



# **Response to Consultation on the Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028**

September 2026

## Executive Summary

- i. The Commission welcomes the Department of Education's work to reform the Northern Ireland Curriculum and recognises the value of a clearer, knowledge-rich framework that can support coherence, progression and consistency across schools.
- ii. The Commission's central position is that the revised Curriculum Framework should explicitly state that promoting equality of opportunity and good relations are core purposes and intended outcomes of learning. These aims should be embedded in the Framework itself, including in its stated objectives and subject content and guidance. Without this, the new curriculum risks being a missed opportunity to support young people in effectively navigating complex topics and addressing and preventing wider societal challenges.
- iii. While there are welcome references to inclusion within the main Framework, as well as references to recognising and responding to racism and prejudice within the Capabilities sections of the Framework, we remain concerned that not all pupils will encounter substantive and meaningful curriculum content that reflects the identities and experiences of Section 75 groups across Northern Ireland.
- iv. The Department should ensure that equality of opportunity and good relations are embedded across the content of the curriculum while also reviewing content within specific subjects to seek out opportunities to better promote equality and good relations and improve representation across Section 75 groups.
- v. In the context of recent racist violence, high levels of hate crime against minority ethnic people, and worrying attitudinal trends across Northern Ireland, the curriculum is a vital mechanism to prevent racism and prejudice.
- vi. We are also concerned that contextual flexibility for schools to determine examples, sequencing, and depth of coverage may lead to variability in terms of pupil exposure to important topics, including in relation to addressing racism, Relationships and Sexuality Education, disability equality, and gender stereotyping. It is important that all students have access to learning in these important areas.
- vii. The Department's commitments to professional learning and implementation planning are welcome, but further detail is needed on how teachers and schools will be supported to deliver curriculum content consistently.

- viii. The Commission also welcomes the commitment to develop monitoring arrangements but considers that implementation should be assessed against equality and good relations outcomes as well as academic attainment, with particular attention to impacts across Section 75 groups.

## Recommendations

The Commission has nine recommendations that it considers important to see implemented as part of the Curriculum Framework and which should be reflected in the final framework.

**Recommendation 1:** The Department should include a clearly defined objective of promoting equality and good relations as part of the purpose of the curriculum.

**Recommendation 2:** Equality of opportunity and good relations should be embedded across the content of the curriculum.

**Recommendation 3:** The Department should use curriculum reform to recognise Traveller, Roma and other minoritised cultures, histories and languages.

**Recommendation 4:** The Department should explicitly recognise disability equality as an overarching curriculum objective and strengthen curriculum content on ableism and disability stereotyping.

**Recommendation 5:** The Department should use this opportunity for curriculum reform to directly, robustly and explicitly challenge stereotypes in relation to women's and men's gender roles at school, work, within families, communities, and wider society; and through career advice.

**Recommendation 6:** The Department should strengthen curriculum content and guidance, so all pupils encounter age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate learning on relationships and sexuality.

**Recommendation 7:** The Department should review content within specific subjects to seek out opportunities to better promote equality and good relations and improve representation across Section 75 groups.

**Recommendation 8:** Teachers should be supported and given ringfenced time to access opportunities for continuous professional

development with specific regard to content related to equality and good relations to ensure the effective delivery of the new curriculum.

**Recommendation 9:** The Department should set out monitoring arrangements to assess curriculum impacts on equality and good relations, including reductions in prejudice and stereotyping and increased understanding of Section 75 groups.

# Table of Contents

|          |                                                          |           |
|----------|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>BACKGROUND .....</b>                                  | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>2</b> | <b>CONTEXT .....</b>                                     | <b>1</b>  |
|          | THE INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF EDUCATION .....                | 1         |
|          | THE STRATEGIC REVIEW OF THE CURRICULUM .....             | 2         |
| <b>3</b> | <b>GENERAL COMMENTS .....</b>                            | <b>3</b>  |
|          | EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT.....                          | 3         |
|          | THE PURPOSE OF THE CURRICULUM.....                       | 4         |
|          | THE CONTENT OF THE CURRICULUM .....                      | 6         |
|          | <i>Race in the Curriculum</i> .....                      | 6         |
|          | <i>Disability and Special Educational Needs</i> .....    | 8         |
|          | <i>Gender Stereotypes</i> .....                          | 9         |
|          | <i>Relationships and Sexuality Education</i> .....       | 10        |
| <b>4</b> | <b>SUBJECT AREAS .....</b>                               | <b>12</b> |
|          | THE DELIVERY OF THE CURRICULUM .....                     | 14        |
|          | <i>Professional Development</i> .....                    | 16        |
|          | <i>Adaptation and Accessibility</i> .....                | 17        |
|          | THE EFFECTIVENESS AND MONITORING OF THE CURRICULUM ..... | 17        |
|          | <i>Section 75 Monitoring</i> .....                       | 17        |
| <b>5</b> | <b>CONCLUSIONS .....</b>                                 | <b>18</b> |

# 1 Background

- 1.1 The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland ('the Commission') is an independent non-departmental public body established under the Northern Ireland Act 1998.
- 1.2 Our statutory remit<sup>1</sup> includes to:
- Encourage public authorities to promote equality of opportunity and address inequalities in fulfilling their equality and good relations duties.
  - Ensure that equality considerations are central to decision-making by focusing particular attention in a number of key public policy areas.
  - Give advice and support to people with potential complaints under anti-discrimination laws.
  - Give guidance to employers and service providers about their obligations under the law and good practice advice.
- 1.3 The Commission continues to highlight persistent inequalities in education, for example in attainment, attendance and bullying, across disability, race, and other grounds, and has long advocated for using education to advance equality of opportunity and promote good relations.
- 1.4 The Commission has had longstanding engagement with the Department regarding changes to the curriculum. We provided a written submission<sup>2</sup> to the Curriculum Review for Northern Ireland. Our response to the invitation for written submissions to the Curriculum Review for Northern Ireland should be read alongside this response, given the level of detailed provided regarding recommendations across Section 75 groups.

## 2 Context

### *The Independent Review of Education*

- 2.1 The establishment and delivery of an Independent Review of Education was a key commitment in the New Decade New

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<sup>1</sup> For further details, see: <https://www.equalityni.org/AboutUs>

<sup>2</sup> ECNI (2025); [Invitation for written submissions to the Curriculum Review for Northern Ireland](#).

Approach (NDNA) document, agreed by the main political parties in Northern Ireland in January 2020.

- 2.2 In December 2023, the Independent Review of Education published a report containing 25 recommendations relating to the Northern Ireland education system in general and the Northern Ireland Curriculum in particular. Most notably, it recommended that the Department of Education “undertake major reform of the curriculum and keep it under continual review”.
- 2.3 Significantly, the Report highlighted that curriculum advice, review and support have suffered from a lack of investment. One of its main recommendations was that Northern Ireland should adopt a knowledge-based approach to the curriculum using modern understandings of how learning takes place.

### ***The Strategic Review of the Curriculum***

- 2.4 A Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum was commissioned in November 2024 and led by educational consultant Lucy Crehan. The Review aimed to evaluate the current curriculum and to recommend a new statutory framework.
- 2.5 The Review drew on a wide range of evidence, including previous reviews undertaken in Northern Ireland, system data, international evidence, cognitive science research and a programme of stakeholder engagement.
- 2.6 The Review identified fundamental flaws in the existing 2007 framework, namely its lack of specificity on what should be taught and when; its lack of coherence; and its failure to meaningfully articulate the role and importance of connected knowledge in developing complex skills.
- 2.7 The Review also found that underfunding, extended periods of action short of strike, the absence of inspection, the lack of a fully functional national assessment system, reduced opportunities for professional learning and curriculum support, and increasing concerns about teacher workload have all negatively impacted curriculum implementation.
- 2.8 The Review recommended that the revised curriculum, in addition to being purpose-led, knowledge-rich, coherent and

focused, should also be inclusive and adaptable. The Review emphasised the benefits of a diverse curriculum, stating that “it matters that [pupils from less well-represented backgrounds] see people like them reflected in the curriculum” and that *“diversity should be a curriculum feature taken into consideration by schools”* in the design and selection of resources” and at meso-level development of resources.

- 2.9 The Commission welcomed the Review’s emphasis on inclusivity and diversity, including support for pupils with SEN, EAL learners and those from diverse backgrounds. We were particularly encouraged by the focus on inclusive representation, challenging harmful stereotypes, and ensuring that children from across the equality grounds see themselves reflected in the curriculum, while helping all pupils to understand different perspectives in an increasingly globalised world.
- 2.10 The Department of Education accepted<sup>3</sup> the Review’s recommendations and established a Curriculum Taskforce to develop a revised curriculum, which is now the subject of this public consultation.
- 2.11 The ECNI submission to the Review focused on four key aspects of the curriculum: its purpose, content, delivery, and implementation and monitoring. This response adopts the same structure, assessing the extent to which the revised Curriculum Framework reflects the Commission’s recommendations.

### **3 General Comments**

#### ***Equality Impact Assessment***

- 3.1 The Equality Impact Assessment for the Draft Curriculum Framework identified no direct adverse impacts of the proposed policy on any of the nine Section 75 categories or any of the multiple identity groups. The Department assessed that the new curriculum framework is expected to promote equity of opportunity for all learners due to its equal application to all learners.

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<sup>3</sup> DE (2025); Response to the Strategic Review of Education; [Department of Education Response to the Strategic Review of Education](#)

- 3.2 It is important to highlight that a common curriculum can advance equality by guaranteeing every child access to the same body of knowledge but can also create differential challenges and impacts across different Section 75 groups.
- 3.3 The Department states that the overall equality impact of the policy will depend on its “effective implementation” and therefore considers many potential impacts to fall beyond the scope of the Framework’s EQIA.
- 3.4 The Commission is concerned at this approach as it does not appear to consider the potential equality implications of curriculum content choices.
- 3.5 Furthermore, the purpose of equality screening and impact assessment mechanism is not just to identify potential adverse impacts but also to seek out opportunities to better promote equality and good relations.
- 3.6 The Commission therefore considers that equality impacts should be assessed not only in relation to curriculum implementation, but also in relation to the content that is included, excluded or prioritised within the curriculum itself. Greater detail should be provided on how the Department has considered the potential of the curriculum to advance equality of opportunity and promote good relations.

### ***The Purpose of the Curriculum***

- 3.7 The Commission has emphasised that the purpose of the curriculum, beyond academic attainment and development, should be to explicitly promote equality and good relations.
- 3.8 We note that the intended purpose of the new curriculum is to “To support young people to develop their capabilities by equipping them with the knowledge, skills and experiences that enable them to have genuine choices and empower them to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives” and that learning objectives include “To support each young person to develop as: an individual; a member of society; a contributor to the economy; a steward of the environment; and a lifelong learner within a system that expects

excellence and places no limit on what young people can achieve.”<sup>4</sup>

- 3.9 While welcoming elements of the proposed purpose, the curriculum falls short of explicitly including the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations as one of its core purposes. We are disappointed that our previous advice regarding the purpose of the curriculum has not been reflected in the proposed new framework.
- 3.10 We continue to emphasise the need for explicit acknowledgement of the purpose of the curriculum in promoting equality and good relations. We further restate our view of the value of education in preventing inequality, discrimination and prejudice in our society.<sup>5</sup>
- 3.11 Including explicit reference to equality and good relations within the purpose of the curriculum gives it weight and priority, and has implications for specific subject content, delivery and implementation of the curriculum. This small change would represent a shift towards a more comprehensive vision for inclusive education, strengthening the current formulation by the Department.
- 3.12 The Commission welcomes the inclusion of social and civic participation as one of the intended capabilities pupils will develop as an outcome of learning including its framing of racism in historical and structural terms.<sup>6</sup>
- 3.13 The Commission was also pleased to see that pupils are expected to engage with “diverse languages, culture, art and music, and with the geography of human settlement and movement, encouraging respect for those from different backgrounds” and equipping them with the ability “to recognise racism and other forms of discrimination, exclusion and prejudice”.<sup>7</sup>
- 3.14 The requirement that the curriculum be ‘inclusive and flexible’ (Principle 5 within the main Framework) is also welcomed,

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Education (2026); Curriculum Framework; [TransformED - Curriculum Overview Document](#)

<sup>5</sup> Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2026); [Ending racism. Advancing equality. What... | Equality Commission NI](#)

<sup>6</sup> Department of Education (2026); Capabilities Framework; [TransformED - Capabilities.pdf](#)

<sup>7</sup> Department of Education (2026); Capabilities Framework; [TransformED - Capabilities.pdf](#)

however, we note that this refers mainly to the inclusivity and flexibility of the curriculum for pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN). We highlight that this Principle could be expanded within the final Framework to offer a more comprehensive definition of inclusivity, reflecting wider equality and good relations considerations.

**Recommendation 1: The Department should include a clearly defined objective of promoting equality and good relations as part of the purpose of the curriculum.**

## ***The Content of the Curriculum***

- 3.15 The Commission has consistently emphasised the need to ensure that equality and good relations are embedded within the curriculum, and that opportunities within it are used to draw attention to prejudice-based bullying and to encourage a greater understanding of and respect for all young people including across the equality grounds.
- 3.16 We have highlighted that mainstreaming equality and good relations in education goes beyond teaching of or within a single subject. It involves making equality and good relations central to the culture and ethos of a school and the education system as a whole and ensuring that equality considerations are reflected throughout the curriculum, not simply limited to certain specific modules or classes.
- 3.17 We have also previously advised that the Department should seek to ensure that children from across the equality grounds see themselves substantively, positively, and meaningfully reflected in the school curriculum and classroom activities, for example – the culture and language of ethnic minority children.

**Recommendation 2: Equality of opportunity and good relations should be embedded across the content of the curriculum.**

### Race in the Curriculum

- 3.18 Article 7 of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination requires that:

*“States Parties undertake to adopt immediate and effective measures, particularly in the fields of teaching, education,*

*culture and information, with a view to combating prejudices which lead to racial discrimination and to promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship among nations and racial or ethnical groups.”*

- 3.19 Given heightened prejudice and tension in Northern Ireland, the Commission welcomes the ambition as defined in the Framework’s published ‘Capabilities’<sup>8</sup>: that pupils should engage with “diverse languages, culture, art and music”, understand “exclusion and prejudice not as abstract concepts, but as patterns that can be understood in historical and structural terms” and “come to see themselves as members of overlapping communities, including the family, school, neighbourhood, society and the world, each carrying responsibilities and opportunities for participation”.
- 3.20 The Commission also welcomes the inclusion of a capability for emotional understanding and empathy, in addition to inclusion of discussions in PSCC regarding stereotyping and how some stereotypes can be unfair or inaccurate, including the harms of inaccurate or unhelpful generalisations about groups of people.
- 3.21 These measures align with positions established recently in our policy paper entitled ‘Ending racism. Advancing equality’<sup>9</sup>, where we recommended equipping “teachers, children and young people to prevent and challenge racism, prejudice and stereotyping”.
- 3.22 At recent engagement events on the curriculum organised by the Commission, we heard from stakeholders that the curriculum content proposed by the Department could be more inclusive of diverse voices and perspectives, particularly those of minority ethnic communities. Participants highlighted the limited representation of individuals from Africa and the Global South within the History curriculum and very few texts by Black authors in the English curriculum. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of reflecting a broader range of contributions, achievements and experiences, cautioning that limiting the

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<sup>8</sup> Described in the Curriculum as: “the emergent qualities and attributes that pupils develop as a result of a well-constructed and well-taught knowledge-rich curriculum”

<sup>9</sup> Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2026); [Ending racism. Advancing equality. What... | Equality Commission NI](#)

representation of minority ethnic people to discussions of discrimination and inequality risks reinforcing stereotypes.

- 3.23 The Commission also notes the lack of reference to Irish Travellers or Roma in the curriculum, a concern which was echoed by stakeholders during its engagement on the curriculum.
- 3.24 In their 2023 report, the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities called on educational authorities to:
- “ensure the representation of minorities across curricula in the UK, as well as in teaching and learning materials and teacher training, with special attention also paid to the culture, history, traditions and identities of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers, in co-operation with persons belonging to national minorities.”*
- 3.25 The Department should use the opportunity presented by this once-in-a-generation programme of curriculum reform to recognise Traveller culture, Roma culture and other minoritised cultures and languages. Roma and Irish Traveller people should not only appear in curriculum materials in relation to poverty, migration or disadvantage. Children need to see people from minority ethnic communities represented as active and valued members of society and in a positive light.
- 3.26 We refer to Republic of Ireland’s Traveller and Roma Education Strategy, where progress is being made to improve educational experiences and outcomes for Traveller and Roma children. A key pillar of this strategy is ‘Participation and Experience’, which involved the provision of new resources to support the teaching of Traveller culture and history, helping to increase representation within classroom learning.<sup>10</sup>

**Recommendation 3: The Department should use curriculum reform to recognise Traveller, Roma and other minoritised cultures, histories and languages.**

#### Disability and Special Educational Needs

- 3.27 The Commission welcomes steps taken to ensure accessibility of the curriculum for young people with Special Educational

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<sup>10</sup> Government of Ireland (2026); [Traveller and Roma Education Strategy Plan for implementation and action 2024–2026](#);

Needs (SEN), learners in Irish-medium contexts and some disadvantaged young people.

- 3.28 Notwithstanding this, the Commission is concerned by the absence, within the overarching framework currently being consulted upon, of any explicit reference to the promotion of positive attitudes towards disabled people or a commitment to challenging disability stereotypes.
- 3.29 Article 8 of the UNCRPD<sup>11</sup> commits States to foster at all levels of the education system, including all children from an early age, an attitude of respect for the rights of persons with disabilities.
- 3.30 Further to this point, the NI Executive's draft Disability Strategy<sup>12</sup> has stated that it will *"promote disability awareness, focussing on addressing disability stereotypes, combatting prejudice, fostering respect for Deaf and disabled people, training for officials in all departments and promoting the positive contribution that Deaf and disabled people make to our society and communities."*
- 3.31 Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) experience more bullying than other school children and schools and education bodies should do more to promote positive attitudes towards young people with disabilities by taking an inclusive approach, challenging negative stereotypes and promoting greater understanding of equality issues within the classroom, including through curriculum design.

**Recommendation 4: The Department should explicitly recognise disability equality as an overarching curriculum objective and strengthen curriculum content on ableism and disability stereotyping.**

#### Gender Stereotypes

- 3.32 The Commission has consistently highlighted<sup>13</sup> the importance of tackling gender stereotypes from an early age, as gender-based stereotyping can begin in childhood and continue throughout life stages.

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<sup>11</sup> [Article 8 – Awareness-raising | United Nations Enable](#)

<sup>12</sup> NI Executive (2025); [The Northern Ireland Disability Strategy](#)

<sup>13</sup> ECNI (2023); [Response to consultation: The Executive Office: Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls and Foundational Action Plan](#)

- 3.33 There are some positive signs that this draft curriculum does intend to tackle sex discrimination and prejudice in a substantive way, albeit confining these discussions to a particular section of the curriculum.
- 3.34 The proposed syllabus for Personal, Social, Civic and Careers (PSCC) introduces discussions from Key Stage 1 regarding what a stereotype is and how some stereotypes, including some gender stereotypes, can be unfair or inaccurate. It also prescribes a learning outcome at Key Stage 3 requiring students to learn how to challenge unacceptable behaviours appropriately, including discrimination based on race, sex or sexual orientation.
- 3.35 This is welcomed by the Commission. We highlight that the Department could go further and use this opportunity for curriculum reform to directly, robustly and explicitly challenge stereotypes in relation to women's and men's gender roles at school, work and in the family, communities and wider society; through career advice, and choices, and by embedding equality across the curriculum, not just in PSCC and RSE.

**Recommendation 5: The Department should use this opportunity for curriculum reform to directly, robustly and explicitly challenge stereotypes in relation to women's and men's gender roles at school, work, within the family, communities and wider society; and through career advice.**

#### Relationships and Sexuality Education

- 3.36 The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) describes comprehensive Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) as *“a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that*

*of others; and, understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives”<sup>14</sup>*

- 3.37 The Commission has previously expressed support for comprehensive, age-appropriate and evidence-based Relationship and Sexuality Education<sup>15</sup> to be provided in schools and have repeatedly emphasised its importance and relevance to the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations across multiple Section 75 groups, including sex and sexual orientation.<sup>16</sup>
- 3.38 We note recommendations from the Gillen Review<sup>17</sup> that state that:
- “it is crucial that the RSE curriculum includes the very areas of which this chapter (Dispelling Rape Myths) and this Report (Serious Sexual Offences in NI) speak. It is not enough to leave Boards of Governors to pick up these points. The State, and in this case the Department of Education, has a duty to play a positive role in addressing the justice gap that exists in our approach to serious sexual offences. I strongly recommend that the Department of Education draw up a plan to exhort all schools to include these matters within their curriculum and, if that proves ineffective, to be the subject of legislation mandating such education.”*
- 3.39 The Commission commends the ambition of the Department in prescribing a wide range of topics in Relationship and Sexuality Education, such as body awareness, consent, friendships, family life, puberty, menstruation, sexual health, pregnancy, contraception, abuse prevention, online safety, healthy relationships, and equality/respect for others.
- 3.40 It is important to stress, however, that the curriculum still permits each school to determine the sequence, depth and examples most appropriate for its setting and schools retain the flexibility to explore aspects of this content in ways that align with their own ethos, community context and pupils’ needs.

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<sup>14</sup> UNESCO cited in NIHRC (2023) Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post Primary Schools in Northern Ireland

<sup>15</sup> ECNI (2025); [Invitation for written submissions to the Curriculum Review for Northern Ireland](#).

<sup>16</sup> ECNI (2024); [Letter to NIA Committee for Education: Inquiry into RSE in Schools](#)

<sup>17</sup> Department of Justice (2019); Gillen Review: Recommendations; <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/gillen-review-recommendations>

- 3.41 A recent report by the ETI<sup>18</sup> stated that “Too many schools/centres avoid completely, or cover with insufficient depth and progression, many of the more sensitive aspects of the Relationship and Sexuality Education aspect of the preventative curriculum”.
- 3.42 There is a risk that, given the continued contextual flexibility afforded to schools by this curriculum, Relationship and Sexuality Education may continue to be implemented inconsistently, with sensitive but essential content avoided or covered without sufficient depth and progression.
- 3.43 The Framework also does not appear to substantively promote equality of opportunity for LGBT pupils or integrate greater understanding of LGBT equality issues into the curriculum content.
- 3.44 The European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance comments, in its most recent report on the UK (2024)<sup>19</sup>, that educational authorities should “make Relationship and Sexuality Education mandatory for all learners in Northern Ireland and to include LGBTI issues in teacher training”.

**Recommendation 6: The Department should strengthen curriculum content and guidance so all pupils encounter age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate learning on relationships and sexuality.**

## 4 Subject Areas

- 4.1 The Commission does not comment as a curriculum-design body or provide detailed or in-depth recommendations on subject-specific content given our remit and expertise. However, to illustrate the points made within our submission, we have provided the following analysis and points for consideration across History, Geography, and Personal, Social, Civic and Careers (PSCC).
- 4.2 The Commission has not set out specific positions on history education, however, we acknowledge that the study of history

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<sup>18</sup> ETI (2024) How effectively are children being prepared for living in, and contributing to, a diverse society? The views of learners and leaders in primary schools.

<sup>19</sup> ECRI (2024); [Sixth report on the United Kingdom](#) (published on 25 October 2024); p.10

and the appreciation of historical context have the potential to promote equality and good relations. The Department states that by “taking pupils beyond their own experience”, the study of history can challenge insularity, expand pupils’ horizons, and encourage engagement with a wider range of perspectives, cultures, and identities.

- 4.3 While welcoming this approach we also note the lack of visibility afforded to those with disabilities in the proposed history curriculum, as well as the absence of LGBT individuals, Irish Travellers and Roma, and re-emphasise the importance of positive representations of different groups within the curriculum, including within teaching of history. Our points previously made within this submission (at point 3.18) regarding addressing racism in the curriculum are particularly relevant within the history curriculum.
- 4.4 The Commission welcomes a Geography curriculum that repeatedly links geographical learning to understanding "sustainable and equitable futures" and that the curriculum explicitly requires pupils to learn about "patterns of inequality within Northern Ireland and a country outside Europe and the causes and consequences of these inequalities".
- 4.5 However, the Geography curriculum could also include greater reference to demographic change in Northern Ireland and case studies could also further reflect the experiences of people from ethnic minority backgrounds, Irish Travellers, Roma, and disabled people.
- 4.6 The Commission welcomes several aspects of the proposed PSCC curriculum. It introduces discussions on rights, equality and stereotyping from an early stage and requires pupils to learn how to challenge discriminatory behaviour appropriately. These provisions align with the Commission’s longstanding position that children and young people should be equipped to recognise and challenge prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping.
- 4.7 The subject is, however, wide in scope and deals with a broad range of topics which appear to be unrelated to each other, for example, financial competence, health and wellbeing, careers and future pathways, psychology of behaviour, and civic participation. The breadth and variety of content prescribed

therein may lead to it becoming perceived as a ‘catch-all’ subject with important issues neither given the priority they deserve or being relegated to brief discussions in the interests of expediency.

**Recommendation 7: The Department should review content within specific subjects to seek out opportunities to better promote equality and good relations and improve representation across Section 75 groups.**

## ***The Delivery of the Curriculum***

- 4.8 The Commission’s concern regarding the delivery of the curriculum centres around flexibility in its delivery, adequacy of training for teachers in how to ensure the particular requirements of pupils are understood and met, and the accessibility of the curriculum, including where reasonable adjustments can be made.

### Flexibility

- 4.9 The stated function of providing curriculum content is to set out “*what must be taught... reducing unnecessary variation between schools and helping to ensure a common educational entitlement*”. This approach is welcome and has the potential to improve equality of opportunity in education by improving alignment in delivery across schools.
- 4.10 However, the Framework also gives schools contextual flexibility to “*select examples that reflect their pupils, communities and cultures*”. We question whether, without clearer prescription at framework level, particularly in areas involving equality issues, this flexibility risks limiting pupils’ exposure to essential equality and good relations content in practice, resulting in disparities between schools in coverage of issues such as race, disability awareness, and relationships and sexuality education.
- 4.11 The Commission acknowledges that, while contextual flexibility is essential for the curriculum to function, allowing schools and teachers to adapt materials and harness resources effectively, proportionally and at an appropriate pace for the classroom in

question, we are concerned that, where local demographics strongly influence school-level curriculum choices, ethnic minority pupils in less diverse settings may be less visible in curriculum content, while other pupils may have limited exposure to people from different ethnic, cultural or faith backgrounds.

- 4.12 Recent ETI research<sup>20</sup> found that the demographics of school communities and local areas resulted “in limited exposure to children from other faiths and backgrounds”. Wider research also indicates that, where curriculum development is delegated to schools, teachers may favour familiar topics or existing resources, reinforcing the need for clearer direction from statutory agencies.<sup>21</sup>
- 4.13 We have concerns that, given well documented strains on teachers, current heavy workloads, crowded schedules, limited teacher subject knowledge and confidence in teaching complex, contentious or emerging topics, and scarce resources, that unless content is specific and prescriptive, it will be omitted.
- 4.14 The OECD argues that curriculum flexibility is most effective when it is underpinned by clearly defined goals, recommending that systems should be “clearly setting out curricular goals and specifying the extent or degree of freedom granted to local authorities, school leaders, teachers and students in deciding the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of teaching and learning”<sup>22</sup>
- 4.15 The Department has been proactive in this area: it has defined curriculum aims and values, prioritised common entitlement, prescribed detailed content in key areas and envisioned emergent qualities to be developed by all pupils in learning the curriculum.
- 4.16 However, the Commission is of the view that certain objectives, such as equality of opportunity and good relations, are so fundamental that they should not depend on local interpretation or prioritisation. Clear articulation of these aspirations as framework-level objectives would help ensure their consistent

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<sup>20</sup> For further details, see: ETI (2024) How effectively are children being prepared for living in, and contributing to, a diverse society? The views of learners and leaders in primary schools.

<sup>21</sup> For further details, see Loader (2023) [Experiences of education among minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland](#)

<sup>22</sup> See [Full Report: Curriculum Flexibility and Autonomy | OECD](#)

realisation across schools, while preserving flexibility in how they are enacted in practice.

### Professional Development

- 4.17 We acknowledge that teachers play a central role in creating inclusive, respectful, and supportive learning environments. Yet, many teachers in Northern Ireland lack the support, training, and resources they need to meet needs of a diverse student population, respond to emerging social challenges, and tackling prejudice.
- 4.18 The Independent Review of Education identified significant weaknesses in Northern Ireland's approach to professional development. The Review also emphasised that curriculum advice and support had suffered from long-term disinvestment. These findings were reinforced by Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, which warned that curriculum reform will not succeed unless it is accompanied by parallel investment in professional learning.
- 4.19 The published draft Curriculum Framework refers to a systematic, multi-year professional learning programme which will run alongside the curriculum rollout and will be integrated into Initial Teacher Education. This professional learning programme will be delivered by the Department for Education under the TransformED NI Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning<sup>23</sup> and will be coordinated by the Northern Ireland Centre for Educational Excellence and Improvement (NICEEI).
- 4.20 The Commission welcomes a centrally driven programme of curriculum implementation and professional development and hopes that it will ensure coherence and consistency across the education system. We also welcome the introduction of mandatory induction for newly qualified teachers and hope that induction materials reinforce the importance of promoting equality and good relations in the classroom context.
- 4.21 We have consistently highlighted the need for actions to improve and strengthen continuous professional development for teachers and teaching/classroom assistants, with particular consideration of training in equality and good relations issues. Teachers should be supported and given ringfenced time to

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<sup>23</sup> [Leading Together for Excellence - a TransformED NI Strategy For Teaching Professional Learning August 2026.pdf](#)

access opportunities for continuous professional development. The Department should also consider and explore options such as teachers being required to undertake a defined number of hours each year to maintain accreditation, looking at best practice in other jurisdictions.

**Recommendation 8: Teachers should be supported and given ringfenced time to access opportunities for continuous professional development with specific regard to content related to equality and good relations, to ensure the effective delivery of the new curriculum.**

#### Adaptation and Accessibility

- 4.22 The Northern Ireland Pedagogical Principles, which will provide a shared, evidence-informed foundation for subject-by-subject teaching that will support the new curriculum to be implemented effectively in classrooms, have not yet been published. Curriculum adaptation guidance is also pending.
- 4.23 The Commission emphasises that the Department should provide good practice guidance to schools on adapting school level policies to take account of increasing cultural and religious diversity among the pupil population.
- 4.24 The Commission refers the Department to UNCRPD obligations which require State Parties to take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language and/or Braille, and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education.

### ***The Effectiveness and Monitoring of the Curriculum***

#### Section 75 Monitoring

- 4.25 It is the view of the Commission that the implementation of this complex and multifaceted curriculum policy should be sufficiently monitored for impacts on Section 75 groups and should not be assessed solely through the prism of academic attainment.
- 4.26 We have made the argument previously in this response that the inclusion of the promotion of equality and good relations as core purposes of the curriculum would represent a shift towards a more comprehensive vision for inclusive education. Such a

shift would need to be accompanied by established metrics, such as the impact of the curriculum in reducing prejudice and stereotyping, increasing awareness and knowledge of different identities across the Section 75 groups, and promotion of good relations, which should all be considered and assessed on a regular basis by the Department.

- 4.27 The EQIA accompanying this consultation provides an undertaking to develop “appropriate monitoring arrangements” during implementation planning, including identifying opportunities to assess and promote equality of opportunity.
- 4.28 The Department states that it will use consultation responses and ongoing monitoring to address gaps in data relating to some Section 75 categories, such as sexual orientation, political opinion and dependants.
- 4.29 These commitments to monitoring are welcome but the Commission is concerned at the lack of detail about how monitoring will be undertaken in practice.

**Recommendation 9: The Department should set out monitoring arrangements to assess curriculum impacts on equality and good relations, including reductions in prejudice and stereotyping and increased understanding of Section 75 groups.**

## 5 Conclusions

- 5.1 The Commission welcomes the Department of Education's commitment to curriculum reform and recognises the significant work undertaken to develop a clearer, more coherent and knowledge-rich Curriculum Framework.
- 5.2 We particularly welcome the emphasis on inclusion, the commitment to professional learning and implementation support, and the recognition within the Framework that pupils should develop an understanding of diversity, discrimination and civic responsibility.
- 5.3 However, the Commission considers that the Framework, in its current form, does not yet fully realise the opportunity presented by this once-in-a-generation programme of curriculum reform to advance equality of opportunity and

promote good relations. While references to inclusion, diversity and equality are present, they are not consistently embedded as explicit purposes of the curriculum, nor are they always reflected in the statutory content that all pupils can expect to encounter.

- 5.4 Greater clarity and prescription are required in key areas where inconsistency of provision has the potential to reinforce existing inequalities and prejudice, including on addressing and preventing racism, disability equality, gender stereotyping, Relationships and Sexuality Education, and the representation of minority ethnic communities, Travellers, Roma people and LGBT people.
- 5.5 The Commission remains concerned that the degree of contextual flexibility afforded to schools may result in significant variation in pupils' access to important equality-related content. Regardless of school type, location or demographic profile, all pupils should have opportunities to learn about the diverse identities, histories, cultures and experiences that make up contemporary Northern Ireland and wider society, and to develop the knowledge, understanding and critical thinking skills necessary to challenge prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping.
- 5.6 The Commission therefore encourages the Department to strengthen the Framework in line with the recommendations contained in this response. Doing so would help ensure that curriculum reform contributes not only to improved educational outcomes, but also to the wider societal goals of promoting equality and good relations.
- 5.7 Education has a unique role in shaping attitudes, fostering mutual understanding, and preventing prejudice. The Commission believes that a stronger and more explicit commitment to these objectives within the final Curriculum Framework would benefit all children and young people and support the creation of a more equal and cohesive society.