secure confidence in the newly developed statutory assessment system, it is critical that the chosen assessment developer(s) have the expertise and capacity to deliver and implement within required timeframes.

13.23   A further option is for the Northern Ireland Reporting Unit or the Department of Education to directly manage the statutory assessment arrangements or for the establishment of a new arms-length body with specific responsibility for statutory assessments. These options should be considered in the light of the audit of CCEA along with the establishment of a separate regulatory framework outlined in the Regulation section below.

13.24   Failure to deliver statutory assessments is not an option, as experiences elsewhere have shown. For example, the catastrophic failure to deliver National Curriculum assessments in England in 2008. Each of the options above requires careful consideration of the technical and administrative expertise and capacity to deliver tests of the highest quality. This will require a strong and transparent governance structure to provide public and professional confidence in the system.

Regulation

13.25   In Northern Ireland, general qualifications, essential skills and occupational studies are regulated by the CCEA. However, statutory assessments are not subject to a regime of regulation: this is in contrast to the development and delivery of general and other qualifications.

13.26   Further, unlike the situation in England and Wales, CCEA is both a provider and regulator of qualification. This mirrors the position in England up to 2008, whereby the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) was responsible for developing the content and regulation of public qualifications and national curriculum statutory tests. However, following a public consultation, a new independent regulator, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) was established.to separate the functions of curriculum, qualification content and development of statutory tests from regulation of the system. Ofqual is an independent regulator reporting directly to parliament rather than ministers and works to a regulatory framework.

13.27   Developing and delivering assessments is a complex undertaking and expert independent regulation can provide assurance that effective technical processes, such as those relating to the setting and maintenance of annual test standards, are in place to secure valid assessments and outcomes that can be relied on. This is particularly important where assessment results can be seen as evidence of the success or otherwise of government education policy.

13.28   The Regulatory Framework is a key document in regard to statutory assessment and lays out the roles and responsibilities of all bodies involved including the Department for Education and other responsible bodies such as organisations responsible for developing, implementing or monitoring national assessment arrangements. Where responsible bodies make use of third parties for contracted services, for example in writing test items, the responsible body is accountable for the performance of their suppliers.

13.29   The regularity approach is driven by a set of principles including transparency and proportionality with a clear focus on the validity of each stage of the processes to ensure the accuracy and usefulness of the assessment outcomes. A model of Ofqual's validity process is given in Table 10.

Table 10 – Validity throughout the assessment lifecycle
(Source: Ofqual 2018, p.10)
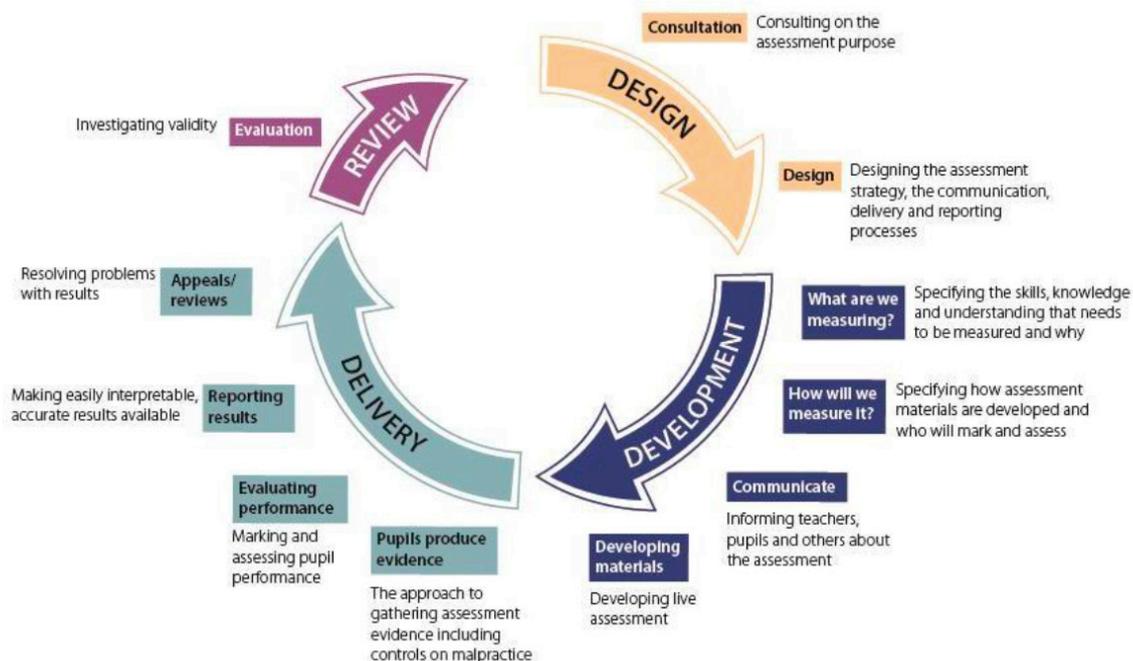
13.30 Although national curriculum assessments are not statutory in Wales, a similar approach to regulation was adopted in 2014, with the establishment of Qualifications Wales.

13.31 The Northern Ireland model of regulation mirrors that found in Scotland where the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is also both regulator and qualifications provider. Such an arrangement is open to calls of conflict of interest. The dual functions of regulation and qualification development by SQA have been questioned leading to accusations that SQA was 'marking its own homework' (Muir, 2022). The OECD (2021) recommended that "…*consideration should be given to a separate body that might be responsible for the regulation and quality of qualifications which is currently part of the remit of the Scottish Qualifications Authority.*"

13.32 The Muir Report (2022) noted the OECD's conclusion alongside the view held by some that given the scale of Scotland's education system, there are cost benefits in having the two functions in one single body. The Muir Report concluded that there was a need to restore the trust and confidence of the public, practitioners and learners in a revitalised single qualification, examination and awarding body for Scotland and that SQA's core two functions should now be separated across two bodies. The Independent Review of Education noted a similar view in regard to provision in Northern Ireland.

13.33 The Panel heard of the lack of resources available for and concerns over the efficacy of the moderation system previously designed to cover statutory assessments in Northern Ireland, a system broadly rejected by the teaching profession. A more robust system of accountability through an Independent Regulator with direct reporting to the Northern Ireland Assembly would provide greater focus on the requirements and efficacy of the statutory assessment system.

13.34   Statutory assessments play a vital role in the education system, and the Panel believes that they must be underpinned by the same level of rigour and assurance as all other forms of assessment used in schools. To achieve this, Northern Ireland requires a dedicated regulatory function for statutory assessment, responsible for ensuring the quality, validity and reliability of assessment design, implementation and outcomes.

13.35   Crucially, this regulatory function should be structurally independent from the body responsible for developing or delivering assessments, in order to safeguard transparency, avoid conflicts of interest, and build public confidence. In the Panel's view, separating the regulatory and provider functions is essential to ensure that statutory assessment outcomes provide robust information on pupil progress and offer a trustworthy evidence base for evaluating the impact of government policy and educational provision.

Financial implications

13.36   Rigorous approaches to test development at scale do present financial implications and the Panel is aware of the need for value for money, particularly given the financial challenges facing the education sector. This has guided thinking around the design of assessments that utilise technology wherever possible to minimise the administrative burden in schools and across the design and delivery system including the marking of assessments. Costs to establish the system of statutory test development and administration will likely have higher initial costs, but the costs should reduce once the system is in place.

13.37   The ultimate costs will be dependent on the exact nature of each assessment, The Panel proposes the development of short, highly focused assessments. As noted above, there are economies of scale to be had and savings on the direct costs the Panel has witnessed across the system through schools purchasing a range of commercially derived assessments.

13.38   The Panel has calculated broad estimated costs for the assessments it has recommended based on publicly stated accounts and the knowledge the Panel has gained over many years of engagement with the development of assessment instruments. However, exact amounts are difficult to establish due to the internal workings of test development agencies and the competitive nature of test development bodies.

13.39   There is also the need to consider oversight of the statutory assessment system and the associated level of expertise. For example, the Standards and Testing Agency in England has around 140 staff at an annual cost of £8 million and is still reliant on external contractors for the development of tests, printing, distribution and marking. The Agency has extended internal expertise in for example psychometrics and item development and this aspect of test development will require scoping in the Northern Ireland context. There are also key decisions required as to whether statutory test development be undertaken by a new agency, an extension of CCEA's role or the

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Department of Education. These are both technical and political decisions beyond the scope of the Panel.

13.40   The estimated costs below are primarily based on paper-based assessments, but the Panel advocates the utilisation of technology wherever possible to develop an efficient and high utility assessment specific to the needs of the Northern Ireland education system.

Assessment	Nature and Development Cycle	Estimated development costs
Baseline check	3-year refreshment cycle	£750k every three years
Phonics check	Revised annually	£300,000 per annum
Multiplication check	Online assessment via digital platform	£70,000 per annum
Statutory end of key stage tests (literacy, numeracy and science)	Paper based externally marked assessments, renewed annually	c£500,000 per assessment per annum

13.41   The key activities within the above estimates are as follows:

i.   Development of the framework and test specification plus time for appropriate consultation.

ii.   Development of 200% of test items to allow for attrition from item trialling.

iii.   Test review panel(s), including reviews of accessibility for pupils with access requirements.

iv.   Conduct of an Item Validation Trial including selecting and recruiting a representative sample of schools, test administration, marking, plus administration of teacher (and possibly pupil) questionnaires.

v.   Psychometric analysis of Item Validation Trial item performance and analysis of questionnaire responses.

vi.   Selection of items for the Technical Pre-Test. This should be almost the final version of the live test paper.

vii.   Conduct of a Technical Pre-Test including selecting and recruiting a representative sample of schools, test administration and marking.

viii.   Complete psychometric and technical report of the Technical Pre-Test.

ix.   Finalisation of the test and mark scheme (a full quality assurance review).

13.42   There are other additional costs associated with the proposed statutory assessment framework, as set out below:

·   **Test delivery.** Northern Ireland has approximately 22,000 pupils per year group which is about 4% of the cohort in England: on this basis the overall cost would be c£800,000 per annum. This covers marker recruitment, marking and data submission.

- **Print and logistics.** Based on the same logic as test delivery, the estimated cost is in the region of £240,000 per annum.

- **Upfront development costs.** Much of this will be around IT development for the on-screen assessments. For example, the baseline check set-up cost around £6 million in England. Given the IT system already available to Northern Ireland schools and the scale, costs should be significantly lower.

13.43   Given that the baseline, multiplication and phonics checks are 'universal', there is clear opportunity to work with the STA or other providers on the provision of these assessments.

13.44   The overall costs will also be determined by the need for external versus internal. STA for example use more in-house expertise for mathematics tests. If there is to be a dependency on contracted test developers, print and distribution and marking, then expertise in test specification, procurement and contract management would be required.

13.45   Savings can be made in the pre-testing stage by the testing of several tests in sample schools and the development of an item bank. Item cloning and AI can also be developed as an approach.

13.46   Additional costs, such as working with the body responsible for the National Curriculum, review panels and the printing of modified papers also need to be considered, but these are relatively small scale in terms of financial outlay.

13.47   Keeping a focus on short specific assessments aligned with technological developments can reduce overall costs, for example print and distribution and utilising auto-marking.

13.48   The Panel has heard positive reassurance around IT capacity in the Northern Ireland education system, but this needs to be stress tested for administration of standardised assessments at simultaneous scale.

Objective items and auto-marking

13.49   Two of the most significant workload issues associated with statutory assessment are moderation and marking. There is some evidence that both marking and moderation function as professional development, as well as an element of the effective administration of assessments (Crisp 2018). However, the impact on workload and competing demands such as marking for national qualifications have led the Panel to recommend assessments which use objective items (questions) which can be auto-marked wherever this is appropriate.

13.50   There have been concerns repeated over the years regarding the apparent reductionism and sub-optimal technical performance of objective items (Burton 2006). The Panel has considered both historical and current research and do not feel that these arguments remain valid.

13.51   Objective test items have become highly refined and efficient, including formats in which incorrect responses are designed to reveal specific misconceptions. Such items do more than simply identify that an answer is wrong; they provide diagnostic information that can directly support subsequent teaching and learning (Barton 2017). These short, focused items can also measure a construct repeatedly using different questions that target the same underlying skill, which strengthens the reliability of the assessment. Their efficiency enables broader sampling of curriculum content, and their form can be varied to maintain engagement and ensure wide coverage across the domain (Vacc et al 2001).

13.52   Further, good test familiarity for all learners can be readily secured (Dominguez-Figaredo & Gil-Juarena 2024). Objective test items are not limited to assessing procedural knowledge; they can assess high level critical thinking and are for example used extensively in medical and legal training (Catanzano et al 2022).

13.53   Committing the system to objective items as the main mode of assessment does not commit it to an overly restricted form of tests and questions. Objective items can vary significantly in form; multiple-choice questions are only one of these. Forms include true-false, matching, multiple-choice, completion (filling blanks, inserting data points, etc), assertion and reason.

13.54   Objective items lend themselves to pre-testing, item-banking and cloning – allowing a high number of items to be available to the system, which is helpful in models such as adaptive assessment (Hopkins 2021). Perhaps most important of all, they can both reduce teacher workload whilst simultaneously showing good measurement characteristics in respect of validity (Burton 2006).

13.55   The assets of auto-marked objective items for assessment are considerable. This evidence, alongside the workload issues associated with alternative forms of assessment, has led the Panel to recommend auto-marked objective items as the principal mode for curriculum-linked statutory assessment.

Avoiding adverse influences of assessment, particularly narrowing the curriculum

13.56   The Panel is very aware of the potential adverse washback effects of assessment into learning and the curriculum (Messick 1996; Carey 2024; Khan & Hassan 2023).

13.57   The Panel has recommended the development of more support to schools through Initial Teacher Education, early career support and continuing professional development. Currently, models of ability and progression held by schools and teachers can vary, with some models propagating ideas of 'fixed trajectories' of learning. This can lead to denial of opportunity and 'self-fulfilling cycles of low expectation' suppressing attainment and adversely affecting equity.

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13.58   The Panel's recommendations on Initial Teacher Education and continuing professional development are intended to counter this. Assessment culture is all-important in an education system, and the culture should strive constantly to be evidence-based and be supported in that process.

13.59   A further issue is that assessment of limited aspects of the curriculum, for example, the proposed focus on mathematics, science and literacy could potentially lead to curriculum narrowing. There are remedies.

13.60   Within the subjects the Panel has recommended for curriculum-linked statutory assessment, the use of auto-marked objective items offers significant protection against curriculum narrowing. This is because these item types allow assessments to sample widely and efficiently across the full breadth of curriculum content, they can draw on a diverse range of question formats and vary the specific content sampled across different assessment sessions. This variability encourages teachers to maintain broad curriculum coverage rather than focus narrowly on a predictable set of topics. In addition, the speed and efficiency of auto-marked items – requiring minimal reading and rapid responses – enable each assessment to include a greater number of items, thereby covering more of the domain and providing a more comprehensive picture of pupil understanding.

13.61   There is, however, the limitation that only assessing mathematics, literacy and science might lead to neglect of other subjects. This risk can be mitigated by other control factors such as school inspection, the mandatory Northern Ireland Curriculum content in other subjects, policy messaging, teacher education and professional development. The Panel also considered additional measures which could be taken in assessment.

13.62   The first is the continuation of the sampling model of assessment, but in all subjects across the curriculum. This could be a 'dense' model – all subjects each year, or a 'light touch' model where different subjects are sampled each year. The data from such sampling would be valid at system-level only, not at pupil or school level. This approach would signal the importance of wide curriculum coverage.

13.63   The second measure is a radical 'carousel' model for statutory assessment. Mathematics, literacy and science would be assessed every year, but other subjects would be assessed every year on a rotating basis. For example, geography one year, history the next. All pupils would take the assessments, which would be valid to pupil level. The schedule might or might not be published in advance. Subjects about which there are concerns (for example from inspection evidence) might be brought up the schedule. The schedule might include one 'carousel subject' per year or could include more. This also could change year on year depending on need.

13.64   The Panel is not making final recommendations on these options, but they remain important options for future consideration.

Conclusion

13.65   The Panel's recommendations for a new statutory assessment system in Northern Ireland rest on the principle that high-quality assessment must be valid, reliable, and trusted. Achieving this requires robust development processes, strong governance, and a regulatory structure that is independent, transparent and technically expert.

13.66   While there are financial and operational implications arising from the new arrangements, these should be viewed as targeted investments that will, over time, deliver efficiencies, reduce workload, and improve system coherence.

13.67   The use of technology, auto-marked objective items, and streamlined test design offers opportunities to strengthen diagnostic value while maintaining fidelity to the curriculum and protecting breadth of learning.

13.68   Ultimately, the success of this reform will depend on ensuring that assessment development is adequately resourced, appropriately governed, and supported by a regulatory framework capable of assuring confidence in every stage of the process. With these foundations in place, Northern Ireland will be well-positioned to implement a statutory assessment system that is both sustainable and educationally robust, providing meaningful insights to support teaching, learning and equity across the system.

Chapter 14:
Overall conclusions and future direction

Introduction

14.1   This report has set out a comprehensive and evidence-based programme for transforming statutory assessment in Northern Ireland. It has drawn upon extensive engagement with teachers, leaders, pupils, parents and carers, sectoral bodies and international experts; rigorous analysis of domestic and international assessment practice; and careful reflection on the needs of a system undergoing significant reform under the TransformED strategy.

14.2   The Review has been conducted at a pivotal moment for education in Northern Ireland, where persistent gaps in attainment, reduced national monitoring, rising levels of complexity and need, and long-standing challenges in coherence have converged with new opportunities to modernise the system, strengthen teaching and learning and rebuild public confidence.

14.3   Across every strand of evidence considered, a clear message has emerged: Northern Ireland requires a coherent, reliable and future-focused statutory assessment system that serves pupils, supports teachers, informs families and provides government with trustworthy insight into standards and equity.

The case for systemic renewal

14.4   The Review has shown that while assessment practice in Northern Ireland's schools is characterised by strong professional commitment and deep expertise, the national statutory assessment framework has, for more than a decade, lacked participation, coherence and trust.

14.5   The collapse of the Levels of Progression framework, the suspension of moderation, the absence of reliable system-level data and the widespread reliance on commercial assessments have collectively left the system without consistent visibility of standards.

14.6   At the same time, trends in international studies have revealed a long-term decline in performance at age 15, while domestic data shows persistent socio-economic gaps and substantial between-school variation.

14.7   The Panel concludes that maintaining the current arrangements is not an option. Without a coherent statutory assessment system, Northern Ireland cannot reliably identify needs, support schools effectively, make evidence-based policy decisions or assure the public that all children are progressing as they should.

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14.8   A new assessment system must therefore be stable, credible, carefully designed, and built on an unambiguous set of principles that safeguard technical integrity, fairness and educational value.

A principles-led approach

14.9   The Panel's assessment principles form the foundation for all of their recommendations. These principles emphasise clarity of purpose, inclusion and equity, high technical quality, curriculum alignment, transparency, proportionate workload, agreed service standards and strong professional competence. They represent a coherent statement of what "good assessment" must mean for Northern Ireland: assessment that genuinely supports learning, strengthens progression, informs parents and carers, and provides dependable information on system-level standards.

14.10   These principles must not be static. As with all effective systems internationally, the principles should be revisited periodically to ensure continued alignment with curriculum reform, professional learning, emerging evidence from cognitive science and changing educational needs. The Panel emphasises that adherence to these principles will be critical to establishing a high-integrity and high-trust assessment system capable of serving the system for decades.

A coherent statutory pathway for Years 1–10

14.11   A central conclusion of the Review is that Northern Ireland must re-establish a statutory assessment pathway that is both coherent across phases and sharply focused on the core building blocks of future learning. The proposed pathway achieves this through a sequenced set of short, focused assessments extending from Year 1 to Year 10. It ensures that children's progress in the key areas of literacy, numeracy and science, the domains most essential to long-term attainment, is captured at the right moments and in ways that directly support next steps in learning.

14.12   The introduction of a high-validity baseline check in Year 1 is also a vital component of this pathway. It is designed to address longstanding weaknesses in early identification of needs and information transfer. It will provide schools with dependable insight into pupils' development upon entry, and supports early action for those who need it most.

14.13   This sits alongside a mandatory phonics check, reading fluency and comprehension tests, a multiplication check and curriculum-aligned tests in mathematics, literacy and science. Together, these provide a dependable picture of progression while maintaining low workload and high technical quality.

14.14   The Panel emphasises that these assessments must align with the new Northern Ireland Curriculum currently under development. Assessment should reflect and reinforce curriculum content, not distort it. The close alignment of curriculum and assessment observed in high-performing international systems is central to the success of the proposed model.

Supporting writing

14.15   Writing is fundamental to thinking, expression and academic development, yet evidence indicates that writing proficiency and writing enjoyment have declined significantly in recent years.

14.16   The Review concludes that statutory testing of writing at scale would, at present, impose undue workload and face reliability challenges. Instead, the Panel proposes an innovative Northern Ireland Writing Repository. This will allow schools to submit anonymised writing samples and in turn should allow observation of system-wide trends and strengthen professional judgement. This low-burden approach both raises the profile of writing and lays the groundwork for potential future developments in writing assessment as new technologies and marking approaches mature.

Ensuring strong professional standards and data literacy

14.17   The proposed statutory framework will only be effective if teachers and school leaders are equipped to use assessment information confidently and responsibly. While Northern Ireland's assessment culture is a major strength, the Review found inconsistency in Initial Teacher Education and variable access to high-quality professional development in assessment. The Panel concludes that a system-wide core curriculum in assessment theory and practice delivered across Initial Teacher Education and early career stages is essential.

14.18   Furthermore, the Panel recommends establishing dedicated support for assessment leads in schools and expanding opportunities for collaboration, moderation, and the sharing of expertise. Strengthening professional competence is not an optional addition to reform but an essential enabler of its success.

Strengthening data infrastructure: a Record of Development and Education

14.19   The Panel concludes that the current arrangements for information transfer are insufficient, particularly for vulnerable learners and those with Special Educational Needs. The proposed Record of Development and Education for Northern Ireland will provide a single, longitudinal digital record capturing developmental, narrative and statutory assessment information from early childhood onwards. This record will ensure continuity of understanding as children move between phases, reduce duplication for teachers and professionals, support early intervention and provide the system with a coherent evidence base to inform planning and support.

14.20   To be successful, it will require clear protocols for data entry, interpretation and use, accompanied by professional learning to support meaningful engagement with the record.

High-quality reporting and interpretation

14.21   High-quality data is only valuable if it is used well. The Panel, therefore, proposes a new Northern Ireland Reporting Unit, responsible for generating all statutory assessment reports, supporting interpretation, providing professional guidance and hosting an annual system learning forum. This independent function will improve the clarity, accessibility and technical integrity of reporting, reduce the burden on schools, and support consistent, evidence-informed decision-making across the system.

Maintaining standards: scaled scores, equating and governance

14.22   The Panel concludes that Northern Ireland must adopt a modern, stable and transparent approach to maintaining standards. The use of scaled scores across all statutory assessments, underpinned by robust equating processes, will ensure that scores are comparable over time and that improvements in performance genuinely reflect improvements in attainment. This sits alongside clear governance through a technical working group on attainment standards, responsible for monitoring trends, overseeing methodological changes, and producing annual public reports.

Ensuring equity for Irish-medium education and SEN learners

14.23   A further central conclusion of the Review is that statutory assessment must serve *all* learners, including those in Irish-medium education and those with SEN. The Panel recommends a rapid, well-resourced development programme for Irish-medium statutory assessments, ensuring linguistic and curricular appropriateness. For SEN learners, the Panel affirms the importance of robust diagnostic assessment.

Implementation and system readiness

14.24   The proposals in this report are ambitious but deliverable. Implementation will require careful phasing, strong project management, robust test development and clear communication. As noted above, it will also require careful sequencing with curriculum reform. Investment will be needed not only in assessment instruments but in data systems, professional development and independent reporting functions. The Panel emphasises that investment in assessment is an investment in pupil outcomes, system equity and long-term public trust.

Final reflections and the way forward

14.25   Taken together, the reforms proposed in this report offer Northern Ireland a unique opportunity to build an assessment system that is coherent, credible and genuinely supportive of learning. They form a connected set of measures designed to strengthen early identification, improve progression, support teacher professionalism, assure system quality and enhance equity.

14.26   The Panel concludes that the implementation of these reforms is essential to:

- restoring consistent system-wide visibility of standards;

- ensuring early identification of needs;

- enabling teachers to make informed and confident decisions;

- improving transitions and reducing avoidable workload;

- supporting curriculum reform and school improvement;

- increasing fairness and reducing variation between schools;

- enhancing public confidence in the education system; and

- ensuring that every learner can progress, achieve and thrive.

14.27   Northern Ireland's educators have demonstrated extraordinary commitment to pupils' learning. The proposals in this report seek to honour that commitment by providing the coherent statutory framework, professional infrastructure and system supports required to deliver lasting improvement.

14.28   With decisive action, sustained support and continued partnership with the profession, Northern Ireland can establish a world-class assessment system that supports every child's progress and secures a brighter educational future for the next generation.

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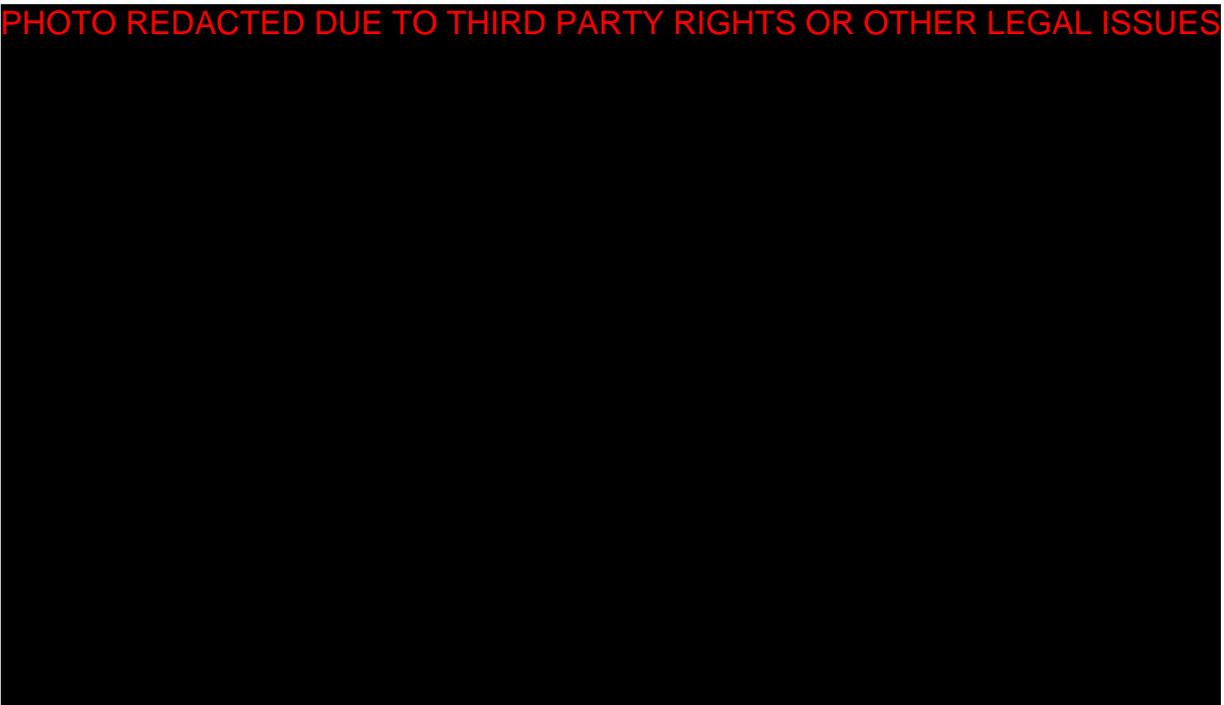
Overview of Recommendations

Statutory assessment, everyday assessments and other assessments

This report sets out the Panel's recommendations for statutory assessment across Northern Ireland. The Panel's remit also extended to considering the relationship between statutory assessment and ongoing assessments in schools. The Panel recognises that assessment in schools takes many forms. These range from minute-by-minute interactions in the classroom, to teachers' reviews of pupils' work, to periodic tests created by schools, commercial assessments, diagnostic tools, and bought-in professional services.

Throughout its work, the Panel has examined how information from 'summative' assessments can be used formatively to support learning. The report draws on the latest evidence from cognitive science on the use of testing in consolidating learning and highlights the importance of understanding what makes a good question and a good test, whether designed by testing agencies or teachers. This includes use of the latest research in these areas, along with new research on how well-designed tests can dependably predict not cap future attainment on a broad front.

The Panel also acknowledges that many schools already operate comprehensive assessment policies, led by designated assessment co-ordinators who oversee practice, ensure consistency and promote professional learning.

The Panel does not, therefore, propose a fixed model for assessment in schools beyond statutory assessment. To do so would run the risk of undermining current good practice and over-constraining the decision-making of schools and teachers. Instead, the Panel's recommendations are designed to build on existing good practice evident in schools and support the continuous improvement of all assessment practices in Northern Ireland.

The report includes:

- a new set of assessment principles which apply to all forms of assessment;
- a new Record of Development and Education for Northern Ireland to provide better information on each young person's progress, support earlier identification of needs and improve transparency;
- consideration of how statutory assessment can support decision-making around additional assessments including diagnostic assessments;
- processes for improved assessment reporting and better use and interpretation of assessment information, supported by a new Reporting Unit as well as Initial Teacher Education and professional learning providers;
- new processes for sharing good practice between schools supported by the Reporting Unit, Initial Teacher Education and professional learning providers;

- insights from high-performing systems to inform all forms of assessment including statutory assessment in Northern Ireland;

- analysis of the risks associated with certain models of ability, fixed ideas of potential, and other misuses of assessment data; and

- clarification of which educational priorities – oracy, high level critical thinking, learning dispositions – should remain central to school-level assessment but should not be assessed separately in statutory assessment.

List of Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

Introduce New Assessment Principles

A set of guiding principles has been developed to underpin assessment policy in Northern Ireland. These principles reflect international standards and best practice in educational assessment. They must be regularly reviewed and updated to remain responsive to evolving policy, context and evidence.

Recommendation 2:

A Focus on Pupil and System-Level Data

Assessment policy should prioritise the collection and use of pupil-level and system-level data to inform teaching and learning, and the development of system-level professional support and resources, rather than data being published or for school-level accountability purposes. This approach will create confidence in the new arrangements and support improvement without creating undue pressure on schools or learners.

Recommendation 3:

Remove Levels of Progression

The current Levels of Progression are not fit for purpose. They are too broad, subjective and open to interpretation. They also do not align with emerging international best practice. They should be removed to allow for a more coherent and effective assessment framework. Instead, assessments will use scaled scores to establish an expected standard.

Internationally, curriculum levels are increasingly not considered appropriate because they oversimplify learning into broad bands, masking gaps in understanding and attainment. They rely on imprecise best-fit judgments, meaning pupils at the same level can have very different strengths, making them unreliable for tracking progress and supporting learning. Originally intended as formative tools, levels can become high-stakes accountability measures, distorting

teaching priorities. They also fail to align neatly with what is taught, creating artificial thresholds that fragment progression. International evidence shows that high-performing systems avoid generic curriculum levels, instead using curriculum-based, concept-focussed assessment that supports depth of learning and coherent progression.

Recommendation 4:

Establish a New Statutory Assessment Pathway

A clear statutory assessment pathway should be introduced for pupils in Years 1 to 10, based on standardised assessments, which will significantly reduce workload for teachers compared with a system based on teacher-led assessments.

This pathway should include:

- **Year 1:** Baseline check
- **Year 2*:** Phonics check
- **Year 3 to Year 5:** Annual reading fluency check
- **Year 4:** Literacy and numeracy assessments
- **Year 5:** Multiplication check
- **Year 7:** Literacy, numeracy and science assessments
- **Year 10:** Literacy, numeracy and science assessments

*If pupils reach the required standard in phonics in Year 2, then they will take short reading fluency checks in Years 3, 4 and 5. If they do not meet the required standard, then the phonics check is repeated annually. From the time the phonics standard is met, it is followed by three years of reading fluency checks.

The new framework is designed to provide reliable information for pupils, parents, carers, schools and policymakers on the key areas of literacy, numeracy and science. These assessments will be closely linked to curriculum content and the Year 4, 7 and 10 assessments will use scaled scores to establish expected standards rather than broad curriculum levels.

The assessments proposed take account of curriculum reform, teacher workload and system readiness, with the need for carefully sequenced and phased introduction fully recognised.

The new framework can create a value-added measure for both primary schools linked to the baseline check, and at GCSE, value-added measures linked to prior attainment in Year 7 and Year 10, providing a benefit to schools in having a consistent assessment baseline to inform pupil progress and school development planning.

Writing development in schools will also be supported by a statutory Writing Repository, details of which are provided in Recommendation 7 below.

Recommendation 5:

Provide Optional Assessments

Alongside statutory assessments, schools should have access to a range of high-quality optional assessments, including:

- **Years 1–10:** Optional use of CCEA Adaptive Assessments in literacy and numeracy potentially replacing current commercial assessments.

- **Years 2–10:** Optional reading fluency checks, with frequency determined by the school, alongside the statutory fluency checks.

- **Year 8:** Optional baseline checks in literacy, numeracy and science to be available to schools.

Recommendation 6:

Develop Dedicated Irish-Medium Assessments

Specific linguistically-appropriate statutory assessments should be promptly developed for Irish-medium schools. These should align with system-wide standards while respecting the distinctive features of Irish-medium education.

Recommendation 7:

Establish a Northern Ireland Writing Repository

As part of statutory arrangements, a Writing Repository should be created to allow schools to lodge examples of pupil writing. This low-workload initiative will enable schools to benchmark writing standards against other schools, including those in similar contexts, and encourage internal scrutiny of writing development.

Given their workload intensity, there will not be formal assessments of writing – rather this approach will provide a beneficial comparative tool, with minimal workload for teachers.

Schools will be required to submit no more than five short, unmarked samples, showing the range of writing quality in Years 4, 6 and 8. For other year groups, submissions are optional but encouraged.

Recommendation 8:

Introduce a Record of Development and Education Northern Ireland

A digital record should be developed for every child and young person, integrating early developmental checks from 0-4 and all statutory assessment data.

The Record of Development and Education Northern Ireland will provide a robust, enduring record of progress for each child and young person, supporting smooth transitions between phases and reducing teacher workload associated with information gathering.

To ensure equity and inclusion for all pupils, there are also specific recommendations relating to the arrangements for pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Pupils with SEN should be entered for standard assessments within the statutory system wherever possible and where outcomes will enhance each young person's progression and personal development. Where entry is not possible, personal attainment should be recorded in the Record of Development and Education Northern Ireland and used for recognition, support and progression.

Recommendation 9:

Establish an Education Reporting Unit

An Education Reporting Unit should be created to manage and analyse assessment data in Northern Ireland. This unit will enhance early identification of pupil needs, improve collaboration across services and phases, and provide system-level intelligence to inform policy. It will ensure high-quality data is available at pupil, school and system levels, supporting equity and improved outcomes.

Recommendation 10:

Strengthen Assessment in Teacher Education and Professional Learning

The new statutory assessment framework should be supported by enhanced professional development and strengthened assessment components in Initial Teacher Education and early career professional development.

Assessment theory and practice should be embedded as part of the compulsory content within Initial Teacher Education and supported through ongoing professional development, particularly for early career teachers. This will further enhance teachers' confidence and competence in using assessment to improve learning.