



EQUALITY COMMISSION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

**Invitation for written submissions to the Curriculum Review for
Northern Ireland.**

30 January 2025

Executive Summary

- i. We welcome Departmental actions to commission a Review into the Northern Ireland Curriculum, and further welcome the engagement the Department has facilitated on this issue to date, including with the Commission.
- ii. We encourage the Department to engage broadly on this issue, including with stakeholders representing different equality groups. We consistently highlight the expertise and experience of stakeholders from across the equality grounds, and that they should be fully involved in the design, delivery and review of public policy and service delivery.
- iii. Our response is centred on four key elements:
 - The purpose of the curriculum.
 - The content within the curriculum.
 - The delivery of the curriculum.
 - The effectiveness and monitoring of the curriculum.
- iv. Regarding the **purpose** of the curriculum, it is important that the curriculum, beyond focusing on academic attainment and development, also explicitly promotes equality, diversity, inclusion and good relations, and tackles prejudice. This means taking a proactive and intentional approach to inclusion of relevant and appropriate materials throughout the curriculum as a whole.
- v. Comprehensive action should be taken by the Department of Education, schools and other education bodies, to embed equality of opportunity and good relations across the **content** of the curriculum. Content should be reviewed on a regular and ongoing basis to ensure alignment with international best practice.
- vi. The Department should seek to ensure that children from across the equality grounds see themselves substantively reflected in the school curriculum and classroom activities, for example – the culture and language of ethnic minority children.
- vii. The curriculum, support materials and related opportunities should also form part of actions to comprehensively address prejudice-based bullying and stereotyping across the equality groups.

- viii. We reinforce the importance of supporting teachers in the **delivery** of all aspects of the curriculum, including equality and good relations elements, via teacher training and continuous professional development, and ensuring the curriculum is accessible to all children and young people.
- ix. In seeking to assess the **effectiveness** of the curriculum, it is important that metrics are assessed that relate to, not only academic achievement, but also to the achievement of the broader purpose of the curriculum (e.g. promoting equality, diversity, inclusion and good relations, and tackling prejudice).
- x. The curriculum should enable **collaborative** approaches to drive attainment and to identify and respond to barriers to education. This means involving young people, parents, families, carers and the wider communities of key equality groups in both the design and delivery of the curriculum, and moving towards a system of education which routinely teaches pupils together via **a shared curriculum in shared classes**.
- xi. Given the lack of comprehensive evaluation of the full curriculum to date, in addition to our key recommendations, we would seek clarity on:
- The current breadth of the curriculum (for example, regarding content across the equality groups).
 - The effectiveness of the curriculum (for example, in promoting good relations and changing attitudes).
 - The consistency of the delivery of the curriculum.
 - The levels of preparation of teachers, and what additional support may be required.
- xii. We reiterate our longstanding call for the adoption of a number of strategic actions to embed equality and good relations in education. These include reviewing curriculum support materials and developing good practice guidance, and developing equality and good relations elements to training programmes for student teachers, existing teachers, school leaders, and governors. We consider that such actions should be included in any recommendations developed from this Review of the Curriculum.

- xiii. In responding to recommendations from this Review, the Department should consider opportunities in the curriculum to promote equality of opportunity across Section 75 groups. The Department should ensure it applies its Section 75 Equality Scheme commitments to the Curriculum Review. For example, the Department should ensure that Section 75 screening and/or equality impact assessment (EQIA) is undertaken on any actions proposed from the Review. Equality assessments should be undertaken before implementation in order to inform decisions.
- xiv. While we welcome that the Department is seeking initial input via this 'call for evidence', we express concern at the short timeline for written submissions (11 December – 30 January), especially given that the submission period included the end-of-year break. It remains important that consultation occurs on any subsequent policy proposals, and that the above Section 75 equality scheme commitments are applied.
- xv. The Commission remains available to support the outworkings of the Review of the Curriculum, and to respond to any further requests for information.

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1 Background

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

- 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 We also have responsibilities to promote, protect and monitor implementation of the UNCRPD in Northern Ireland; and to monitor, advise, report on and enforce the UK Government's adherence to its commitment under Article 2 of the Windsor Framework to protect certain equality and human rights in Northern Ireland after Brexit.
- 1.3 Our statutory remit¹ 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.

Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum

- 1.4 We note the purpose of the Review of the Curriculum² to make policy recommendations regarding the purpose, design, specification and implementation of the Northern Ireland Curriculum.
- 1.5 We note that the Review will further:

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

² For further details, see: [Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum | Department of Education](#)

- identify emerging curricular themes and key issues of public/political/media interest;
- consider the role of curriculum design in tackling educational disadvantage and reducing educational inequalities;
- produce coherent proposals and recommendations to support the future development/reform of the curriculum; and,
- make recommendations on how the curriculum should be monitored, reviewed and developed with relevant experts in the field, key education organisations, schools and other key stakeholders.

Recommendations from the Independent Review of Education

1.6 We note that the Independent Review of Education (2023)³ made the following recommendations in relation to the curriculum:

“Undertake major reform of the curriculum and keep it under continual review”.

- *“The curriculum needs to be based on a clear understanding of how learning occurs. It should inspire lifelong learners capable of successfully participating in an ever-changing society. Both the content and the process of learning are crucial. Learners should advance smoothly from early childhood to lifelong learning without abrupt changes, such as currently exists most notably between the primary and post-primary stages. This will require major changes and significant investment.*
- *The curriculum should be kept under continual review following radical reform involving a reduction in subject content, improvement of transitions and the development of pre-vocational learning from age 14.*
- *In adult life, the main curricular consideration is meeting the learner’s needs as the learner perceives them”.*

³ For further details, see: [Independent Review of Education \(2023\)](#)

“Provide expert curriculum advice”.

- *“Considerable resources and attention need to be invested in curriculum development, review, and advice. CCEA’s responsibilities should be divided between two separate organisations – one for curriculum and the other for assessment and qualifications.*
- *An interim Curriculum Taskforce should lead on the identified areas of reform until the new Curriculum Council is created. The taskforce should prioritise addressing the issue of excessive curriculum content and also lead on other identified priorities”.*

ETI Reports and wider Research

1.7 We further note a number of reports from the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) that have reviewed elements of the curriculum and its delivery:

- ETI’s Report⁴ on how effectively are children being prepared for living in, and contributing to, a diverse society found that “in some of the schools visited, both leaders and children identified the demographics of the school communities and local area as resulting in limited exposure to children from other faiths and backgrounds” and that “In one school, for example, staff reported that while they were committed to embracing diversity, this was at times, challenged by parental and community views. It was reported some prejudice towards newcomer children, asylum seekers and their families had been expressed. In this school, the staff required courage and commitment in dealing with this challenge”.
- ETI’s evaluation of teacher professional learning in meeting the special educational needs of learners⁵ found that “Over one-third of teachers (36%) indicated that they do not have the knowledge, skills and understanding to meet their learners’ SEN, and almost two-fifths (39%) indicated that

⁴ 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.](#)

⁵ For further details, see: ETI (2023) [An evaluation of teacher professional learning in meeting the special educational needs of learners](#)

their internal teacher professional learning was not effective enough.”

- Regarding the Preventative Curriculum⁶, ETI found that “Too many schools/centres avoid completely, or cover with insufficient depth and progression, many of the more sensitive aspects of the RSE aspect of the preventative curriculum. These include teaching on gender and sexual identity; LGBTQ+; sexual abuse; child sexual exploitation (CSE); domestic abuse/violence; and menstrual wellbeing” and that “There are inconsistencies in the frequency and rigour with which the preventative curriculum is reviewed and updated by schools/centres”.

2 ECNI policy positions on education

- 2.1 The Commission has highlighted the importance of ensuring access to education and learning across and between all stages of life for all equality groups, including children and young people with special educational needs (SEN), people for whom English is an additional language, and people with caring responsibilities.
- 2.2 We continue to highlight persistent inequalities in education⁷ (for example in attainment, attendance, and bullying) across disability, race, gender, and others, as well as continuing to highlight inequalities experienced by children on free school meals⁸.
- 2.3 We recently published updated recommendations on advancing equality for children with SEN⁹ and on early years and childcare¹⁰.
- 2.4 Within our response to the draft Programme for Government¹¹ we noted that while focus areas included SEN and childcare,

⁶ For further details, see ETI (2023) [The Preventative Curriculum in Schools and Education Other Than at School \(EOTAS\) Centres](#)

⁷ For further details, see: <https://www.equalityni.org/KeyInequalities-Education>

⁸ For further details, see: [ECNI \(2020\) Summary of policy positions relating to poverty and socio-economic disadvantage](#)

⁹ For further details, see: <https://www.equalityni.org/SEN>

¹⁰ For further details, see: <https://www.equalityni.org/Childcare>

¹¹ For further details, see: <https://www.equalityni.org/pfg>

there was no broader priority for education or addressing educational inequalities.

- 2.5 Full details on our policy recommendations to address educational inequalities can be found in the referenced footnotes.

3 Purpose of the Curriculum

- 3.1 The Commission has consistently affirmed that education plays a key role in determining an individual's life chances, and recognises and reinforces the wider value of education, beyond solely the achievement of qualifications. Education can provide exposure to literature, language, sport, activities, art, and music; as well as allowing individuals to develop an understanding and experience of the value and range of diverse cultures, identities and backgrounds.
- 3.2 **The Commission emphasises that it is important that the purpose of the curriculum, beyond focusing on academic attainment and development, also explicitly promotes equality, diversity, inclusion and good relations.** This means taking a proactive and intentional approach to inclusion of relevant and appropriate materials throughout the curriculum as a whole.
- 3.3 We note the current purpose of the curriculum, as outlined in the Minimum Content Order 2007¹², is a “balanced and broadly based curriculum which (a) promotes the spiritual, emotional moral, cultural, intellectual and physical development of pupils at the school and thereby of society; and (b) prepares such pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life by equipping them with appropriate knowledge, understanding and skills”.
- 3.4 We further note that schools must provide learning opportunities in relation to: (a) Religious Education – in accordance with the core syllabus drafted by the four main Christian Churches in Northern Ireland and specified by the Department of Education. And (b) the following Areas of Learning: (Language and Literacy, Mathematics and Numeracy, Modern Languages, The Arts, Environment and

¹² For further details, see: [Minimum Content Order 2007](#)

Society, Science and Technology, Learning for Life and Work, and physical Education).

- 3.5 While we welcome the broad purpose of the curriculum outlined in the Minimum Content Order, we re-emphasise the need for explicit acknowledgement of the role of the curriculum in promoting equality and good relations.
- 3.6 We note the inclusion of outcomes within Key Stage 4, Learning for Life and Work, that include, but are not limited to, that the curriculum should enable students to “respond to the specific challenges and opportunities which diversity and inclusion present in Northern Ireland and the wider world”, and “develop their understanding of relationships and sexuality and the responsibilities of healthy relationships”¹³.

4 Content of the Curriculum: Equality mainstreaming and diversity

Overview

- 4.1 We have impressed upon the Department 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.
- 4.2 We highlight that mainstreaming equality and good relations in education goes beyond teaching of or within a single subject, or participating in a shared education project. It involves making equality and good relations central to the culture and ethos of a school and the education system as a whole, including that equality considerations are reflected throughout the curriculum and not limited to certain specific modules or classes.
- 4.3 The Department should seek to ensure that children from across the equality grounds see themselves substantively reflected in the school curriculum and classroom activities, for example – the culture and language of ethnic minority children.

¹³ For further details, see Part 6 of the [Minimum Content Order 2007](#)

- 4.4 The Commission has recommended specific action to institute coordinated, comprehensive and coherent measures to counter gender-based stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes from an early age and across all areas of life, including in all stages of education.
- 4.5 The Department and other stakeholders should ensure that the curriculum, support materials and related opportunities form part of actions to comprehensively address prejudice-based bullying and stereotyping, across all the equality groups. The Commission has also consistently highlighted¹⁴ the importance of assessing the effectiveness of existing mechanisms to address prejudice-based bullying, for example, the Addressing Bullying in Schools (Northern Ireland) Act 2016.

Recommendations and Supporting Evidence across the Equality Groups

- 4.6 The following recommendations should not be read as a comprehensive overview of different actions required to ensure the curriculum embeds equality and good relations but rather highlights specific recommendations required across different areas.
- 4.7 We reiterate that we encourage the Department to engage broadly on this issue, including with stakeholders representing different equality groups. We consistently highlight the expertise and experience of stakeholders from across the equality groups, and that they should be fully involved in the design, delivery and review of public policy and service delivery.

Race

- 4.8 The Department should seek to ensure that children from across the equality grounds see themselves substantively reflected in the school curriculum and classroom activities, for example – the culture and language of ethnic minority children.

¹⁴ For further details, see: ECNI (2022) [Tackling Bullying and Challenging Stereotypes](#)

- 4.9 The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) Sixth Report on the United Kingdom (2024)¹⁵ highlighted that “The history curriculum in Northern Ireland contains a range of statutory minimum content and can cover Black history. It is nevertheless up to individual teachers to decide whether, for instance, the Muslim awareness month and Black history month are used for teaching. Similarly, “Gypsy”, Roma and Traveller history or de-colonisation are not taught in all schools. In the view of ECRI, this should be mandatory for all learners, and teachers should receive more detailed guidance and a minimum standard on this matter”.
- 4.10 Research from Queen’s University Belfast¹⁶ suggests that while children and parents of minority ethnic children largely have positive views on learning about diversity within schools, and appreciated the student-centred teaching approaches in NI schools, some parents also suggested that the curriculum needs to be diversified and that there is a need for increased representation of minority cultures, languages and histories.
- 4.11 We further note recent evidence to the Education committee from Queen’s University Belfast (11 Dec, 2024) highlighting findings from their [report](#) that there was:
- “Some parents and children also wished for greater recognition of diversity within the curriculum – for example, through acknowledging diverse histories, including the histories of minority ethnic communities in Ireland and Britain, and teaching literature by authors of colour. This is particularly relevant in the context of the upcoming curriculum review. Stakeholders expressed concern about the lack of representation of faiths other than Christianity in the curriculum, particularly at primary level, and there are issues in practice around the option to withdraw from RE.”*
- 4.12 Minority ethnic students, including Irish Traveller children, experience lower levels of belonging and higher levels of exclusion than their white, settled Northern Irish peers.

¹⁵ The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) Sixth Report on the United Kingdom (2024) <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance/united-kingdom>

¹⁶ For further details, see [Loader \(2023\) Experiences of education among minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland](#)

Research¹⁷ from Queen’s University Belfast found that the most negative experiences of education were encountered by Irish Traveller children, and questioned the relevance of the curriculum to the needs of Traveller children, recommending greater flexibility within learning structures to adapt to pupil’s priorities, particularly by increasing access to vocational education.

Disability

- 4.13 Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) leave school with poorer educational outcomes, have poorer attendance, and experience more bullying than other school children. Experience of SEN also differs by equality group and socio-economic status¹⁸.
- 4.14 Schools and education bodies should promote positive attitudes towards young people with disabilities through taking an inclusive approach, challenging negative stereotypes, and promoting a greater understanding of equality issues within the classroom. Opportunities within the curriculum should be explored to achieve this.
- 4.15 Research conducted by the Anti-Bullying Alliance (UK) suggests that 36% of pupils with SEND experience frequent bullying compared to 25% of those without SEND¹⁹. Several other academic studies have highlighted high levels of bullying experienced by children with autism, speech and language challenges, and Asperger Syndrome.
- 4.16 There should be a proactive approach to addressing ableism²⁰ within schools, including within the curriculum. There is further a need to tackle prejudice-based bullying, including bullying

¹⁷ Biggart, A., O’Hare, L. & Connolly, P. (04 Feb 2013) In A need to belong?: The prevalence of experiences of belonging and exclusion in school among minority ethnic children living in the ‘White hinterlands’: Irish Educational Studies. 32, 2

¹⁸ For further details, see: <https://www.equalityni.org/SEN>

¹⁹ For further details, see: [Anti-Bullying Alliance SEN & Disability](#) and [Anti-Bullying Alliance \(2021\) All Together Report: Reducing Bullying in School](#)

²⁰ Defined by UNICEF as “a value system that discriminates against people with disabilities based on the idea that certain ways of appearance, functioning and behaviour are essential for living a life of value.” See:

https://www.unicef.org/media/120421/file/Social_and_Behavioural_Change_Interventions_to_Strengthen_Disability_Inclusive_Programming_Summary.pdf

motivated against disability, and challenging stereotypes, including for children with SEN across the equality groups.

Gender

- 4.17 The Commission has recommended specific action to institute coordinated, comprehensive and coherent measures to counter gender-based stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes from an early age and across all areas of life, including in all stages of education and within the curriculum. It is essential to challenge gender stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes from an early age, as gender-based stereotyping can begin in childhood and continue throughout life stages.
- 4.18 These measures should include challenging stereotypes in relation to women's and men's gender roles at school, work and in the family, communities and wider society; through career advice²¹ and choices and the curriculum.
- 4.19 The Commission has previously outlined its view²² that the absence of gender mainstreaming in education and vocational training, including in the curriculum, is a foundation for inequality. Failing to mainstream equality ensures that gender stereotyping remains in schools and other places of education and vocational training, including further and higher education. While girls' educational attainment has improved and they out-perform boys, stereotyping, the curriculum, subject choice and careers advice²³ still inhibit girls in fulfilling their potential^{24, 25}.
- 4.20 The Commission has consistently highlighted that everyone should have equality of opportunity to pursue a career path of

²¹ Including through career advice/guidance delivered by schools, institutions of further and higher education and other educational bodies, as well as by career advice services.

²² ECNI (2016) [Gender Equality: Policy Priorities and Recommendations](#), para 6.2.

²³ Careers advice includes that given in further and higher education and in later life, as well as that in schools. The DEL [Strategy on Careers Education and Guidance](#) (2016) recognises the important role of career advice and guidance "*in supporting school careers teachers and STEM subject teachers in the promotion of STEM careers and addressing gender imbalance by ensuring that all young people in schools, in particular females, are fully aware of the opportunities available and the potential for career progression*". See page 42 thereof.

²⁴ The need for career guidance activities to encourage girls to pursue non-traditional paths and improve the gender awareness of teaching personnel was also raised by the CEDAW Committee. See CEDAW Committee (2013), [Concluding Observations on UK, CEDAW Committee](#).

²⁵ See, for example, Burns, S., Leitch, R. and Hughes, J. (2015) [Education Inequalities in Northern Ireland](#) which notes that the literature indicated that gender stereotyping of subject choice at A Level may be a contributory factor in gender imbalance in terms of females being less likely than males to study STEM subjects.

their choice and to access the support they require to achieve their full potential. We have highlighted longstanding gender inequalities regarding enrolment in STEM subjects.

- 4.21 The Commission's Measuring Equality in Northern Ireland Project (MENI) has highlighted²⁶ that among Northern Ireland domiciled students enrolled in UK institutions of higher education in 2020/21, the percentage of male students (52%) to enrol onto Broad STEM subjects was eleven percentage points higher than the percentage of female students to do so (41%). Conversely, the percentage of male students (38%) to enrol onto Narrow STEM subjects was more than three times higher than for female students (11%). This trend remained similar in the following year in 2021/22.
- 4.22 The Commission has also recommended²⁷ action to increase women's participation in sport in Northern Ireland at all levels, including in schools.
- 4.23 There is a need to tackle gender-based bullying, including transphobic bullying and bullying of a sexual nature across all areas of education, and to support schools to address the barriers experienced by trans pupils. This should include²⁸ actions to further the broader societal aim of preventing gender-based violence; to tackle the nature and specific impact of gender-based violence on women and men and due to a person's gender identity; to tackle cultural and stereotypical attitudes, including through education, aimed at raising awareness of, and tackling, gender-based violence; and to ensure effective resources and services for those who are subject to gender-based violence.
- 4.24 Under Northern Ireland Executive Formation Act 2019, the NI Secretary of State is under a duty to implement the Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women's 2018 Inquiry Report recommendation to: *'Adopt a strategy to combat gender-based stereotypes regarding women's primary role as mothers'*.

²⁶ For further details, see <https://www.equalityni.org/Delivering-Equality/Addressing-inequality/Education/Research-investigations>

²⁷ ECNI (2016) [Gender Equality: Policy Priorities and Recommendations](#), para 12.7.

²⁸ ECNI (2016) [Gender Equality: Policy Priorities and Recommendations](#), para 10.17

- 4.25 The 2013 Grasping the Nettle report²⁹ sets out how prejudice, discrimination and bullying contribute to withdrawal and non-participation and, in turn, under achievement and poorer life chances for young trans people, also highlighting that *“the exclusion of trans issues from the school curriculum reduces trans equality and inhibits good relations from developing”*. The report acknowledged that while DE was undertaking work to address this problem, *“much more needs to be done to increase awareness, understanding and knowledge of trans issues in educational settings”*. Research published by DE in 2016³⁰ on the experiences of LGBT students in post-primary schools found that 63.1% of LGBT respondents believed that transgender issues were handled ‘badly’ or ‘very badly’.
- 4.26 As noted above, in 2023 ETI reported³¹ that *“Too many schools/centres avoid completely, or cover with insufficient depth and progression, many of the more sensitive aspects of the RSE aspect of the preventative curriculum. These include teaching on gender and sexual identity; LGBTQ+ ...”* and that *“There are inconsistencies in the frequency and rigour with which the preventative curriculum is reviewed and updated by schools/centres”*.

Sexual Orientation

- 4.27 Schools and education bodies can also significantly help promote positive attitudes towards Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) pupils through challenging negative stereotypes of LGB people, and promoting a greater understanding of LGB equality issues within the classroom.
- 4.28 The Commission has previously recommended³² that the Department and other key stakeholders, in line with the aims and objectives of the Department’s CRED policy³³, takes steps to ensure that curriculum support materials and good practice

²⁹ TEO / ICR (2013) [Grasping the nettle: the experiences of gender variant children and transgender youth living in Northern Ireland](#)

³⁰ DE (2016) [POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF 16-21 YEAR OLD PEOPLE WHO ARE LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND/OR TRANSGENDER \(LGBT\)](#) - by Public and Corporate Economic Consultants (PACEC)

³¹ ETI (2023) [The Preventative Curriculum in Schools and Education Other Than at School \(EOTAS\) Centres](#)

³² ECNI (2013) [Promoting Sexual Orientation Equality: Priorities and Recommendations](#), para 6.39.

³³ For further details, see: [Promoting community relations | Department of Education](#)

guidance effectively embeds equality of opportunity for LGB pupils.

- 4.29 Research published by DE in 2016³⁴ on the experiences of LGBT students in post primary schools found that 54.5% of respondents stated that issues about sexual orientation or gender identity had not come up in any of their classes. Furthermore, 71.4% of respondents who stated that issues about sexual orientation or gender identity had been mentioned stated it had been mentioned in Religious Education. Other classes where LGBT issues were mentioned included Learning for Life and Work (40.2%) Sexual Health Education (24.1%) and English Literature (17.8%).
- 4.30 A 2011 Cara-Friend/Rainbow Project report³⁵ conveyed that there were ample opportunities within the statutory curriculum to challenge negative stereotypes and present the diversity of sexual orientation to children and young people, but that the experience of LGB young people is that these opportunities are not taken up by teachers in schools.

Relationships and Sexuality Education

- 4.31 Previously highlighted considerations for the curriculum across the equality groups are also relevant specifically for relationships and sexuality education (RSE).
- 4.32 The Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) highlighted in 2018, through its inquiry procedure, that the provision of age-appropriate, culturally sensitive, comprehensive and scientifically accurate sexuality education and information is critical to the realisation of women's right to health. It found that the UK State's 'lack of oversight of delivery by schools of the curriculum on relationship and sexuality education, to ensure that it is evidence-based and includes contraceptive use, safe abortion and post-abortion care', violated the Convention³⁶.

³⁴ DE (2016) [POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF 16-21 YEAR OLD PEOPLE WHO ARE LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND/OR TRANSGENDER \(LGBT\)](#) - by Public and Corporate Economic Consultants (PACEC)

³⁵ For further details, see: Cara Friend and Rainbow Project (2011) Left out of the equation. A report on the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people at school

³⁶ CEDAW (2018) [Inquiry concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under article 8 of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW](#), CEDAW/C/OP.8?GBR/1, para 75-6.

- 4.33 ETI’s report on the Preventative curriculum found that “Too many schools/centres avoid completely, or cover with insufficient depth and progression, many of the more sensitive aspects of the RSE aspect of the preventative curriculum. These include teaching on: gender and sexual identity; LGBTQ+; sexual abuse; child sexual exploitation (CSE); domestic abuse/violence; and menstrual wellbeing”.
- 4.34 We note recommendations from the Gillen Review³⁷ 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.”*
- 4.35 Recognising the value of RSE in terms of both education and in addressing wider societal issues and inequalities, the Commission reiterates the importance of access to age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education. Any scope for a parent / carer to withdraw their child from lessons on sexual and reproductive health and rights, including those covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion should ensure the best interests of the child.
- 4.36 The Commission has also recommended³⁸ that steps are taken to ensure that schools are supported to deal with issues in a sensitive, non-discriminatory way, including when delivering RSE to pupils.

³⁷ For further details, see [Gillen Review Recommendations | Department of Justice](#)

³⁸ ECNI (2013) [Promoting Sexual Orientation Equality: Priorities and Recommendations](#)

5 Delivery of the Curriculum

Teacher Training and Continuous Professional Development

- 5.1 We reinforce the importance of supporting teachers via teacher training³⁹ and continuous professional development to the benefit of teachers and pupils.
- 5.2 In light of the diversity of life experiences and educational needs within the Northern Ireland population, we consider it essential that all teachers are equipped to ensure students' particular requirements are understood and met. Initial teacher education (ITE) and continuing professional development (CPD) are key methods of achieving this.
- 5.3 It is our understanding is that continuous professional development for teachers is largely voluntary (teachers are not required to participate beyond core school training days), meaning there is no requirement for teachers to undertake updated training on new methods or approaches to education, or on complex issues that have changed over time, for example the impact of growing up online.
- 5.4 In relation to effectively understanding and responding to challenges growing up online, research from Stranmillis University called for "investment in evidence-informed, up-to-date and practical professional development within Initial Teacher Education as well as CPD/in-service training for all education staff"⁴⁰.
- 5.5 In seeking to ensure the effective delivery of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, the Department may consider and explore different 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.
- 5.6 We note observations of The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2023) Concluding observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of the United Kingdom of

³⁹ For further details, see: ECNI: [Equality in Education: Full Position Paper](#)

⁴⁰ For further information, see [Growing Up Online | Children's online activities, harm and safety in Northern Ireland - an Evidence Report](#)

Great Britain and Northern Ireland⁴¹, that includes a focus on teacher training: *“Integrate comprehensive, age-appropriate and evidence-based education on sexual and reproductive health into ... teacher training and ensure that it includes education on sexual diversity, sexual and reproductive health rights, responsible sexual behaviour and violence prevention”*.

- 5.1 We further note recent evidence to the Education committee from Queen’s University Belfast (11 Dec, 2024), regarding capacity of schools to support the learning of Newcomer children, and the lack of specific training for teachers and classroom assistants to support language teaching:

“An ‘emergency response’ approach dominates the provision of English language support for newcomer pupils, which is characterised by withdrawal of children from mainstream classes. Classroom assistants often become the principal English language teachers for newcomer pupils. Parents were positive about the role of classroom assistants and keen that their children should receive support from them, although they were also aware of the precarity of such provision in relation to funding and availability. Stakeholders, however, observed an absence of training in English language teaching among those with responsibility for supporting newcomer pupils’ English language learning”.

Accessibility of the Curriculum

- 5.2 Children with complex needs, such as children with disability, require appropriate and timely support to access and participate in the full range of educational opportunities available to children without a disability.
- 5.3 It is important to ensure all children from across the equality groups are able to fully access the curriculum. This includes making reasonable adjustments⁴² within the context of the

⁴¹ See The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2023) [Concluding observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#)

⁴² For further details, see [ECNI \(2005\) SENDO Guidance](#), pg. 61 – “The responsible body for a school shall take such steps as it is reasonable for it to have to take to ensure that – (a) in relation to the arrangements it makes for determining the admission of pupils to the school, disabled persons are not placed at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with persons who are not disabled; and (b) in relation to

design and delivery of the curriculum. Reasonable adjustments are the reasonable steps that a responsible body should take in order to avoid putting disabled pupils and prospective disabled pupils at a substantial disadvantage compared to other pupils.

- 5.4 The duty to make reasonable adjustments is an anticipatory duty, and it is a proactive as well as reactive duty. Schools cannot, in general, wait until a disabled pupil arrives at the school, or a pupil acquires a disability, or a pupil's disability worsens before making reasonable adjustments.
- 5.5 In terms of the delivery of the curriculum, schools should ensure that teaching, including information on sexual and reproductive health, is accessible to, and inclusive of, pupils across the equality groups. For example, information should be in formats accessible to disabled pupils, and information should be accessible to pupils from different minority ethnic backgrounds, who may experience language barriers.

School leadership and creating an inclusive culture

- 5.6 School Leadership should promote positive attitudes, challenge stereotypes and discrimination and ensure that options to advance equality are considered at the earliest point across all elements of educational delivery.
- 5.7 Regarding delivery of content to address prejudice-based bullying and stereotyping, and to achieve an anti-bullying culture, it is important that schools recognise the range of factors to be considered as part of a whole school approach. These include creating an inclusive culture and environment; ensuring the participation of learners and their parents / carers; staff training; relationship and sexuality education (RSE) and using curriculum opportunities to cover controversial topics.
- 5.8 We also note recommendations from ECRI⁴³ on the diversity of education workforce: "ECRI recommends that the relevant authorities across the UK, in consultation with the relevant stakeholders, conduct research and develop strategies to

education and associated services provided for, or offered to, pupils at the school by it, disabled pupils are not placed at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with pupils who are not disabled".

⁴³ For further details, see ECRI (2024) Country monitoring in the United Kingdom. Sixth report on the United Kingdom (adopted on 3 juillet 2024 / published on 25 October 2024)

improve teacher diversity and strengthen the recruitment, career development and retention of Black teachers and teachers of African descent and other ethnic minority backgrounds.”

- 5.9 The Commission also reiterates that there should be greater sharing and collaboration between teacher training colleges. We remain concerned about the impact that the separate provision of teacher training has on job opportunities, professional development and the promotion of good relations; and consider that closer collaboration between all initial teacher training providers in Northern Ireland would have a range of benefits, including to good relations.

6 The effectiveness of the curriculum and monitoring of the curriculum

- 6.1 As per the purpose of the curriculum, the impact and effectiveness of the curriculum should be assessed on a range of factors beyond academic attainment.
- 6.2 The effectiveness of the curriculum in changing attitudes should be assessed as part of overall monitoring of the curriculum. **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, should all be considered and assessed on a regular basis.**
- 6.3 We recommend that the effectiveness of the curriculum, and changes made to the curriculum, are not only tracked in aggregate, but also for the impact on individuals from across the full range of equality grounds. Including comprehensive equality metrics will facilitate the targeting and delivery of interventions across the full range of equality groups.
- 6.4 Recommendations stemming from the Review of the Curriculum should be considered by the Department with an associated action plan produced, clear targets, and regular and transparent reporting mechanisms.

7 The importance of a collaborative and shared approach

- 7.1 We encourage the Department to engage broadly on this issue, including with stakeholders representing different equality groups. We consistently highlight the expertise and experience of stakeholders from across the equality grounds, and that they should be fully involved in the design, delivery and review of public policy and service delivery.
- 7.2 The curriculum should enable collaborative approaches to drive attainment and to identify and respond to barriers to education. This means involving young people, parents, families, carers and the wider communities of key equality groups in both the design and delivery of the curriculum.
- 7.3 This should reflect learning that poorer educational outcomes are often correlated with lower family engagement; the importance and expertise of communities and community & voluntary organisations; and also learning from the COVID-19 pandemic that despite their best efforts many parents lacked confidence, skills, space, and technology to best support children's learning.
- 7.4 The Commission has also consistently advocated to move towards a system of education which routinely teaches all pupils together via a shared curriculum in shared classes, in support of better advancing a shared society⁴⁴.
- 7.5 We consider that sharing across the education system could better provide learners with shared awareness, understanding and experience of the value and range of diverse cultures, identities and backgrounds in Northern Ireland; while also enabling learners from different cultures/communities to experience a shared society.

⁴⁴ For further details on the Commission's range of recommendations related to sharing in education, please see: <https://www.equalityni.org/sharededucation>

8 Cross Cutting Recommendations

8.1 There is need for action to address a number of recommendations across Government strategies, programmes and plans.

- Targeting Interventions, Tracking Impacts: We recommend that all key measures are not only tracked in aggregate, but also for the impact on individuals from across the full range of equality grounds. Including comprehensive equality metrics will facilitate the targeting and delivery of interventions across the full range of equality groups.
- Equality Data: Improving the collection and sharing of comprehensive equality data will better underpin the targeting and tracking of equality impacts. Key datasets should contain comprehensive equality data to facilitate full equality analysis. Making such information more accessible will assist a wide range of decision makers and stakeholders.
- Leadership: Leadership should promote positive attitudes, challenge stereotypes and discrimination and ensure that options to advance equality are considered at the earliest point and across the lifecycle of law, public policy and service delivery.
- Stakeholder Involvement: We recommend full and routine stakeholder involvement and co-design. To benefit from their expertise and experience, key stakeholders from across the equality grounds should be fully involved in the design, delivery and review of law, public policy and service delivery.
- Implementation Friendly Design: When drafting policy and legislation, it is important to consider and provide for implementation – including via prioritised, measurable, time-bound and resourced actions.
- Resources: Appropriate and sufficient resourcing is a key element of successful implementation. The Equality Commission and/or stakeholder organisations should be appropriately resourced to support individuals, organisations, and/or Government / Departments as relevant.

9 Further information

- 9.1 For further information on the Commission's overarching recommendations for education please see our [Education policy priorities and recommendations](#).
- 9.2 Our Public Policy team can also be contacted via: publicpolicy@equalityni.org