

Research Briefing

29 July 2024

By Professor Alpesh Maisuria

# Comparing the school curriculum across the UK



## Summary

- 1 School curriculum in England
- 2 School Curriculum in **Northern Ireland**
- 3 School Curriculum in Scotland
- 4 School Curriculum in **Wales**

### Image Credits

Attributed to: Canon 550d - Pencil Colour by @Doug88888. Licensed under CC BY 2.0 / image cropped.

### Disclaimer

The Commons Library does not intend the information in our research publications and briefings to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. We have published it to support the work of MPs. You should not rely upon it as legal or professional advice, or as a substitute for it. We do not accept any liability whatsoever for any errors, omissions or misstatements contained herein. You should consult a suitably qualified professional if you require specific advice or information. Read our briefing [‘Legal help: where to go and how to pay’](#) for further information about sources of legal advice and help. This information is provided subject to the conditions of the Open Parliament Licence.

### Sources and subscriptions for MPs and staff

We try to use sources in our research that everyone can access, but sometimes only information that exists behind a paywall or via a subscription is available. We provide access to many online subscriptions to MPs and parliamentary staff, please contact [hoclibraryonline@parliament.uk](mailto:hoclibraryonline@parliament.uk) or visit [commonslibrary.parliament.uk/resources](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/resources) for more information.

### Feedback

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email [papers@parliament.uk](mailto:papers@parliament.uk). Please note that authors are not always able to engage in discussions with members of the public who express opinions about the content of our research, although we will carefully consider and correct any factual errors.

You can read our feedback and complaints policy and our editorial policy at [commonslibrary.parliament.uk](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk). If you have general questions about the work of the House of Commons email [hcenquiries@parliament.uk](mailto:hcenquiries@parliament.uk).

# Contents

<b>Summary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1 School curriculum in England</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 Establishment of the national curriculum	7
1.2 Statutory curriculum	8
1.3 2010 Coalition Government Reforms	8
1.4 Key stages of the national curriculum	9
1.5 Subjects of the national curriculum	9
1.6 Academies	11
1.7 The future of the national curriculum	12
<b>2 School Curriculum in Northern Ireland</b>	<b>15</b>
2.1 Objectives	15
2.2 Key elements	16
2.3 Skills and capabilities	16
2.4 Key stages	17
2.5 Foundation Stage	17
<b>2.6</b> Key stages one and two	<b>18</b>
<b>2.7</b> Key stage three	<b>18</b>
2.8 Key stage four	19
<b>2.9</b> Curriculum Areas of Learning	<b>20</b>
2.10 Religious education	20
2.11 The future of the Northern Ireland Curriculum	21
<b>3 School Curriculum in Scotland</b>	<b>23</b>
3.1 Broad general education	24
3.2 Curriculum subject areas	24
3.3 Experiences and outcomes, and benchmarks	25
3.4 Senior phase	26
3.5 Qualifications	26

3.6	The future of Curriculum for Excellence	26
<b>4</b>	<b>School Curriculum in Wales</b>	<b>28</b>
4.1	Donaldson review	28
4.2	New Curriculum after 2022	28
4.3	Curriculum for Wales Purposes	29
4.4	Areas of Learning and Experience	30
4.5	The future of Curriculum for Wales	30

## Summary

The school curriculum in England is the responsibility of the Westminster Government. Since devolution (1997-99), the respective state school curriculums in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, have been a devolved matter.

Education policy in Scotland and Wales is determined by the Scottish and Welsh Governments respectively. There are arrangements for the Northern Ireland Executive to be responsible for education.

This briefing provides an overview of each of these four curriculums. It considers their respective futures, highlighting some key issues that may feature in future reforms.

## England

England's [national curriculum](#) is mandatory for maintained (council-run) schools, but academies and free schools, which are outside of local authority control, have had more freedoms. However, the Labour government have confirmed changes to their autonomy regarding the curriculum and school inspection.

The last national curriculum review took place during the Coalition Government's term. The revised national curriculum has been implemented since 2014, and there have been related changes to exams and assessments. The Labour Government have commissioned an independent review of the national curriculum, which will report in autumn 2025.

## Scotland

Like Wales and Northern Ireland, the school curriculum in Scotland is a devolved policy area.

The [2019 Curriculum for Excellence](#) is the latest version of the curriculum in Scotland. It has been designed to be coherent, sequenced, and integrated over four key stages. CfE is designed to be "[a totality of all that is planned for children and young people from early learning and childcare, through school and beyond](#)".

## Wales

In March 2014, the Welsh Government commissioned the [Donaldson Review of Curriculum and Assessment from Foundation Phase to Key Stage four](#). Donaldson had previously carried out a similar review for the Scottish Government in 2010, and his report led to the redevelopment of Curriculum for Excellence.

The Welsh government has introduced [the Curriculum for Wales \(CfW\)](#). CfW is designed to be flexible for teachers to tailor it to the needs of their learners. There are no programmes of study prescribing exactly what must be taught.

CfW roll-out began in September 2022 in all publicly funded nursery settings and primary schools. Half of all secondary schools opted to roll-out the new curriculum to year seven in 2022-23. By September 2023 it became statutory for all year eight pupils. The roll-out will continue every year reaching Year 11 in 2026-27.

## Northern Ireland

The current [Northern Ireland Curriculum was initiated on 1 Aug 2007](#). The curriculum covers all 12 years of compulsory education for [pupils aged four to sixteen](#).

The curriculum focuses on the learning process and learner needs, as well as their knowledge, understanding, and skills. The curriculum is designed to provide students with a broad and balanced education, which includes the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and understanding in various areas of learning.

# 1

## School curriculum in England

The broad framework for the curriculum in maintained schools in England is set by the Westminster Government through the Department for Education (DfE), led by the Secretary of State for Education. The DfE has overall responsibility, but schools decide the detail and sequencing of their own curriculum. The Labour Government have signalled changes to the statutory curriculum in their 2024 manifesto.

The Westminster Government does not have jurisdiction over curriculum matters in the devolved nations of the UK, though the Secretary of State for Education has a historic duty to promote the education of the people of Wales.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1

## Establishment of the national curriculum

The national curriculum in England was established by the Thatcher Government following the passage of the Education Reform Act 1988. Implementation of the 1988 Act continued until 1993, when a review of the national curriculum was conducted by Sir Ron Dearing in response to teachers' observations that the curriculum was 'unwieldy'. A revised national curriculum was introduced in 1995 with less prescribed content and changes to testing arrangements.

In 1996, the Conservative Government introduced two pilot support initiatives in numeracy and literacy. These were carried forward as the National Literacy and National Numeracy Strategies by the incoming New Labour Government.

In 2007, the national curriculum was revised by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) to broaden the scope of the curriculum to include the following focuses: successful and enjoyable learning, confident learners, and responsible citizens.

[The Commons Library briefing on the school curriculum in England](#) provides an overview of these developments.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> [Education Act 1996](#), section 10

<sup>2</sup> Commons Library briefing CBP 06798, [The school curriculum in England](#)

## 1.2 Statutory curriculum

All maintained schools in England must offer the statutory curriculum as set out in section 80 of the Education Act 2002, as amended. The statutory curriculum includes:

- The national curriculum, which applies to pupils aged approx. 5 years to around 16
- At primary level, a programme of relationships education, and at secondary level, sex and relationships education (SRE) for all pupils, unless they have been withdrawn (from sex education)
- Health education for all pupils; and
- Religious education (RE) for all registered pupils unless they have been withdrawn. Content will depend on the type of school and (usually) the locally agreed syllabus.<sup>3</sup>

A comprehensive account of the early history of the national curriculum can be found in [a 2009 report of the Children, Schools and Families Select Committee](#).<sup>4</sup>

## 1.3 2010 Coalition Government Reforms

The 2010 Coalition Government began extensive reform of the national curriculum in England from 2011.<sup>5</sup> Full background on changes is available in the Library briefings on [the school curriculum in England](#), and on [GCSE, AS and A Level reform](#).<sup>6</sup> These reforms, designed to streamline content and reduce prescription, were detailed in the wide ranging [2010 schools white paper: The Importance of Teaching](#). The reforms have remained since September 2014 but the Labour government have commissioned an independent review to be published in autumn 2025.

---

<sup>3</sup> [Education Act 1996](#), section 80

<sup>4</sup> Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, [National Curriculum](#), 2 April 2009, HC 344-I, Section 1 and 6

<sup>5</sup> Commons Library research briefing, CBP 06798, [The school curriculum in England](#) p10

<sup>6</sup> Commons Library research briefing, CBP 06962, [GCSE, AS and A Level reform](#).



## 1.4 Key stages of the national curriculum

The national curriculum has four [key stages](#) with 12 subjects of learning spanning primary to secondary phases of schooling. These 12 subjects are prescribed in Sections 84 and 85 of the Education Act 2002.

The subjects are outlined in statutory documents. All local-authority-maintained schools in England must teach these programmes of study.

Although maintained schools must teach the national curriculum, they can organise subject teaching as they see fit. There is no requirement to spend a set amount of time on any one subject.

## 1.5 Subjects of the national curriculum

Much of the current national curriculum was introduced in September 2014.<sup>7</sup> The exception is the science curriculum which was established for year 10 pupils in September 2016 and applied to year 11 pupils from September 2017.

Further information and links to the complete framework and individual versions of the curriculum for primary and secondary key stages can be found in the Commons Library briefing: [The school curriculum in England](#).<sup>8</sup>

The [National Archives website](#) provides information about the pre-2014 primary and secondary curriculums.

---

<sup>7</sup> Department for Education, [National curriculum](#), July 2014

<sup>8</sup> Commons Library briefing, CBP 06798, [The school curriculum in England](#), section 2

National curriculum subjects				
England				
	KS1	KS2	KS3	KS4
	Age approx. 5-7	Age approx. 7-11	Age approx. 11-14	Age approx. 14-16
Maths	✓	✓	✓	✓
English	✓	✓	✓	✓
Science	✓	✓	✓	✓
History	✓	✓	✓	X
Geography	✓	✓	✓	X
Art and design	✓	✓	✓	X
Physical education	✓	✓	✓	✓
Music	✓	✓	✓	X
(Modern) foreign languages	X	✓	✓	X
Computing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Design and technology	✓	✓	✓	X
Citizenship education	X	X	✓	✓

Source: Commons Library briefing CBP 06798, [The school curriculum in England](#).

Since September 2020, health education has been a statutory part of the curriculum in primary and secondary schools in England. The Library briefing [Relationships and Sex Education in Schools \(England\)](#)<sup>9</sup> provides more information.

There is [statutory guidance on relationships and sex education \(RSE\) and health education \(2019\)](#).<sup>10</sup> The guidance sets out what pupils should know about mental wellbeing by the end of primary and secondary schooling. This includes mental health conditions, recognising early signs of mental wellbeing concerns, and knowing where to seek help.

In March 2023, a Westminster Hall debate relating to suicide prevention and the national curriculum took place. The Commons Library produced a briefing for this debate: [E-petition debate relating to suicide prevention and the national curriculum](#).<sup>11</sup>

The previous Government committed to carrying out a review of the revised RSHE curriculum.”<sup>12</sup> It is likely that the Labour government commissioned

<sup>9</sup> Commons Library research briefing CBP 06103, [Relationships and Sex Education in Schools \(England\)](#). Section 1.5

<sup>10</sup> Department for Education, [Statutory guidance on relationships education, relationships and sex education \(RSE\) and health education](#), July 2019

<sup>11</sup> Commons Library research briefing CDP 2023-0060, [E-petition debate relating to suicide prevention and the national curriculum](#)

<sup>12</sup> [HC Deb 8th March 2023, Col. 298](#)

curriculum review will make proposals to change SRE. The Children's Wellbeing Bill was announced in the Kings Speech 2024.

## 1.6

## Academies

Governance and the content of the school curriculum in England has been changing due to the [policy of academisation](#).<sup>13</sup> By January 2023, 80% of secondary schools had made the switch to academy status, and 40% of primaries are academies. Just over half of all pupils attend academies rather than maintained schools.<sup>14</sup>

Academies and free schools are state-funded non-fee-paying schools in England. They have been independent of local authorities' control.<sup>15</sup> Crucially, since their inception, academies have had the autonomy to create and follow their own curriculum.<sup>16</sup> The only requirement has been that it must be broad and balanced, and include English, mathematics, sciences, relationship and sex education, and religious education (RE).<sup>17</sup>

Under the Conservatives, the march [2022 Schools White Paper Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child](#) stated that all state schools should be in, or run by multi-academy trusts by 2030.<sup>18</sup> This would have meant that the full national curriculum would be a formal requirement in far fewer schools and each trust could have its own curriculum offering.

Academisation has been controversial,<sup>19, 20</sup> partly because of the freedom these schools have over curriculum content and delivery.

However, in July 2024, the Education Secretary announced that the DfE [“will make legislative changes so that all state schools, including academies, will be required to teach the national curriculum.”](#)<sup>21</sup> This change will be implemented after the curriculum review is published in autumn 2025.

The changes will also include bringing multi-academy trusts, rather than individual schools, into inspection system.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Department for Education, [The case for a fully trust-led system](#). March 2022, p2

<sup>14</sup> Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics, January 2023](#), main text, June 2023

<sup>15</sup> GOV.UK, [Types of school: Academies](#)

<sup>16</sup> Commons Library research briefing CBP 07059, [FAQs: Academies and free schools](#)

<sup>17</sup> GOV.UK, [The national curriculum: Overview](#)

<sup>18</sup> Department for Education, [Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child](#). March 2022

<sup>19</sup> [“Ofsted: Curriculum ‘suffered’ because of academisation”](#), Times Educational Supplement, 1 June 2019 (Accessed 13 July 2023)

<sup>20</sup> D. Hill, C. Lewis, A. Maisuria, P. Yarker, J. Hill [Conservative Education Policy Reloaded: Policy, Ideology and Impacts in England](#) (PDF), 2016. p13

<sup>21</sup> Secretary of State for Education written statement: [Schools and Teaching](#), July 2024

<sup>22</sup> The Kings Speech 2024, July 2024, p64

Oversight of academies lays with the schools' inspectorate - Ofsted; and Regional Directors (DfE appointees who each cover one of nine regions in England); as well as the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA – a DfE executive agency).

---

The 2024 Kings Speech contained the Children's Wellbeing Bill, which would require academies to teach the national curriculum and that academy trusts will be inspected.

These changes to academies and their curriculum will be part of the Children's Wellbeing Bill announced in the Kings Speech 2024.

## 1.7

## The future of the national curriculum

The Labour manifesto for the 2024 general election committed the Party to changes to the national curriculum in England.<sup>23</sup> These include:

- an 'expert led' review of the curriculum and assessment, which would "consider the right balance of assessment methods whilst protecting the important role of examinations". The curriculum should deliver "excellent foundation in reading, writing and maths, and support to develop essential digital, speaking, and creative skills"<sup>24</sup>
- promoting numeracy, and improving the quality of maths teaching in nurseries and primary schools
- Studying a creative or vocational subject up to 16
- protecting time for physical education
- a National Music Education Network, inclusive of parents, teachers and children
- work experience and careers advice for all young people<sup>25</sup>; and
- ensuring that schools "address misogyny and teach young people about healthy relationships and consent"<sup>26</sup>

---

Becky Francis CBE will lead the governments curriculum review. It will be published in autumn 2025.

Labour have not announced an uplift to core education funding, so it is unclear how these commitments will be resourced. However, two specific

---

<sup>23</sup> Labour Party, '[Labour Party manifesto 2024](#)', June 2024, pp 82–3

<sup>24</sup> As above, p 83

<sup>25</sup> As above, p 44

<sup>26</sup> As above, p 68

commitments relating to the curriculum were costed in Labours Fiscal Plan that accompanied the Manifesto:<sup>27</sup>

- early language development in all primary schools (£5mn)
- delivering work experience and careers advice for all young people (85mn)

These commitments are costed from the planned £1.5bn annual revenue raised from applying VAT and business rates to private schools to 2028-29.<sup>28</sup> This revenue is also earmarked for several other initiatives.

## Key issue: Diversity and decolonisation

In recent years, there have been calls for the national curriculum to be more diverse and inclusive beyond the general requirement to be broad and balanced.<sup>29,30</sup> The Black Lives Matter movement and concern about inequalities have led to suggestions that the curriculum should include diverse perspectives on the British empire.<sup>31,32,33</sup>

## Key issue: Sustainability and climate change

Issues relevant to climate change are included on the national curriculum. General information about what is covered is available in the Library Debate Pack, [Inclusion of sustainability and climate change in the national curriculum](#).

There has been growing demand for a stronger focus on sustainability and climate change in the national curriculum. In 2022, the DfE launched a [sustainability and climate change strategy](#) that has significant implications for the national curriculum.<sup>34</sup> The strategy's vision is to deliver a world-leading education sector in sustainability and climate change by 2030. The strategy consists of four aims and five action areas, including climate education through the curriculum, particularly in science, geography, and citizenship. The National Education Union has supported this strategy.<sup>35</sup> The Labour government are yet to commit to reform.

In addition, future thinking about the curriculum may include a stronger and more direct focus on artificial intelligence (AI) and technology, financial

---

<sup>27</sup> As above, p 127

<sup>28</sup> As above

<sup>29</sup> H.E. Gandolfi, [Decolonising the science curriculum in England: Bringing decolonial science and technology studies to secondary education](#) (PDF), 2021

<sup>30</sup> Commons Library research briefing CDP 2021-0101, [E-petition debate: Black history and cultural diversity of the curriculum](#), section 3

<sup>31</sup> S. Themelis, [Colonialisms and class](#), 2022

<sup>32</sup> [PQ Volume 698](#), 28<sup>th</sup> June 2021

<sup>33</sup> NEU, [Building Back Better demands an inclusive curriculum for all](#), 11 April 2022

<sup>34</sup> GOV.UK, [Sustainability and climate change strategy](#), 21 April 2022

<sup>35</sup> NEU, [DfE launch of Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy](#), 21 April 2022

education, and maths.<sup>36</sup> However, the retention and recruitment of specialist teachers in STEM subjects is an issue currently causing concern in the sector – separate Library briefings on [teacher recruitment and retention](#), and [initial teacher training](#) in England provide further background. The Labour government have committed to recruiting 6,500 specialist teachers.

---

<sup>36</sup> See Prime Minister’s Office press notice, [‘Prime Minister outlines his vision for Maths to 18’](#), 17 April 2023

## 2

# School Curriculum in Northern Ireland

Since the Northern Ireland Act 1998, education has been a devolved matter, meaning that the Northern Ireland Assembly has full legislative powers.<sup>37</sup>

The current Northern Ireland Curriculum [was initiated on 1 Aug 2007](#) by the Northern Ireland Department of Education.<sup>38</sup> The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA) is the examinations board and regulator responsible for the curriculum.

The curriculum covers all 12 years of compulsory education for [pupils aged four to sixteen](#). However, parents and guardians can defer starting school for younger children.<sup>39</sup> The curriculum focuses on the learning process and learner needs, as well as their knowledge, understanding, and skills. The curriculum is designed to provide students with a broad and balanced education, which includes the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and understanding in various areas of learning.

## 2.1

### Objectives

The Northern Ireland Curriculum is designed to provide learning opportunities for each young person to develop as:

- **an individual**  
to achieve personal fulfilment and individual well-being through living a successful life
- **a contributor to society**  
to be concerned for the well-being of others as well as themselves, in their own society and beyond it; and
- **a contributor to the economy and the environment**  
to appreciate how employment will impact on the economic choices they make and how they, in turn, impact individually and collectively on the environment.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> GOV.UK, [Devolution Settlement: Northern Ireland](#), Updated. 23 September 2019

<sup>38</sup> NI GOV.UK, [The Education \(Other Skills\) Order \(Northern Ireland\) 2007](#), 1 August 2007

<sup>39</sup> Department of Education, [School Starting Age](#)

<sup>40</sup> CCEA, [Curriculum Aim and Objectives](#), undated

## 2.2

### Key elements

There are key elements relating to each curriculum objective which may be taught through various subjects across the curriculum.<sup>41</sup> These are:

#### **Developing as an individual**

- Personal understanding
- Mutual understanding
- Personal health
- Moral character
- Spiritual awareness

#### **Developing as a contributor to society**

- Citizenship
- Cultural understanding
- Media awareness
- Ethical awareness

#### **Developing as a contributor to the economy and the environment**

- Employability
- Economic awareness; and
- Education for sustainable development

## 2.3

### Skills and capabilities

There is emphasis on developing Curriculum Skills and Capabilities for lifelong learning and contributing effectively to society:

#### **Cross-Curricular Skills**

- Communication
- Using Mathematics
- Using Information and Communications Technology

---

<sup>41</sup> Council for the Curriculum, Examination & Assessment, [Aim of the Northern Ireland Curriculum](#)



## Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities

- Managing Information\*
- Thinking, Problem-Solving and Decision-Making
- Being Creative\*
- Working with Others; and
- Self-Management.<sup>42</sup>

\*At key stage four, managing Information and Being Creative do not appear as statutory parts of the curriculum, although they may remain relevant to learning.

The goal is to teach each of these elements through embedding throughout all parts of the curriculum. Pupils should have opportunities to acquire, develop and demonstrate the skills in ways that suit the delivery of respective subjects.

## 2.4

### Key stages

The curriculum is organized into compulsory key stages.

Structure of NI national curriculum		
	Ages	School year(s)
Pre-school (not compulsory)	3-4	n/a
Foundation stage	4-6	1 and 2
Key stage 1	6-8	3 and 4
Key stage 2	8-11	5 to 7
Key stage 3	11-14	8 to 10
Key stage 4	14-16	11 and 12

Source: [Council for the Curriculum, Examination & Assessment, Curriculum](#).

## 2.5

### Foundation Stage

In the foundation stage, the following is covered:

<sup>42</sup> As above, [Curriculum Skills and Capabilities](#)

- Language and Literacy
- Mathematics and Numeracy
- The Arts
- The World Around Us
- Personal Development & Mutual Understanding
- Physical Development & Movement; and
- Religious Education.<sup>43</sup>

## 2.6 Key stages one and two

In the first key stages, the following is covered:

- Language and Literacy
- Mathematics and Numeracy
- The Arts
- The World Around Us
- Personal Development & Mutual Understanding
- Physical Education; and
- Religious Education

## 2.7 Key stage three

Building on the key stage one and two, in key stage three, the following is covered:

- Language and Literacy
- Mathematics and Numeracy
- The Arts
- Learning for Life and Work

---

<sup>43</sup> Council for the Curriculum, Examination & Assessment, [Curriculum at Foundation Stage](#)

- Modern Languages
- Environment and Society
- Science and Technology
- Physical Education; and
- Religious Education

## 2.8

### Key stage four

Building on the key stage three, in key stage four the following is covered:

- Language and Literacy
- Mathematics and Numeracy
- Modern Languages
- The Arts
- Environment and Society
- Science and Technology
- Learning for Life and Work
- Physical Education; and
- Religious Education

In the foundation stage, learning should build on children's early experiences through planned and challenging play. As pupils progress through key stages one and two at primary school, they gradually move towards more formal approaches to learning. In key stages three and four at post-primary, pupils continue to broaden and deepen what they know and understand. The curriculum framework means that each year all pupils should have opportunities to develop skills across different areas of learning.

## 2.9

### Curriculum Areas of Learning

The curriculum is set out in Areas of Learning.<sup>44</sup> Where appropriate, teachers should make connections across all these areas to integrate learning experiences. They also have flexibility to select aspects from each area that are appropriate to their pupils' abilities and interests.

In addition to the statutory curriculum, schools in Northern Ireland may also offer additional programmes such as vocational courses, work-based learning, and apprenticeships to prepare students for their future careers.

## 2.10

### Religious education

Religious education (RE) is a compulsory part of the Northern Ireland curriculum, although parents have the right to withdraw their child from part or all RE or collective worship. Schools must provide RE in accordance with the core syllabus which was drawn up by the four main churches and the Department of Education.

The RE core syllabus includes Christianity, morality, world religions and a requirement at key stage four for pupils to study the Christian church from both a Protestant and a Roman Catholic perspective.<sup>45</sup> It should provide a common core for the teaching of RE that schools can build upon in a way that suits the needs of their pupils and the ethos of the school.

Teachers are required to use different pedagogical approaches to give pupils a range of access to learning experiences. These include active learning methods, which can be informed by [Assessment for Learning strategies](#).<sup>46</sup> Teachers are encouraged to use real life contexts for learning. The curriculum has flexibility for teachers to customise learning shifting away from a [one-size-fits-all](#) framework.<sup>47</sup>

### Climate education

The [curriculum in Northern Ireland](#) includes a range of opportunities for children to be taught about climate change and sustainability issues. For example, during key stage three, there are statutory requirements, as well as guidance for the curriculum in [Geography](#) and [Science](#) that covers relevant issues.

---

<sup>44</sup> Council for the Curriculum, Examination & Assessment, [Curriculum Areas of Learning](#)

<sup>45</sup> Department of Education, [Religious education core syllabus](#). 1 August 2007

<sup>46</sup> Council for the Curriculum, Examination & Assessment, [Assessment for Learning: A Practical Guide \(PDF\)](#). Section 5

<sup>47</sup> Council for the Curriculum, Examination & Assessment, [Curriculum Monitoring Programme](#)

There is also [non-statutory guidance](#) on science at key stage three that encourage thinking about impacts of climate change and biodiversity.

General information on climate education in the curriculum in Northern Ireland is available in the Library briefing: [Inclusion of sustainability and climate change in the national curriculum](#).<sup>48</sup>

## 2.11

# The future of the Northern Ireland Curriculum

## Key issue: Underachievement

In January 2020, the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU) at Queens University Belfast produced a summary of evidence bringing together research published since 2000 on educational underachievement in Northern Ireland. There were six findings and recommendations to address the [long tail of underachievement](#), particularly for working class children in the context of general high performance in GCSEs and A Levels. The wide-ranging report calls for curriculum innovation and a reconsideration of high-stakes external testing. A key theme is that education should address the needs of all children and focus on inclusion.<sup>49</sup>

[CREU produced a follow-up report in 2021](#).<sup>50</sup> One conclusion was that boys underachieved relative to girls, but research did not fully explain the role of the curriculum and it needs more study.

As part of the Deal, then Education Minister, Peter Weir, announced the appointment of an Expert Panel to examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and social disadvantage.<sup>51</sup>

The Panel's final report includes explicit recommendations on curriculum and assessment matters.<sup>52</sup> This includes the Executive establishing an [independent review of education](#) focussing on raising standards and access to the benefits of the curriculum for all pupils.

---

<sup>48</sup> Commons Library briefing CDP-2021-0166, [Inclusion of sustainability and climate change in the national curriculum](#). Section 1.4

<sup>49</sup> Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement, [Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland: Evidence Summary](#). January 2020

<sup>50</sup> Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement, [Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland: Review of Research 2021](#), April 2021

<sup>51</sup> GOV.UK, [New Decade, New Approach](#), January 2020

<sup>52</sup> NI GOV.UK, [Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland - a Fair Start](#), May 2021

Working class educational underachievement continues to be a persistent problem in Northern Ireland, and academic selection as well as assessment and examination are highlighted as prominent issues to address in the future.

The report recommends a whole community approach to education to promote inclusivity.

## Key issue: Integration

There is progress on expanding the [number of integrated schools](#) attended by both Protestant and Catholic children in Northern Ireland.

The [Integrated Education Act 2022](#) has been designed to facilitate connecting learners from different religious, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>53</sup>

Dedicated funding has been allocated to [integrated schooling](#).<sup>54</sup>

There is [wider support for accelerating this issue](#) but there are many challenges to implementation, including practicalities, and the fact that there has not been a Northern Ireland Executive since February 2022.<sup>55,56</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> NI GOV.UK, [Integrated Education Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2022](#). April 2022

<sup>54</sup> GOV.UK, [Secretary of state for Northern Ireland boosts integrated education in NI with £1.9m funding package](#). July 2022

<sup>55</sup> The Conversation, [Integrated education in Northern Ireland: why progress is slow despite the support](#). August 2022

<sup>56</sup> BBC, [Integrated education expansion plan branded 'action plan with no action'](#). April 2023

### 3

## School Curriculum in Scotland

Like Wales and Northern Ireland, the school curriculum in Scotland is a devolved policy area.

Since devolution, the Scottish Parliament has been responsible for Scotland's school curriculum. The governmental body responsible is Education Scotland. Since 2004, while non-statutory, the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) has been implemented in nurseries, primary and secondary schools spanning ages 3 to 18. CfE was launched in 2010/11 for primaries and it now applies to all state secondary schools.

### Academy and Grammar in school names

State secondary schools in Scotland can include 'academy' and 'grammar' in their names. These are historic legacies, and they do not denote affiliation with academy trusts or academic selection.<sup>57</sup>

The [2019 CfE](#) is the latest version of the curriculum in Scotland.<sup>58</sup> This has been designed to be coherent, sequenced, and integrated over four key stages. CfE is designed to be "[a totality of all that is planned for children and young people from early learning and childcare, through school and beyond](#)".<sup>59</sup> This totality encompasses four overarching contexts of planning and learning:

- Curriculum areas and subjects
- Interdisciplinary learning
- Ethos and life of the school; and
- Opportunities for personal achievement

Each school designs its own curriculum based on a two-part common framework. This autonomy allows for tailored curricular practices.

<sup>57</sup> Scottish Council of Independent Schools, [Annual Census](#), 2021

<sup>58</sup> Education Scotland, [What is Curriculum for Excellence?](#)

<sup>59</sup> As above

## 3.1

### Broad general education

CfE has two parts. The first part consists of early years, followed by a broad general education phase ending at S3, or the third year of secondary schooling. Up to S3, children focus on developing [four capacities](#):<sup>60</sup>

- Successful learners
- Confident individuals
- Responsible citizens, and
- Effective contributors

## 3.2

### Curriculum subject areas

The four capacities in the broad general education (up to S3) are developed through 12 [curriculum areas](#):

- Expressive arts
- Health and wellbeing
- Languages
- Numeracy and mathematics
- Religious and moral studies
- Sciences
- Social studies; and
- Technologies

More recently, Education Scotland has guided schools to include coverage of the following:

- Community learning and development
- Community resilience
- Gaelic Education, and

---

<sup>60</sup> Scottish Government, [School admissions, curriculum and qualifications](#)



- Political literacy.<sup>61</sup>

In August 2016, Education Scotland published [the Curriculum for Excellence \(CfE\) Statement for Practitioners](#). This consolidated the multiple support materials and guidance documents written for practitioners since 2004. The statement was authored by the HM Chief Inspector of Education who said the:

two key priorities for CfE are: ensuring the best possible progression in literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing for every child and young person; and closing the attainment gap.<sup>62</sup>

To deliver these priorities, the statement was intended to highlight two key resources to support practitioners in planning learning, teaching and assessment of these curriculum areas:

- Experiences and Outcomes, and
- Benchmarks

### 3.3 Experiences and outcomes, and benchmarks

After 2016, delivery of most of the curriculum areas have been supported using the [experiences and outcomes \(Es +Os\)](#) resources provided by Education Scotland.<sup>63</sup> These statements benchmark the knowledge, skills, attributes, and capabilities of the four capacities that young people are expected to show in each curriculum area.

With “Principles and Practice” documents for the curriculum areas, Es +Os are used by teachers to plan learning and to aid professional judgement about progression. The benchmarks outline the standards that are expected within each curriculum area, at each level.

The benchmarks communicate to practitioners what to do, and what to avoid when planning learning, teaching and assessment. [Moderation guidance](#) is also provided to facilitate professional dialogue and a shared understanding of standards and expectations in the broad, general education phase.<sup>64</sup>

The benchmarks provide a framework for standardising what learners need to know for progression to the next level in each curriculum area. Practitioners are supported with holistic assessment guidance through benchmarks that map to national standards. Schools report on [Literacy and Numeracy](#) performance.

---

<sup>61</sup> Education Scotland, [Curriculum areas](#)

<sup>62</sup> Education Scotland, [A Statement for Practitioners from HM Chief Inspector of Educator](#) (PDF), August 2016

<sup>63</sup> As above, [Experiences and outcomes](#)

<sup>64</sup> As above, [Moderation Cycle](#)

While it is expected that classroom teachers are the primary users of these resources, implementation of Es +Os is the responsibility of all practitioners.

## 3.4 Senior phase

The second part of CfE is a [senior phase of education](#) (from S4). This is an entitlement between ages 16-18. S4 aligns with and progressively advances the four capacities developed from S3 to offer learners:

- Opportunities for developing skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work
- Opportunities to maximise their individual potential, benefitting from appropriate personal support and challenge, and
- Support to help them move into positive and sustained destinations beyond school.<sup>65</sup>

## 3.5 Qualifications

All learning in the broad general education phase up to S3 contributes to learning specially for qualifications in the senior phase; learners will build a portfolio of qualifications. This is intended to be done without compromising the entitlement to a broad general education.

In [the senior phase](#), the curriculum framework and qualifications provide a range of opportunities to meet the needs of all learners. To deliver this breadth of learning, schools design and implement a bespoke three-year senior phase jointly with a range of key partners, including colleges, employers, universities and community learning and development organisations, while including parents and carers with curriculum decisions from an early stage.<sup>66</sup>

## 3.6 The future of Curriculum for Excellence

According to the OECD, Scotland has been at the forefront of curriculum reform and its approach has been “[inspiring and widely supported](#)”<sup>67</sup> (see Wales below), but some have argued it is in need of refresh after 20 years.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Education Scotland, [Senior phase](#)

<sup>66</sup> Education Scotland, [Senior phase](#)

<sup>67</sup> OECD, [Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future](#), June 2021

<sup>68</sup> W. Humes, [Scottish education: A crisis of confidence and trust](#) (PDF), March 2023

Finland and Japan have automatic review after a decade.<sup>69</sup> [Norway is undergoing "renewal"](#) after the previous comprehensive reform in 2006.<sup>70</sup>

## Key Issue: Renewal

In 2009 Professor Graham Donaldson was asked to review Teacher Education. Since the Donaldson report - [Teaching Scotland's Future](#) (2010),<sup>71</sup> there have been calls for teacher education to be reviewed to align with changing contexts to more effectively deliver CfE.<sup>72</sup>

According to Donaldson, attending to teacher education should be part of continuous "whole system" change.<sup>73,74</sup> In 2023, Professor Walter Humes, said that this should include cultural change to renew trust and confidence.<sup>75</sup>

The Scottish Government has been in process of refreshing the CfE. The [National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan](#) (NIF) was launched in 2019.<sup>76,77</sup>

The OECD was invited to evaluate the implementation of CfE in primary and secondary schools.<sup>78</sup> It found that the coherence, structure, and long-term vision of CfE in need of attention.

Professor Ken Muir was appointed as an independent advisor in 2021. His March 2022 report had 21 recommendations, including a new curriculum and assessment agency, alongside establishing updated visions, values and principles of CfE.<sup>79</sup>

Between 2017-2022, the Curriculum and Assessment Board was established to improve curriculum and assessment policy in education. A priority has been on inclusion and equity as part of [reviewing of assessment and qualifications](#).<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> W. Humes, [Scottish education: A crisis of confidence and trust](#) (PDF), March 2023, p23

<sup>70</sup> European Commission, [Norway – ongoing reforms and policy developments](#), June 2022

<sup>71</sup> G. Donaldson, [Teaching Scotland's Future – Report of a review of teacher education in Scotland](#) (PDF), December 2010

<sup>72</sup> Scottish Government, [Evaluation of the Impact of the Implementation of Teaching Scotland's Future](#) (PDF), March 2016

<sup>73</sup> Scottish Parliament, [School education: subject profile](#) (PDF), June 2021, p9

<sup>74</sup> Nesta, [Rethinking the curriculum in Scotland and Wales - Nesta talks to Professor Graham Donaldson](#), May 2022

<sup>75</sup> W. Humes, [Scottish education: A crisis of confidence and trust](#) (PDF), March 2023, ps19-27

<sup>76</sup> Scottish Government, [2019 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan](#), December 2018

<sup>77</sup> Scottish Government, [Let's Talk Scottish Education](#)

<sup>78</sup> OECD, [Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future](#), June 2021

<sup>79</sup> Scottish Government, [Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education](#) (PDF), March 2022

<sup>80</sup> L. Haywood, [Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment](#), 2022

---

## 4 School Curriculum in Wales

### 4.1 Donaldson review

In March 2014, the Welsh Government commissioned the [Donaldson Review of Curriculum and Assessment from Foundation Phase to Key Stage four](#). Donaldson had previously carried out a similar review for the Scottish Government in 2010, and his report led to the redevelopment of Curriculum for Excellence.

For the Welsh review, data was collected from school visits, interviews with practitioners, and more than 300 responses from children and young people. The final report, [Successful Futures](#), was published in February 2015 containing 68 wide-ranging proposals, including recommendations related to the purpose and structure of the curriculum,<sup>81</sup> which were accepted in full.<sup>82</sup>

### 4.2 New Curriculum after 2022

Alongside [concerns about PISA scores](#), interest in renewing children's education in Wales has been heightened since the Covid-19 pandemic. It is within this context that the proposals in [Successful Futures](#) were the “blueprint” for education reforms in the [Curriculum and Assessment \(Wales\) Act 2021](#).<sup>83</sup>

The Welsh government has introduced the Curriculum for Wales (CfW). CfW is designed to be flexible for teachers to tailor it to the needs of their learners. There are no programmes of study prescribing exactly what must be taught.

Unlike the key stages in its predecessor, CfW is intended to be a continuum of learning with progression points. Progression is an important feature of CfW as reflected in the statutory [Progression Code](#) under the 2021 Act. The Welsh

---

<sup>81</sup> G. Donaldson. Successful Futures: [Independent review of curriculum and assessment in Wales](#), January 2015

<sup>82</sup> Nesta, [Rethinking the curriculum in Scotland and Wales - Nesta talks to Professor Graham Donaldson](#), May 2022

<sup>83</sup> Welsh Parliament, [Going live: Rolling out the new curriculum from this September](#), 1 July 2022

Government has also issued [statutory guidance on pupils' ongoing assessment](#).<sup>84</sup>

CfW roll-out began in September 2022 in all publicly funded nursery settings and primary schools. Half of all secondary schools opted to roll-out the new curriculum to year seven in 2022-23.<sup>85</sup> By September 2024 it has become statutory for all year nine pupils. The roll-out will continue every year reaching Year 11 in 2026-27. The roll-out is scheduled as follows:

- Year 10 Sept 2025
- Year 11 Sept 2026

The first cohort to take qualifications associated with the new curriculum will be 2026-27's year 11.

The Welsh Government has issued guidance on [supporting learner progression](#) and [transitioning between the existing national curriculum and the Curriculum for Wales](#).<sup>86</sup>

## 4.3

### Curriculum for Wales Purposes

In the 2022 [curriculum annual report](#),<sup>87</sup> Jeremy Miles, the then Minister for Education and Welsh Language, emphasised that the CfW is underpinned by a commitment to four purposes to create well-rounded future citizens who are:

- Ethical, informed citizens ready to be citizens of Wales and the world
- Ambitious, capable learners ready to learn throughout their lives
- Enterprising, creative contributors ready to play a full part in life and work, and
- Healthy, confident individuals ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society

The curriculum annual report states that literacy, numeracy and digital competence are central to all parts of the curriculum, while opportunities to develop wider skills should be made available by teachers when developmentally appropriate.

---

<sup>84</sup> Welsh Government, [Supporting learner progression: assessment guidance](#), 22 June 2022

<sup>85</sup> Welsh Government, [Cabinet Statement: Secondary school roll out of the Curriculum for Wales from September 2022](#), 14 June 2022

<sup>86</sup> Welsh Government, [Supporting transition from the current arrangements to Curriculum for Wales](#), 18 May 2022

<sup>87</sup> Welsh Government, [Curriculum for Wales: Annual Report 2022](#), 1 July 2022

Relationships and Sexuality Education, and Religion, Values and Ethics, and Welsh language will be mandatory from age three (English from age seven).

## 4.4 Areas of Learning and Experience

The report recommended that the curriculum for three to 16-year-olds should be organised into six [Areas of Learning and Experience \(AoLEs\)](#)<sup>88</sup>. AoLEs are defined as:

- Expressive arts
- Health and Well-being
- Humanities
- Language, Literacy, and Communication
- Mathematics and Numeracy, and
- Science and Technology

These AoLEs are based on the [27 statements of what matters code](#), which is statutory for state-funded schools.<sup>89</sup>

The curriculum requires schools to design their own curriculum and assessment arrangements within these AoLE's.

They are designed to be flexible to enable children to be taught about priority issues, such as climate change. General information on where climate education in the Welsh curriculum could be located, is available in the following Library briefing: [Inclusion of sustainability and climate change in the national curriculum](#).

## 4.5 The future of Curriculum for Wales

### Key Issue: Monitoring

The Senedd's [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) is tasked with the on-going evaluation of CfW through a series of 'check ins' and [calls for evidence](#) throughout this Senedd (up to May 2026).

The Welsh Government funded research to capture the perspectives of young children (aged 3 to 6) during the Covid-19 pandemic, about their experiences of education at that time. One recommendation was that policy makers and

---

<sup>88</sup> Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021, [Areas of Learning and Experience](#)

<sup>89</sup> Welsh Government, [Curriculum for Wales: statements of what matters code](#), 15 November 2021

teachers [should attend to amplifying](#) children’s voices in planning curriculum experiences in the early and foundation years, as well as primary years of schooling.<sup>90</sup>

The architect of the new Welsh curriculum, Professor Graham Donaldson writes, [“the biggest single issue in radical reform is actually to sustain it, is to see it as a long-term endeavour, not something that happens as a one off”](#).<sup>91</sup>

## Key Issue: Continuous Professional Development

Donaldson also calls for continued curriculum development to be part of an integrated package of reform that includes developing capacity through continued professional development, masters-level educated teachers, and rethinking the reliance on examinations for assessment.<sup>92</sup>

As a newly establishing curriculum, there will be other issues to emerge during and after implementation concludes in 2027.

---

<sup>90</sup> Welsh Government, [Covid-19, education and learning: amplifying young children’s voices](#), April 2023

<sup>91</sup> Nesta, [Rethinking the curriculum in Scotland and Wales - Nesta talks to Professor Graham Donaldson](#), May 2022

<sup>92</sup> As above

The House of Commons Library is a research and information service based in the UK Parliament. Our impartial analysis, statistical research and resources help MPs and their staff scrutinise legislation, develop policy, and support constituents.

Our published material is available to everyone on [commonslibrary.parliament.uk](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk).

Get our latest research delivered straight to your inbox. Subscribe at [commonslibrary.parliament.uk/subscribe](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/subscribe) or scan the code below:



 [commonslibrary.parliament.uk](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk)

 [@commonslibrary](https://twitter.com/commonslibrary)