
Supporting Progress for Every Child

Transforming Statutory Assessment: An Independent Review for Northern Ireland

Summary Report
March 2026

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Overview

This summary report presents the findings and recommendations of the Independent Review of Statutory Assessment in Northern Ireland. It should be read in conjunction with the full report. 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, the 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 will be 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 curriculum levels, the 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.

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.

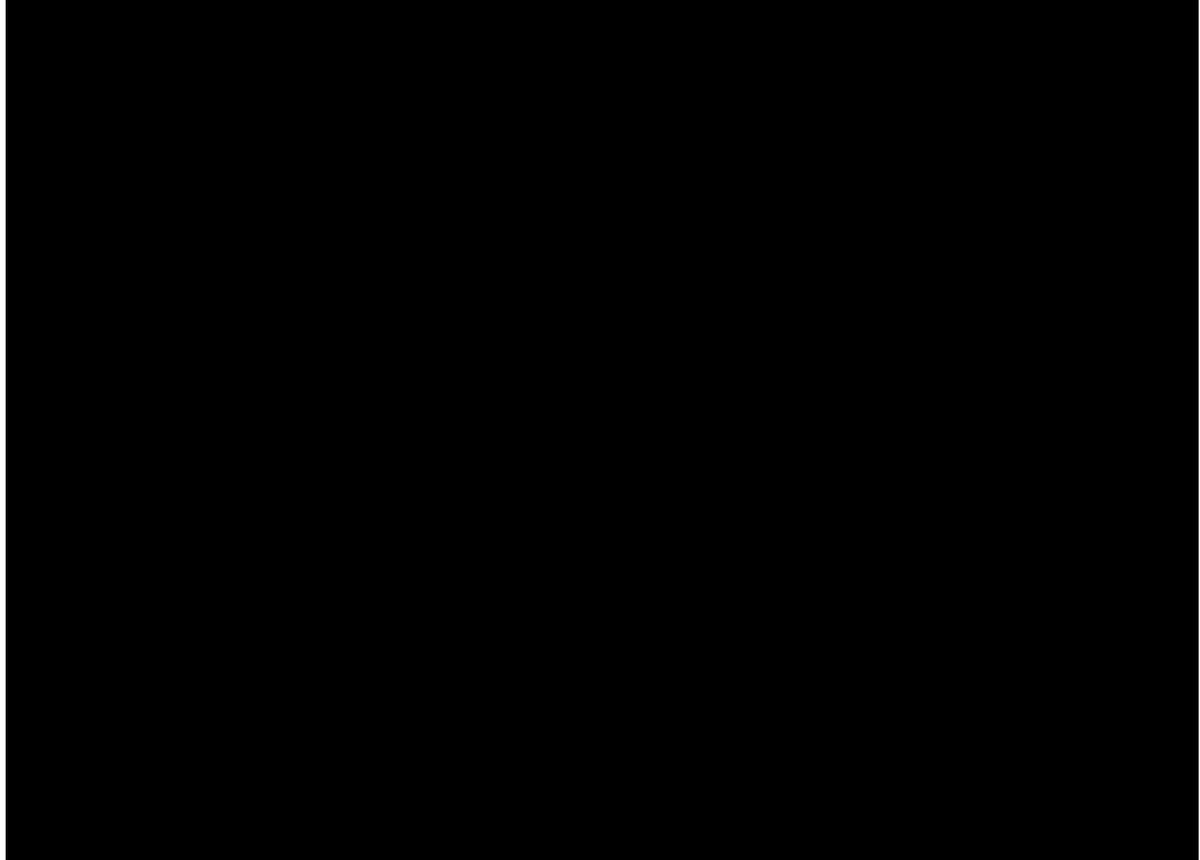
To ensure successful implementation, the Review sets out several enabling reforms:

- 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

The TransformED Strategy (launched March 2025) seeks to make Northern Ireland a world-leading education system through coherent reform of teaching and learning. Its design draws on lessons from successful systems internationally, placed in the specific context of Northern Ireland emphasising coherence across curriculum, assessment, inspection, teacher development and resource allocation as essential for sustained improvement.

Past reforms internationally show how misalignment of these elements weakens education systems (for example, Sweden's grade inflation crisis and Scotland's curriculum-assessment disconnect). TransformED aims to avoid these pitfalls by taking a comprehensive and sequenced approach to reform grounded in evidence.

It is within this wider context of the TransformED Strategy that the Independent Review of Assessment Panel was established in June 2025. The Panel was asked to fundamentally review current arrangements for assessment and to make recommendations on the nature, purpose, and design of statutory assessment in Northern Ireland.

The Review draws on a broad, diverse and triangulated evidence base to examine assessment in Northern Ireland. Sources include system-wide data, key publications, international research and extensive stakeholder engagement.

Stakeholder engagement was central to the review process and included 13 school and setting visits, 58 engagement meetings, 106 written submissions to the call for evidence and a large-scale teacher survey (912 responses).

Chapter 2:

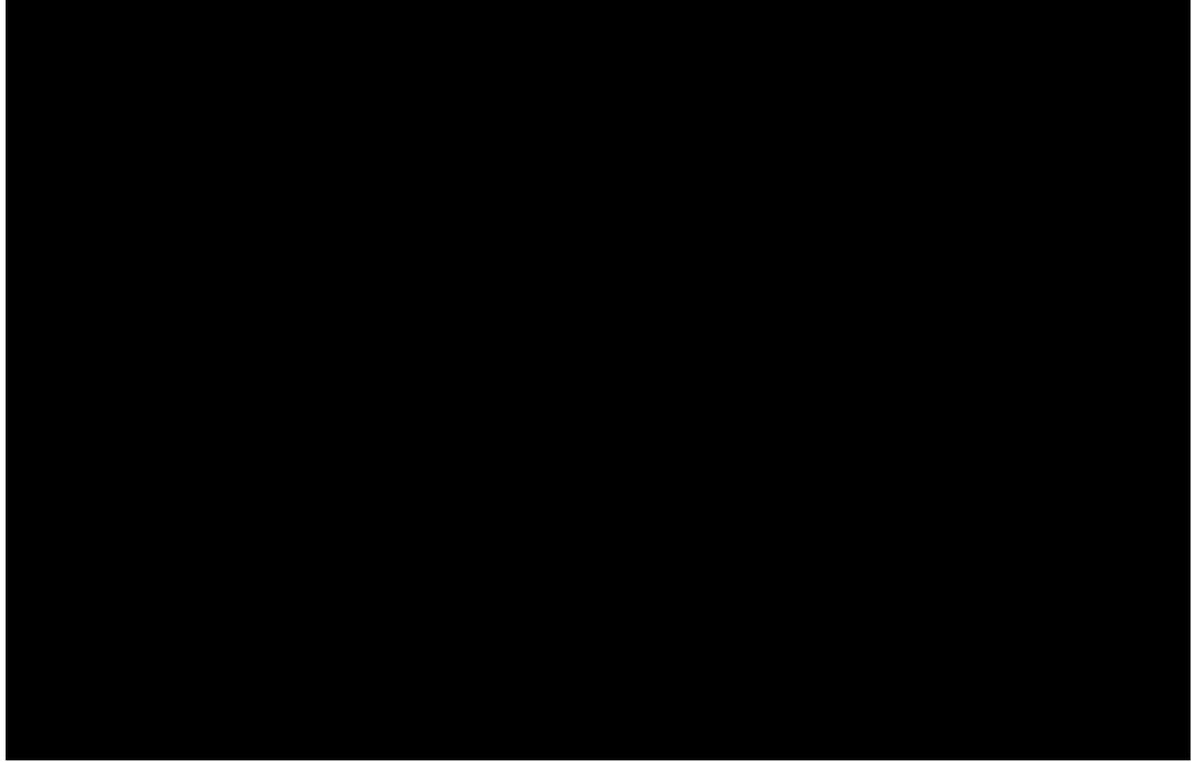
The Northern Ireland education system

Northern Ireland's education system is small but complex. There are 329,209 pupils in 1,102 publicly funded schools, with multiple school types including controlled, Catholic maintained, voluntary grammar, integrated and Irish-medium schools. The Department of Education has statutory responsibility for 0–4 provision, primary, post-primary and youth services, with an annual resource budget of over £3 billion pounds.

The education system's many strengths include a highly qualified teaching workforce and historically high GCSE and A-level outcomes. However, Northern Ireland faces deepening financial strain, rising levels of Special Educational Needs (SEN), repeated bouts of industrial action and reduced confidence across the education sector. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified pre-existing pressures, including weakening school attendance and increasing the number of pupils with lower levels of school readiness.

The current statutory Northern Ireland curriculum, which was introduced in 2007, sought to increase skills development and reduce prescription but is now seen as too general, lacking specificity and clarity about essential knowledge and concepts across all subjects. A major curriculum reform process is underway, with a new framework due for consultation in late spring 2026. Assessment must be designed to align with the curriculum and implementation of this report's recommendations needs to sequence appropriately with curriculum reform.

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Chapter 3:

The performance of the education system

Northern Ireland continues to show strong outcomes at primary level with high international performance in reading and mathematics. Yet PISA results, from the international study of 15-year-olds, have declined significantly over the past decade across reading, mathematics and science. In 2022, 15-year-olds in Northern Ireland performed above average in reading, but only average in science and mathematics; being below England and the Republic of Ireland across all three domains.

Domestic qualification outcomes have improved markedly over the last 20 years, including a halving of the proportion leaving without qualifications and substantial gains for disadvantaged pupils. Nevertheless, inequalities remain substantial: the GCSE attainment gap between pupils entitled to Free School Meals and non-Free School Meals pupils was 27.5 percentage points in 2023/24.

Furthermore, schools with similar levels of disadvantage show dramatically different levels of attainment, pointing to systemic inconsistency and the need for high-quality, comparable pupil-level data to support equity-focussed interventions.

Part 2: **The evidence**



Chapter 4:

The current assessment framework in Northern Ireland

Over the past decade, Northern Ireland's statutory Key Stage assessment framework has progressively weakened to the point of near-collapse. Industrial action beginning in 2014 significantly reduced school participation in Key Stage 1–3 assessments, undermining the consistency of national reporting. This instability was then intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which statutory assessments were formally disapplied from 2020 to 2023.

As a result, Northern Ireland has experienced a prolonged period with no dependable system-wide data on pupil performance. Interim arrangements in 2024/25 resumed limited unmoderated teacher-based assessments in literacy and numeracy. However, participation and data quality remained variable, offering only a limited basis for reliable monitoring and comparison.

The nature of the statutory assessment model itself contributed to its decline. Assessments at the end of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 were built around the Levels of Progression – a broad seven-level curriculum scale intended to assess Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT. The framework sought to serve multiple competing purposes simultaneously: supporting classroom learning, reporting pupil progress, for school-level accountability and generating system-level data. However, the level descriptors were too general and open to interpretation, creating doubts about reliability and comparability. Moderation requirements, introduced to address these weaknesses, significantly increased workload and were viewed by teachers as bureaucratic and misaligned with the diagnostic purpose of formative assessment.

This led the teaching unions to include non-participation in Action Short of Strike from 2014, and participation rapidly declined. By 2017/18, only 14% of primary and 32% of post-primary schools submitted Key Stage outcomes, and confidence in the system did not recover even after moderation requirements were relaxed.

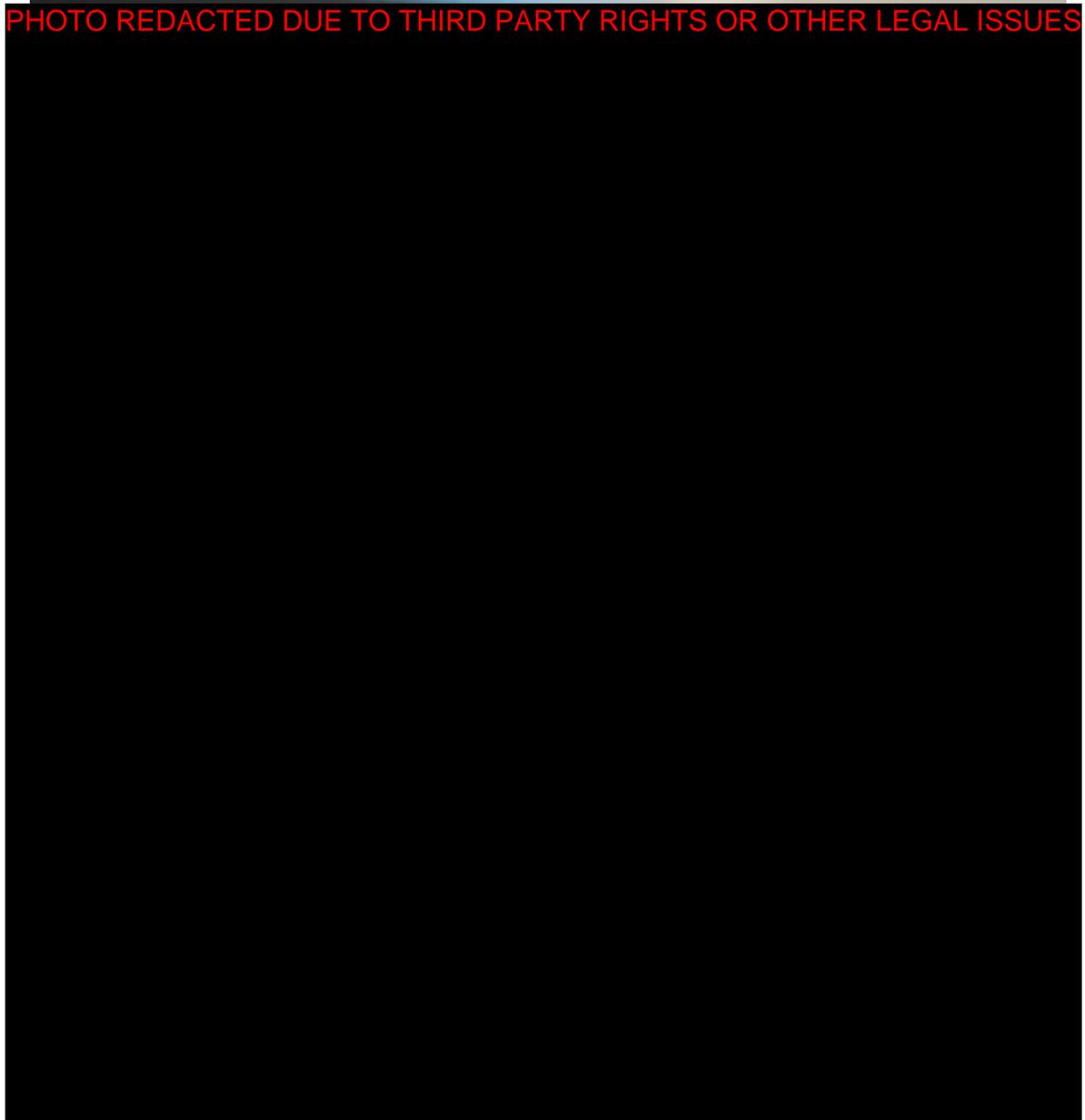
The pandemic further deepened gaps in system-level evidence. When the Department resumed unmoderated teacher-based assessments in 2024/25, there were higher levels of participation, but the resulting data lacked the reliability and comparability needed for accountability or meaningful system monitoring. Differences in participation across schools compounded these issues, highlighting the fragility of the existing statutory model and the pressing need for an alternative that is both technically robust and operationally feasible.

To restore national-level insight, the Department has introduced system-level sample assessments in literacy and numeracy at the end of each Key Stage from 2025/26. These low-stakes written tests, administered to a representative sample of schools rather than the whole cohort, are designed and marked externally by CCEA. While this approach will provide more reliable national-level data with minimal workload, it cannot inform individual pupil

progress, classroom practice or school-level decision-making. Such sample-based assessments lack the motivational “wash-back” that school-level assessment can generate.

Overall, Northern Ireland currently lacks basic, dependable information about pupil, school and system performance at Key Stages 1 to 3. The collapse of statutory assessment, combined with the absence of inspection during key periods, has left the system without the evidence needed to evaluate the impact of over £3 billion in annual education spending. Re-establishing a coherent, credible and sustainable assessment framework is essential not only for accountability but also for supporting teaching, ensuring that pupil needs are understood and addressed across all Key Stages, and restoring confidence across the system.

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Chapter 5:

Assessment in Northern Ireland schools

Despite the significant limitations of current statutory assessment, schools in Northern Ireland maintain a robust and deeply embedded assessment culture, characterised by frequent “assessment check-ups”, thoughtful data use and strong professional commitment. Teachers regularly use internal and commercial assessments, and frequently triangulate results to understand learning, support progression and inform instruction.

Engagement with schools, sector bodies and Initial Teacher Education providers shows that teachers value assessment, apply it frequently and often use it with considerable skill. Many schools demonstrate thoughtful planning around assessment type, timing and analysis, supported by arrangements such as assessment coordinators and consistent informal, day-to-day assessment embedded across the curriculum. The Irish-medium sector also demonstrates a clear desire for linguistically appropriate, curriculum-aligned assessments tailored to their context.

These strengths have endured even during periods of system instability, with many teachers maintaining robust assessment practices despite industrial action and political uncertainty. However, the absence of a trusted statutory assessment framework has created variability in practice and driven heavy reliance on commercial assessment products. Many schools use standardised tests annually for formative purposes, progress tracking and intervention planning. Yet this reliance brings challenges: inconsistent use across schools, uneven reporting to parents and carers, poor transfer of assessment information between phases, lack of alignment with the Northern Ireland curriculum and substantial financial costs to schools.

The slow development and rollout of CCEA’s Computer Adaptive Assessments highlights the impact of wider underinvestment across the education system but also points to a potential free-to-schools alternative to commercial standardised assessments.

The findings from the Review’s Teacher Survey reinforce these themes. Responses from over 900 teachers show high levels of experience and confidence in using assessment data, alongside strong use of formative, summative and standardised assessments across sectors. Teachers overwhelmingly prioritise literacy and numeracy for any future statutory model and express limited support for retaining the Levels of Progression. While assessment information is valued, especially when passed between teachers, there are clear gaps in formal assessment training within Initial Teacher Education and early career support, combined with concerns about workload and inconsistency in expectations.

Overall, assessment practice in Northern Ireland is characterised by professionalism, commitment and effective use of data within schools, but weakened by the lack of a coherent statutory framework. Heavy reliance on commercial tools, gaps in training and inconsistent

information-sharing highlight the need for a more stable, curriculum-aligned system. Strengthening statutory arrangements, supported by high-quality adaptive assessments and clearer system-wide guidance, offers an opportunity to enhance coherence, reduce workload and ensure assessment information reliably supports learning and equity across all schools.

Chapter 6:

International context and comparisons

The Panel studied high-performing and improving education systems internationally including Estonia, Finland, Hong Kong, Ireland, New Zealand, Portugal, Singapore and Sweden.

Key insights include:

- The strongest systems have alignment between curriculum, assessment and pedagogy.
- Data from regular national assessment supports early identification of needs, equity interventions and policy refinement.
- Teacher professional learning is a non-negotiable driver of effective assessment use.
- Removing statutory assessments without strong alternatives (Portugal post-2015, Finland's curriculum shifts) brings the risk of declining performance.
- Systems that rely solely on teacher assessment without external anchors for assessment struggle with both reliability and comparability.

Lessons most relevant to Northern Ireland include: the importance of early years developmental checks (Estonia, Finland, New Zealand); the value of reading fluency testing (Iceland); the risks of losing national reference points (Sweden); and the power of long-term data to focus system improvement (Ireland).

In reforming statutory assessment, Northern Ireland must ensure strong alignment between curriculum, and assessment; prioritise early identification of need and support; invest in high-quality, high-trust data at all stages; and commit to continuous professional learning for teachers.

The international evidence shows that well-designed statutory assessment is essential for equity and system improvement. Northern Ireland's future assessment system must be coherent, balanced and evidence-driven, ensuring dependable standards while supporting every learner's progression.

Part 3:
**Proposals for
reform**

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Chapter 7:

Assessment principles

The Panel has developed a set of principles to inform and support assessment policy in Northern Ireland. They are set out in the table below. The principles are designed to be useful at both system and school level,.

	Principle	What this means
1	Purpose-driven, inclusive and equitable	<p>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.</p> <p>Assessments must be designed to meet the needs of all pupils, including those with additional or exceptional learning requirements.</p>
2	Growth-orientated attainment	<p>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.</p>
3	Curriculum-aligned	<p>Assessments must align with and support attainment in the statutory curriculum for Northern Ireland.</p>
4	Fair, transparent and supportive of learning	<p>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.</p> <p>All assessment outcomes must be treated as consequential and used responsibly to enhance learning.</p> <p>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.</p>

	Principle	What this means
5	High technical quality: valid, reliable and free from bias	<p>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.</p> <p>Assessment outcomes must be consistent and dependable; meaning that similar performance yields similar results across occasions and assessments.</p> <p>Assessment design must not unfairly advantage or disadvantage any individual or group.</p>
6	Efficient and proportionate	<p>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.</p>
7	Agreed service standards	<p>All assessment providers must meet agreed service standards and ensure a sustainable supply of high-quality statutory assessments.</p> <p>All assessment outcomes and reports should be provided to agreed schedules and service standards.</p> <p>Publicly available information should include technical evaluations, reliability data, participation statistics and other evidence relating to assessment performance.</p> <p>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.</p>
8	Strong professional competence in assessment	<p>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.</p>
9	Clear communication with parents, carers and stakeholders on assessment and its outcomes	<p>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.</p>

Chapter 8:

The new statutory assessment framework: scope and rationale

The Panel proposes a new statutory assessment framework for Northern Ireland that balances workload, cost, technical quality, and educational utility. Statutory assessments should concentrate on domains with strong evidence for reliable measurement and foundational impact on learning, specifically literacy, mathematics and science. This focus will support individual learners, drive school improvement, and provide dependable system-level insight. Alongside these, a high-validity baseline check in Year 1 is recommended to identify early developmental needs and trigger timely interventions.

Early development (birth–6) is critical to later outcomes, with evidence that cognitive, language and socio-emotional growth are tightly interlinked. While Northern Ireland has comprehensive pre-school guidance and multiple health-led developmental reviews, the Panel notes gaps in cross-agency data sharing, consistency and utility at transition into school. It is important to strengthen multi-agency protocols so information from early checks is consistently accessible to schools and used to inform support from the outset.

A refined baseline check on school entry should build on lessons from England's Reception Baseline check: short, teacher-administered, and psychometrically robust across domains such as number, early calculation, patterns, measurement, vocabulary, phonological awareness and comprehension. The Panel suggests modest extensions to the check (within manageable testing time) to enhance individual-level reliability and provide interpretable score profiles to guide classroom action, further diagnostics, and referrals.

In writing, the Panel rejects re-introducing statutory assessments tests or teacher assessed moderated tasks. This is due to reliability challenges, the significant workload involved in assessment of writing, and potential negative washback. Instead, it proposes a Northern Ireland Writing Repository: each school would annually submit a small set of unmarked, anonymised samples (typical and exemplary) for Years 4, 6 and 8. This low-burden mechanism would enable benchmarking across schools, support professional dialogue, and may allow the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to report annually on system-level trends. It will also create a longitudinal evidence bank while leaving room to adopt emerging technologies (for example comparative judgement tools and AI-assisted marking) when mature.

For reading, the framework distinguishes targeted statutory checks from broader curricular aims. It endorses a sequence that includes a Year 2 phonics check and reading fluency checks in Years 3 to 5 (or for three years after phonics standard is met). It also incorporates literacy assessments, including comprehension in Years 4, 7 and 10, providing scaled scores and Northern Ireland benchmarks. Optional adaptive assessments (Year 2 – Year 10) and fluency checks extend the toolkit. Fluency checks (correctly read words per minute) are quick to administer, intelligible to teachers and families, and strongly associated with comprehension,

making it valuable for early identification and progress monitoring. Spelling, punctuation and grammar tests are recommended within the statutory pathway, but as auto-marked instruments to avoid workload escalation.

Assessment should enable action: identifying pupils below benchmarks, guiding further diagnostics, shaping targeted support, and informing instructional refinement. The Panel, therefore, notes the need for clear guidance on exclusions from statutory assessment, timing (to maximise intervention value), and score interpretation; and proposes a Reporting Unit to produce high-quality reports, strengthen teachers' assessment literacy, and iteratively improve assessment instruments. Attitudinal data about reading may be co-collected to deepen insight at pupil, school and system levels.

Several important areas are not proposed for statutory assessment at this stage – ICT/digital literacy/computing, creativity, high-level critical thinking, and oracy. These areas were excluded because the underlying constructs are not yet stable enough to measure outcomes reliably at scale, the assessment burden would be high, and statutory testing could risk narrowing the curriculum. However, the Panel emphasises that these domains remain educational priorities. They should continue to be developed through high-quality curriculum materials, optional assessments, strong professional development, and, where appropriate, in qualifications at ages 16 and 18.

The Panel notes that creativity and high-level critical thinking are best cultivated through strong subject knowledge and well-designed disciplinary tasks rather than through generic standalone tests.

Oracy is extremely important; however, the Panel advises embedding it across teaching and learning rather than creating a separate statutory check, to preserve breadth, authenticity and minimise workload.

For school connectedness and metacognition/learning dispositions, the Panel favours the use of school-level assessments rather than statutory measures.

In respect to SEN learners, the Panel advocates inclusive participation in statutory assessments where appropriate, full access to access arrangements and aids, and continued use of diagnostic assessments outside the statutory suite. It supports the development of a Record of Development and Education Northern Ireland to accumulate evidence across settings, improve transitions, and bring greater sensitivity to SEN decision-making.

Overall, the proposed statutory assessment framework seeks to provide high validity and utility with low workload, leveraging technology and focused instruments to raise equity, standards and confidence across the system.

Chapter 9:

Key elements of the assessment pathway

The Panel proposes a streamlined statutory assessment pathway focusing on literacy, numeracy and science, designed to be low-workload, high-utility and aligned with the forthcoming curriculum. The pathway includes:

- **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 reach the required standard in phonics in Year 2, then they will take short reading fluency checks in Years 3, 4 and 5. If pupils do not meet the required standard in Year 2, then the phonics check is repeated. From the time the phonics standard is met, it is followed by three years of reading fluency checks.

Levels of Progression should be discontinued and replaced with scaled scores in the literacy, numeracy and science assessments enabling year-on-year comparability, clear expected standards and the development of value-added measures.

The Panel recommends establishing a Northern Ireland Writing Repository rather than statutory writing tests. This repository would allow schools to benchmark writing samples annually (statutory writing repository submissions to be made for Years 4, 6, and 8, with optional but encouraged submissions in other years) and may enable ETI to report on system-wide trends.

The new assessment pathway 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.

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.

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

Chapter 10:

Standards in statutory assessment

Educational standards encompass multiple distinct concepts, including the difficulty of assessment questions, the curriculum content sampled, the rules used to convert raw marks into final scores, the quality of pupil responses, overall attainment inferred from grades, curriculum expectations, and the quality of teaching that enables those outcomes. These meanings are often confused in public debate, which complicates discussions about fairness, consistency and changes in performance over time.

When considering statutory assessment, standards must be dependable over long periods so that rising scores reflect real improvement rather than easier tests. International examples illustrate the risks of weak standards control: in Sweden, rising teacher grades alongside falling PISA scores led to a breakdown in public confidence; in England, concerns about declining awarding standards prompted the introduction of the “comparable outcomes” approach to qualification awarding at GCSE and GCE A-level and later National Reference Tests to monitor real changes in cohort performance. These cases highlight the need for systems that can distinguish true improvement from shifts in test difficulty.

To support long-term consistency, Northern Ireland’s statutory assessment system should adopt overarching criteria for maintaining standards. These include employing equating processes that link results across years; ensuring equating methods are sensitive to genuine improvements or declines in attainment; using multiple equating approaches where feasible; retaining detailed test data for future scrutiny; and establishing a technical working group with independent psychometric expertise to oversee standards, produce annual reports and advise on adjustments. Clear documentation and transparent communication are essential for building public and professional understanding.

Numerical scaled scores are recommended instead of grades or the current curriculum levels because they allow clearer year-on-year comparability, support cohort, and age-related interpretation, accommodate error estimates and strengthen the statistical foundations of equating.

Reporting should show each pupil’s scaled score, their position relative to age expectations, and in relation to their cohort detail of which to be determined by the Reporting Unit, alongside item-level performance data to support formative and diagnostic use.

Maintaining standards is understood not as freezing the system but as ensuring that equal performance receives equal recognition across time, and that improvements in system-level results genuinely reflect gains in learning.

Chapter 11:

Supporting the new statutory framework

Northern Ireland's current assessment practice is strong within schools, but the wider system for gathering, interpreting and transferring information about children's development is fragmented. Gaps in early identification, inconsistent information sharing, and the absence of a coherent longitudinal record limit the ability of professionals to make timely, evidence-informed decisions.

Early developmental indicators can signal later difficulties, and effective support, particularly for pupils with SEN depends on the ability to capture narrative, contextual and developmental information alongside formal assessment outcomes.

A **Record of Development and Education Northern Ireland** is, therefore, proposed as a low workload, single, cumulative digital record containing developmental data, assessment outcomes and narrative evidence. Such a record would support smoother transitions, strengthen early intervention and reduce avoidable duplication for teachers and allied health professionals. All schools currently have a system in place for recording pupil progress. This proposal would allow a fully-supported, system-level approach to be adopted across the education system.

The Record's effectiveness requires clear protocols for collecting, interpreting and acting on information, supported by ongoing professional development. The Record would also play a vital role for pupils with complex needs, complementing statutory assessments while ensuring wider progress is recognised.

A **Northern Ireland Education Reporting Unit** is also recommended to ensure high-quality reporting, robust interpretation and consistent use of assessment outcomes. The Unit would produce clear reports tailored to different users – pupils, teachers, school leaders, parents, carers and policymakers – while offering professional development to build confidence in interpreting results. Separating reporting from test administration would enhance accountability and quality assurance. The Unit could sit within the Department of Education or be established as an independent body. It would convene an annual conference to share insights and promote best practice.

The Panel emphasises the importance of analysing both individual assessment outcomes and longer-term patterns across the accumulated record. Longitudinal analysis provides richer insight than single-point outcomes and can support much earlier identification of emerging difficulties. Research shows that indicators of later reading or learning challenges often appear in early developmental records. Combining the digital record with the Reporting Unit's analytical capacity would enable more sophisticated, low-workload insights into pupil

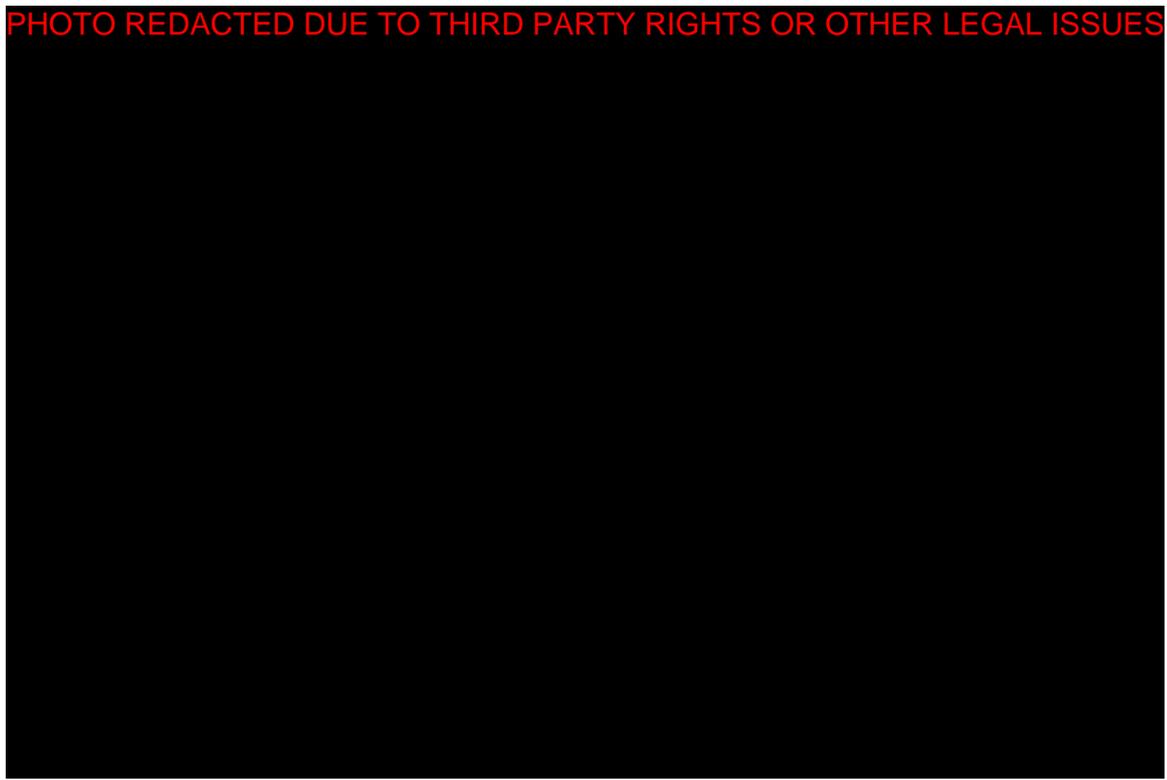
progress and school improvement. Advances in technology, including AI-supported data handling, are expected to further reduce workload and improve analytical quality over time.

Teacher expertise is a critical component of an effective statutory assessment system. Evidence from Initial Teacher Education providers, school leaders and the teacher survey points to substantial variation in the depth and quality of assessment training. Nearly half of surveyed teachers reported no assessment training during Initial Teacher Education, with only a small minority receiving in-depth preparation. Many teachers highlighted the need for support in data interpretation, understanding assessment types and using assessment to inform planning. A strengthened approach is advocated, including a core curriculum for assessment in Initial Teacher Education, clearer competence frameworks, and stronger alignment between Initial Teacher Education, induction and early career development.

There is a strong appetite within schools for better support, particularly for assessment leads and coordinators. A dedicated professional development programme for assessment leads, alongside improved collaboration across Initial Teacher Education providers, would enhance system consistency and build a confident workforce capable of applying assessment principles effectively.

Together, the proposed digital record, reporting unit, strengthened competency and coherent professional learning framework form an integrated approach designed to create a more equitable, evidence-informed assessment system that supports every learner.

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Chapter 12:

Assessment in Irish-medium education

Irish-medium education serves over 7,300 pupils across 30 standalone schools and 10 Irish-medium units, operating on a full immersion model from pre-school to post-primary.

To ensure equity, Irish-medium settings require statutory assessments developed specifically for learning through Irish rather than relying on translated English-medium materials. The Panel proposes a rapid, well-funded development programme to produce curriculum-aligned Irish-medium assessments in maths, literacy and science, including tailored versions of the phonics, fluency and multiplication check, and an Irish-medium baseline check. An 18-month development window is recommended, with first statutory trials in 2027–28.

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. Their design must allow standards to be equated across sectors to ensure comparability in attainment, while supporting pupil learning, school self-evaluation and system-level monitoring.

There are four key barriers to progressing Irish-medium assessments at the same pace as wider assessment reform: a shortage of high-quality Irish-medium test items, distinctive curriculum sequencing in immersion settings, different progression patterns associated with bilingual language development, and the influence of dialect variation on assessment item validity.

To overcome these barriers, high-quality items must be purpose-built from Irish-medium teaching materials and validated using rigorous psychometric processes. Collaboration with the Republic of Ireland's assessment authorities and potential European Union support is encouraged to expand test item development capacity.

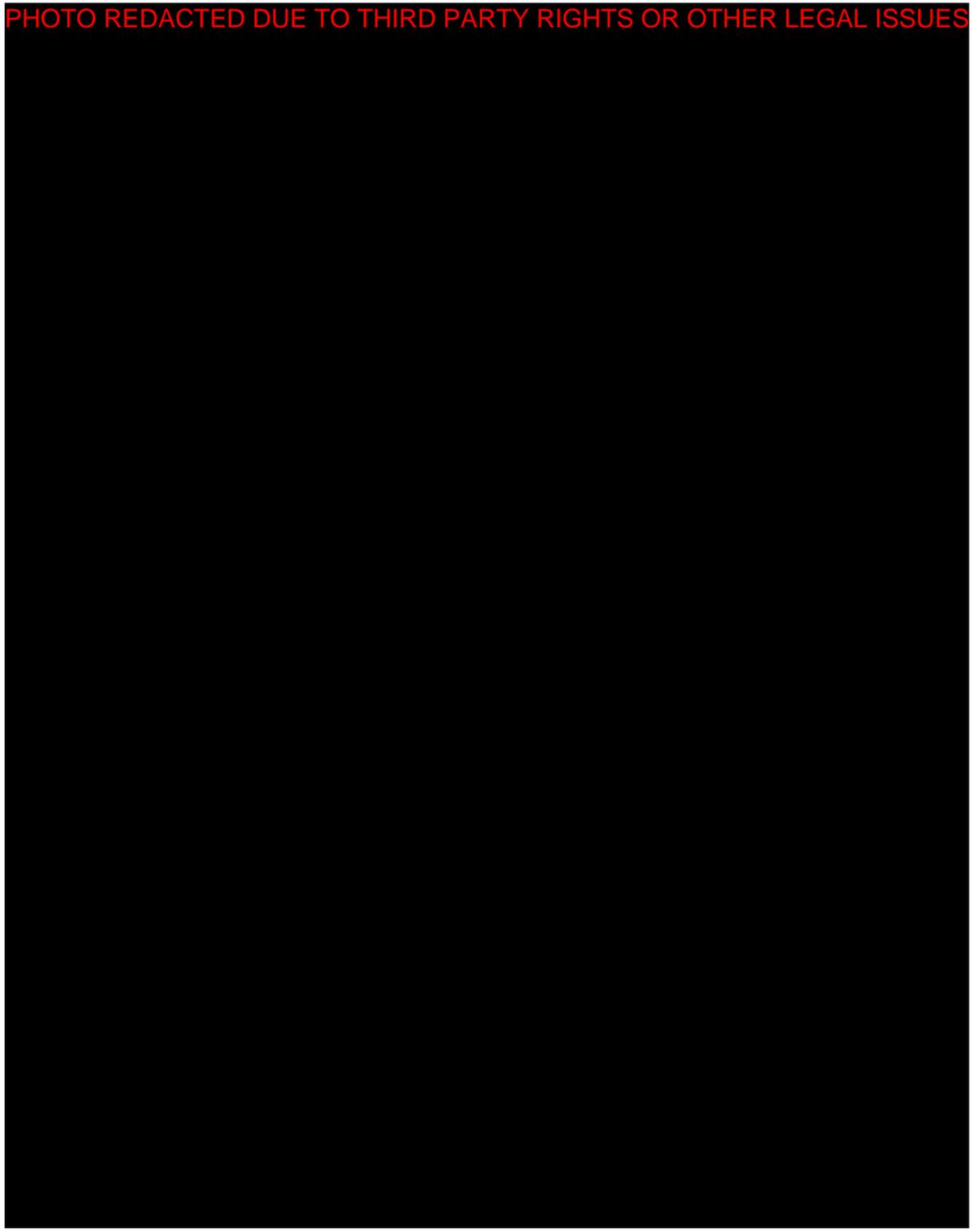
Differences in curriculum timing, bilingual language acquisition and exposure to Irish dialects must be carefully considered, as they affect item performance, progression patterns and assessment fairness. Achievement norms should be tuned specifically to the Irish-medium context while ensuring that end-of-school standards remain aligned with system expectations at ages 16 and 18.

There are significant technical demands in setting and maintaining standards in Irish-medium assessment. Criterion-referenced standards are preferable given the expected growth and demographic shifts in the sector. Reliable equivalence across Irish and English-medium assessments depends on a robust item bank, sensitive equating methods and strong governance.

The Panel concludes that revised statutory arrangements for Irish-medium schools can only

be implemented when sufficient validated Irish-medium items are available, and emphasises urgent, collaborative development to ensure validity, reliability and equity of assessment for the Irish-medium sector.

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Part 4:
**Delivery and
next steps**

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Chapter 13:

Considerations for implementation

The Panel's recommendations propose a coherent system of statutory and non-statutory assessments designed specifically for the Northern Ireland education system. The aim is to strengthen curriculum alignment, increase standardisation and reduce school workload while maintaining high technical quality. Robust procedures and governance are essential to ensure validity, reliability and cost-effectiveness, particularly where assessments carry significant educational and policy implications.

High-quality assessment development requires a structured, transparent process including item validation, technical pre-testing, clear test frameworks, and specialist expertise in psychometrics and item design. International models such as those used by the Standards and Testing Agency (STA) in England demonstrate the importance of rigorous test development methodologies and compulsory participation in trials to ensure that assessments are accurate and dependable. Delivery systems must also incorporate secure administration, marking and awarding processes with sufficient technical and logistical capacity.

There are concerns regarding the current resourcing of CCEA to deliver the full suite of recommended statutory assessments, particularly given delays to development of computer-adaptive testing and competing organisational priorities. The Panel suggests a full audit of CCEA's capacity and resourcing.

A number of potential delivery models for implementation of the new statutory assessment framework are suggested. These include using external contractors, adapting existing assessments from other jurisdictions, expanding CCEA's role with additional resources, or establishing a new arms-length body to manage statutory assessments. Whichever model is selected, it must demonstrate the capability to deliver consistently and to a high standard.

In England, OFQUAL regulates statutory assessments as well as qualifications. To date, there have not been arrangements in place for robust regulation of statutory assessment in Northern Ireland and this is a clear requirement going forward.

Further, clear separation between regulatory and provider functions is a key governance requirement. Northern Ireland's current model where CCEA acts as both regulator and awarding body for qualifications creates a risk of perceived conflict of interest. Lessons from reforms in England and Wales, and ongoing debates in Scotland, support the need for independent regulation to strengthen transparency, accountability and public confidence. Statutory assessment outcomes inform both school practice and government decision-making, making rigorous oversight essential.

Cost considerations underline the importance of short, focused assessments that make use of technology and auto-marking to reduce ongoing expenditure and administrative burden.

Objective items (questions with a single, predetermined correct answer) are recommended as the primary assessment format for literacy, numeracy and science assessments due to their efficiency, reliability and suitability for machine marking.

The Panel acknowledges the risk of curriculum narrowing because of assessment and proposes a range of potential mitigation measures, including broad sampling within assessed subjects, stronger professional development, and optional future models such as system-level sampling of a wider range of subjects, or the rotating of subjects for assessment.

Chapter 14:

Overall conclusions and future direction

The Review concludes that Northern Ireland's statutory assessment system requires substantial renewal. Drawing on extensive engagement with educators, parents, learners, sectoral partners and international experts, it identifies the need for a coherent, reliable and future-focused assessment framework aligned with the wider TransformED reforms.

The system currently faces challenges including reduced system-wide monitoring, persistent attainment gaps and increased complexity in learner needs. Across all evidence, stakeholders consistently called for an assessment system that reinforces learning, supports teachers, informs families and provides government with dependable insight into standards and equity.

A clear case for systemic change emerges. Despite strong professional practice in schools, the statutory assessment framework has lacked coherence, participation and trust for more than a decade. The collapse of key elements such as the Levels of Progression, the suspension of moderation and the increasing reliance on commercial tests have left the system without a consistent view of standards. Meanwhile, international performance has declined, and socio-economic disparities persist. The Panel concludes that the status quo is untenable and that a stable, credible and principled statutory assessment system must be established.

The Review sets out a principles-led model that underpins all recommendations. These principles emphasise clarity of purpose, inclusion, high technical quality, curriculum alignment, proportional workload and strong professional competence. A coherent statutory pathway for Years 1–10 is central to the new system, including a high-validity Year 1 baseline check and a sequenced series of focused assessments in literacy, numeracy and science. Writing will be supported through a new Writing Repository to strengthen professional judgement and track system-level trends without imposing high-burden testing.

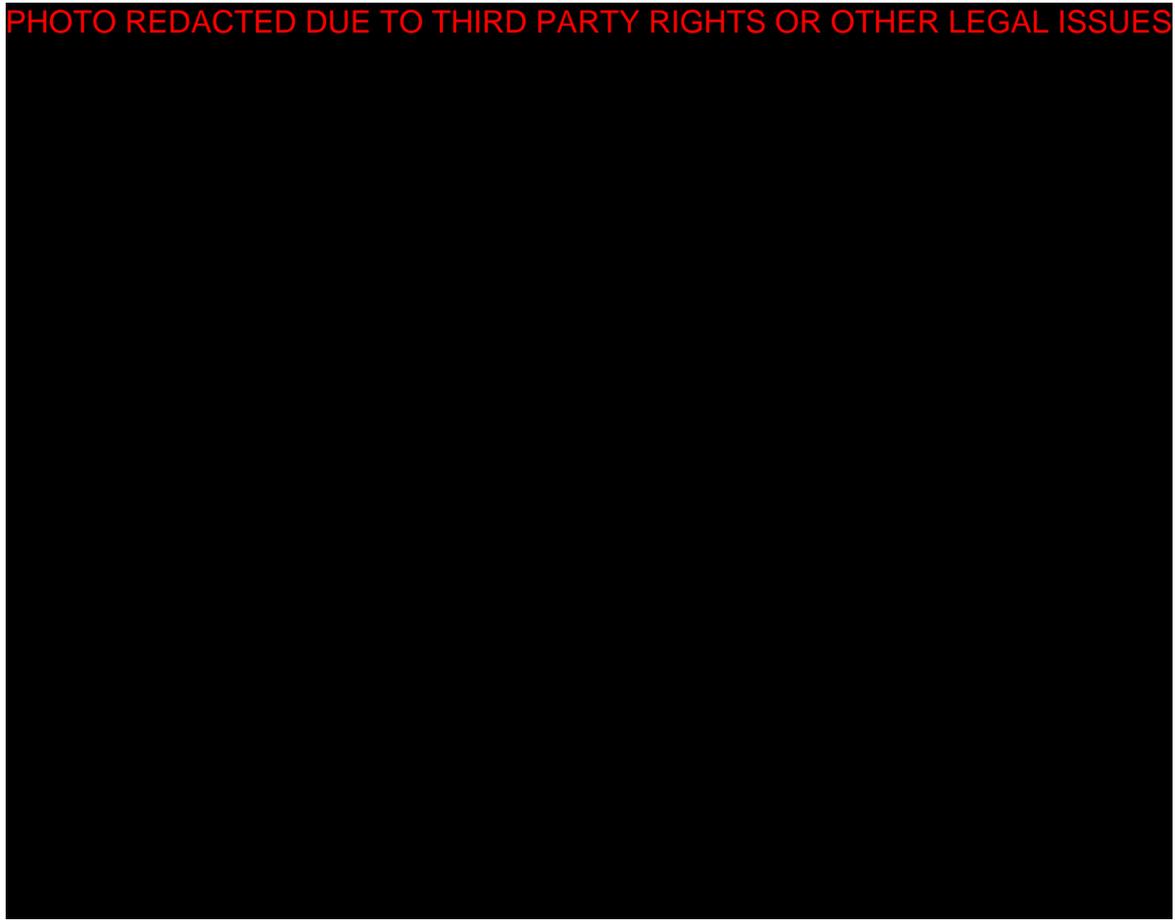
To ensure effective implementation, the Review highlights the need to strengthen professional standards, data literacy and information transfer. A core curriculum in assessment theory and practice is recommended across Initial Teacher Education and early career stages, alongside support for school-based assessment leads.

A new Record of Development and Education will provide a single digital record to support continuity for all learners, particularly those with SEN or in transitions. The Review also proposes a Northern Ireland Reporting Unit, scaled scoring with robust equating, and dedicated measures to ensure equity for Irish-medium and SEN learners.

Overall, the proposed reforms offer an opportunity to rebuild a coherent, credible and equitable assessment system that supports learning, strengthens progression and improves system-wide visibility of standards.

The Panel concludes that implementation is essential to restoring public trust, supporting curriculum reform, reducing avoidable workload and ensuring fairness across schools. With strong leadership, investment and partnership with the profession, Northern Ireland can establish a world-class assessment system capable of supporting every learner to progress and thrive.

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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.

