

Education, Children and Young People Committee
Wednesday 11 March 2026
10th Meeting, 2026 (Session 6)

School Reform: Curriculum and Assessment

Introduction

1. At its meeting on 21 January 2026, the Committee agreed to take evidence to further its understanding of progress being made on the Curriculum Improvement Cycle and on reform to senior phase qualifications.

Committee meeting

2. At its meeting today, the Committee will take evidence from two panels.
3. The first will focus on the Curriculum Improvement Cycle. The Committee will hear from—
 - David Macluskey, Strategic Lead and Chief Education Officer at Perth and Kinross Council, representing Association of Directors of Education (ADES)
 - Dr Keir Bloomer, Chair, Commission on School Reform
 - Andy Harvey, National Officer - Education, EIS
 - Ollie Bray, Strategic Director, Education Scotland
4. The second panel will focus on the progress on reform to senior phase qualifications, the Committee will take evidence from—
 - Donna Stewart, Chief Examiner, Qualifications Scotland
 - Sarah Brown, Senior Advisor, Qualifications Scotland
 - Kirsty Ayed, President, School Leaders Scotland (SLS)
 - Professor Louise Hayward, Professor of Educational Assessment and Innovation, University of Glasgow.

Supporting information

5. A SPICe briefing has been prepared for this meeting. This is included at **Annexe A**.
6. A submission has been received from EIS. This is included at **Annexe B**.

Clerks to the Committee
March 2026

Annexe A

SPICe The Information Centre
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

Education, Children and Young People Committee
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School Reform – Curriculum and Assessment

The Committee will take evidence from two panels exploring the work on developing the curriculum in Scotland and the assessment approaches in the Senior Phase.

The Committee has taken an interest in these topics through several pieces of work this session. This has [included sessions on the wider reform process](#), [the future of qualifications in the senior phase](#) and consideration of the [Education \(Scotland\) Bill \(now Act\)](#).

Reform in School Education this session

The session began with the publication of the OECD's report on implementation of Curriculum for Excellence – this was published on 21 June 2021. Much of the reform work that has followed has flowed from the recommendations and conclusions of that report. Some of the key publications in this policy area this session are:

- [OECD, Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence, Into the Future](#) (2021)
- [OECD, Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland, A comparative perspective](#) (2021)
- [Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education](#) ("The Muir Report") (2022)
- [All Learners in Scotland Matter - national discussion on education](#) (2023)
- [It's Our Future - Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment](#) (2023)
- [Education \(Scotland\) Bill](#), introduced in 2024.

This list is not exhaustive. There has also been reform and policy-development in other areas, such as the Scottish Attainment Challenge and in Additional Support for Learning.

The Muir Report was mainly focused on the structures of the national education bodies and led to the development of the Education (Scotland) Bill. That Bill was passed on 25 June 2025 and became an Act on 6 August 2025. Provisions to establish Qualifications Scotland were commenced on 1 December 2025. The provisions establishing the office of the Chief Inspector of Education in the 2025 Act have not been commenced, although in practice, the inspectorate has been operating more independently from the remainder of Education Scotland for some

time. The focus of this paper will be on policy, curriculum and practice development, rather than structural changes of the national agencies. The [International Council of Education Advisers suggested at its meeting in October 2025](#) that “the emphasis of any future reforms should be on improving what the Scottish system already has, rather than further restructuring”.

OECD review

Much, if not all, of the school education reform followed on from the observation and recommendations of the 2021 OECD review of CfE, [Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence, Into the Future](#). The Scottish Government’s [remit of the OECD’s review](#) was to look at the implementation of CfE, but explicitly excluded the “principles and aspirations of CfE”.

The conclusions and recommendations of the OECD’s report covered issues to do with structure, culture, policy, assessment and curriculum. The OECD’s report said that Curriculum for Excellence “offers an inspiring and widely supported philosophy of education” and “allows for effective curricular practices and for the possibility of a truly fulfilling education for learners.” Some of the observations in relation to the curriculum were:

- CfE has entered the “hearts and minds of many people in many roles across the education spectrum.”
- Reported issues to do with “the relevance, practicality and effectiveness of the tools aiming to operationalise CfE’s vision, such as the attributes and capabilities, and the Experiences and Outcomes”.
- “There is no clear model of how knowledge, skills and attitudes, capabilities and attributes contribute to learning.” (p46) In particular the place of knowledge in the curriculum was unclear in Broad General Education which could lead to challenges during the transition to Senior Phase. Conversely, Senior Phase was seen as overly dominated by subject knowledge.
- there is a lack of consolidated evidence of CfE practices in schools, hampering a more precise and evidence-informed diagnosis of the curriculum in action and its outcomes.
(pp46-48)

The 2021 review’s recommendations were included in the final chapter of the report. It highlighted a lack of strategic direction at the time. it said:

“It would be valuable if Scotland developed a clear concept of where CfE needs to go and what actions need to be taken, so education in Scotland continues helping all young people learn, develop their resilience and thrive in the 21st century. It is unclear whether the CAB¹ or any other system leader has a clear long-term strategy in relation to CfE or is reviewing its evolution in light of current developments and research in education more broadly. Having a longer-term strategy for CfE, for its revision if needed, with defined responsibilities and institutions that are stable and prepared for shaping the

¹ CAB: the [Curriculum and Assessment Board](#) – a national stakeholder/Government advisory committee.

next steps would be an asset to CfE and the Scottish Government. Such a strategic and institutional development would also support policy alignment for schools and a coherent vision of student learning from ages 3 to 18 years. For the next steps, it will be important to develop a shared understanding of CfE's contributions to effective student learning and well-being and to set up a policy-making and implementation process for CfE that is stable and has stakeholder support." (p114-115)

The OECD report commended the approach to CfE as a "bold, future-oriented approach" which is widely shared by stakeholders. It continued, saying that CfE "will remain relevant for Scotland and beyond if the leaders and stakeholders responsible for CfE look ahead to the next decades, informed by the insights from implementation from the last two decades."

The OECD recommended that Scotland should "re-assess CfE's aspirational vision against emerging trends in education". It particularly highlighted a need to clarify "the role of knowledge in a 21st century curriculum". It said—

"Clarifications are also needed around the concept of knowledge itself, recognising that knowledge goes beyond disciplines and subjects; as well as around the way knowledge integrates with skills and attitudes ...; and with the Scottish capabilities and attributes. Clarifying the role of knowledge in the vision of CfE is the first step to strengthen the coherence of CfE. This will also help re-align learning through BGE and the Senior Phase and support better progression and transition for learners. It will help correct imbalances between breadth and depth of learning." (p118)

The OECD said that there should be a better understanding of how pupils progress across the four capacities in CfE – pupils as: learners, individuals, citizens, and contributors.

A key recommendation of the OECD was to "develop a systematic approach to curriculum review". It explained:

"Data collected through ongoing monitoring, together with independent research and intelligence from the HMIE's inspection of education, can inform cycles that address particular aspects of CfE within a planned and specified timeframe. Such a planned and systemic approach to review might serve Scotland well, given the level of public interest in education. An agreed systematic approach would also reduce reliance on external independent reviews when controversies arise and build internal capacity for curriculum monitoring. A review cycle might also reduce the need for ongoing guidance and clarifications and give the system greater stability overall. The energy of leaders could be redirected to focus on the implementation of CfE in their schools rather than responding to the most recent update or clarification. A review cycle would support CfE in coherence [in relation to] granting curriculum leadership and development responsibilities to a stand-alone agency." (p129)

The development of the Curriculum Improvement Cycle is a direct response to this recommendation.

Vision, Purpose and the National Discussion

The OECD said that as part of an implementation strategy, a national vision or purpose can help guide policy makers and practitioners to make decisions at appropriate levels of subsidiarity. (p61)

A coherent approach to curriculum and assessment would likely reflect the national priorities and purpose of education.

National Discussion on Education

The OECD recommended that Scotland re-assess its vision for education and this was echoed in the Muir Report which recommended that the Scottish Government “initiate a national discussion on establishing a compelling and consensual vision for the future of Scottish education.” In September 2022, the Scottish Government commissioned two members of the Scottish Government’s International Council of Education Advisers to facilitate A National Discussion on Education and their report , [All Learners in Scotland Matter](#), was published in May 2023.

The report of the national discussion noted that over 38,000 people took part in the process, the majority of whom were pupils. The national discussion produced a “Vision Statement for the Future of Scottish Education”. This was:

All Learners in Scotland Matter

Children and young people are at the heart of education in Scotland. The Scottish education system values collaborative partnerships that engage all learners, the people who work within and with the education system, parents, and carers to ensure that all learners in Scotland matter.

All learners are supported in inclusive learning environments which are safe, welcoming, caring, and proactively address any barriers to learning and inequities that exist or arise. Education in Scotland nurtures the unique talents of all learners ensuring their achievement, progress, and well-being.

Each child and young person in Scotland has high-quality learning experiences which respect their rights and represents the diversity of who they are and the communities they live in.

Each child and young person experiences great teaching, resources, and support for joyful learning that builds their confidence and equips them to be successful and to contribute in their life, work, and world, so they know how much they matter.

The national discussion also produced Guiding Values which were framed as developing the aims of “excellence and equity” within the Scottish system. These values were:

- **Ambitious** –high expectations for all learners and enabling each child and young person to develop and achieve their ambitions.
- **Inclusive** – to value, respect, recognise, and represent the diversity of all children and young people, and provide equitable educational experiences and opportunities for all learners.

- **Supportive** – engage each child, young person, and adult meaningfully and appropriately in an education process that provides the necessary supports for all learners to progress, achieve, and realise their personal ambitions.

The National Discussion also made observations and recommendations about the curriculum and assessment. In relation to the curriculum, it found:

- CfE as it is experienced is “unnecessarily variable” and “cluttered”.
- Support for the four capacities
- the technical framework should be revisited

In relation to assessment, it found that there was support for a broader set of assessment and qualification options, which can reflect the achievements of all learners and utilise a mix of assessment approaches.

National Improvement Framework

The Scottish Government sets out its priorities for education annually in the National Improvement Framework (NIF). This is accompanied by an annual National Improvement Plan. The NIF sets out the Government’s vision for education in Scotland, along with “key priorities” and “outcomes we expect to achieve”.

The vision in the NIF remains formulated around “excellence and equity”. It is:

- Excellence through raising achievement and improving outcomes: ensuring that every child and young person achieves the highest standards they can.
- Achieving equity: ensuring every child and young person has the same opportunity to succeed.

The key priorities in the NIF are:

- Placing the human rights and needs of every child and young person at the centre of education;
- Improvement in children and young people’s health and wellbeing;
- Closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people;
- Improvement in skills and sustained, positive school-leaver destinations for all young people; and
- Improvement in achievement, particularly in literacy and numeracy.

While covering similar ground to the vision and values set out in the National Discussion, the NIF does not replicate the vision that was set out there.

The NIF also sets out seven outcomes. Outcome 3 is relevant to the present topics of curriculum and assessment:

“Inclusive and relevant curriculum and assessment which gives young people the knowledge and skills necessary to contribute to society, shape a sustainable future, while celebrating and supporting progression for all.”

CfE: capacities and contexts for learning

Within curriculum for excellence, the four capacities provide a concise and overarching aim of school education. These are “to enable all young people to become”:

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

These capacities are focused on developing young people as individuals and this is much broader than subject knowledge and skills.

CfE also sets out four contexts for learning, which again highlight the intention that school education is intended to be holistic. These are:

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

A social dimension

Documents produced by educationalists in Scotland tend to focus on the purposes of education through the lens of the individual learner. Purposes and outcomes of education can also include benefits to society, rather than solely to the individual.

For example, the Scottish Government’s [Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation](#) describes the benefits of a skilled workforce both in terms of the benefits to individual workers and for “business productivity and economic prosperity”.

Another example in relation to culture can be found in language policy and approaches to education as means to revitalise Gaelic. [Bòrd na Gàidhlig says](#):

“Gaelic education and learning are at the heart of Bòrd na Gàidhlig’s aims and aspirations. From Gaelic playgroups to post-graduate studies, this wide-ranging sector is the foundation of our efforts to preserve and revitalise the Gaelic language.”

The purposes and functions of school education is a complex area, covering different domains at both the individual and societal levels. It can also be a contested area.

Curriculum Improvement Cycle

The 2021 OECD review found that in Scotland “the policy environment is crowded with multiple initiatives” but nevertheless “gaps and misalignments remain – such as that in assessment, for example – and where new policies are introduced (or old ones revisited), alignment and coherence is an issue”. It also stated that a “gap in the policy environment is an established systematic review cycle for CfE supported by robust data and evidence” and recommended that Scotland should consider adopting this approach.

The Government accepted this recommendation and Education Scotland is leading the development of new Curriculum Improvement Cycle.

Language

The OECD 2021 review observed that “Scotland successfully developed an education language to support the philosophy of CfE that made its way into daily discussions of education policy makers, teachers and learners alike ... However, the constant production and recycling of documentation was often described as ‘overwhelming’ by practitioners, and the terminology used was deemed too technical and lent itself to too much interpretation.”(p116) It recommended that there should be a “coherent communication strategy to support developments of CfE” and that this should include “sharper messages and more accessible language”.(p124)

[Education Scotland published Language Matters in May 2025](#). This is a short glossary of “working definitions” which is intended to “support clarity around language through the process” of the CIC. Some of the key definitions are replicated below:

- **Big idea/s:**
A Big Idea captures the core understanding children and young people will develop in a particular area of the curriculum from early years onwards. It will set out overarching ideas and concepts and have relevance and meaning for learners. It will support progression and guide the selection of content.
- **Curriculum:**
Curriculum in Scotland is defined as the totality of all that is planned and enacted for children and young people from early learning and childcare, through school and beyond. That totality is shaped by the purpose (the ‘why’) set out in the four capacities and a set of entitlements and can be planned for and experienced by learners across four contexts (the ‘what’): opportunities for personal achievement; the ethos and life of the school/setting as a community (and with its community); curriculum areas and subjects and interdisciplinary learning.
- **Curriculum making:**
Curriculum making – the development of practices, processes and policies – happens across different parts of the education system. Place based curriculum making which happens, for example, in early learning and

community learning settings and schools involves work such as curriculum design and the development of pedagogical practices.

- **Inclusion:**
Inclusion means taking positive action and intervening in order to enable achievement for all by building and fulfilling the potential of every child, young person and adult.
- **Knowledge:**
Knowledge refers to things that an individual can know. In curriculum it includes substantive knowledge (knowing that) and procedural knowledge (knowing how). Substantive knowledge refers to the understanding of concepts that explain the world (eg. democracy) and also to individual facts. Procedural knowledge is the knowledge of how to do something (eg. balance an equation).

Process and timeline

The [CIC is planned to be an ongoing cycle with four stages](#):

1. **Analysis** – ongoing reviewing of feedback from practice on how the curriculum is working including using evidence from international studies (PIRLS, TIMSS, PISA) and research on specific issues.
2. **Engagement and co-creation** – planning, engagement, collaboration and processing of feedback to test draft workstreams. Importantly in the Scottish model in this stage the implementation strategy is also co-designed.
3. **Share, Learn and Adopt** – local capacity building and professional development; development of support material; monitoring of experiences of teachers and students.
4. **Mobilise, monitor and evaluate** – mobilise the system around the approach and implementation. Once the new approach is mainstream, the cycle begins again in terms of monitoring and evaluation through inspectorate reports, research, feedback.

Education Scotland led a number of pilot Curriculum Reviews [in 2023-24 and it published, Background and a Case for Change, a report on that work in November 2024](#) (“the November 2024 Paper”). Education Scotland sought to include the views of a significant number of professionals in this process. It described its work with practitioners as “a significant evolution in [Education Scotland’s] practices and engagement.” (p4)

The work on the pilot reviews have informed how Education Scotland intends to approach the substantive work on the CIC. The November 2024 Paper identified four “key outputs and messages”. These were:

- i. Declutter the curriculum
- ii. Clarify knowledge
- iii. Recognise the difference between curriculum areas

- iv. Reposition cross-curricular knowledge and skills
- v. Provide clarity and simplify guidance

A key question, particularly in relation to points ii and iii above, was around the level of prescription in the curriculum. Currently CfE envisages a very high degree of autonomy for practitioners on what can be taught. The November 2024 Paper said that practitioners remain supportive of professional autonomy in this regard, but that there is an “appetite for greater clarity on what learners should know at key points in their learning and a recognition that the current technical framework for the curriculum does not sufficiently provide that clarity.”

Education Scotland also noted that practitioners working in different subject areas may have different perspectives on the level of prescription required. Education Scotland said that “a number of participants in the maths pilot review supported greater prescription and specification as to what learning it was expected children and young people would undertake throughout the curriculum”. Participants in the expressive arts pilot curriculum review were less likely to hold this view. Education Scotland suggests that different subject areas may have more or less national prescription, depending on the nature of the subject.

Hierarchical and Horizontal Subjects

Education Scotland draws a distinction between “hierarchical” and “horizontal” subjects. This should likely be read as subjects in which there is more hierarchical or horizontal knowledge.

“The hierarchical form refers to the form of knowledge that builds cumulatively. To acquire hierarchical knowledge, it is necessary to begin from the elementary elements for understanding the higher levels. For example, one needs to know the concept of mass in physics before understanding gravitation. Hierarchical knowledge has a rigid structure and it aims at making generalisations. This form of knowledge is typical in the natural sciences. In turn, horizontal knowledge includes several specialised parallel languages. Learning a piece of a horizontal language does not presuppose deep preliminary knowledge. For example, one can understand the meaning of the fall of the Berlin Wall in history without deep knowledge of the Franco-Prussian War. The horizontal knowledge does not advance cumulatively, but via expansion.”

[Niemelä, Mikko \(2020\)](#)

In December 2024, Education Scotland published another paper, [Towards an Evolved Technical Framework](#) (“the December 2024 paper”). This expands on how the specification of the curriculum – currently the Experiences and Outcomes (E’s and O’s), Benchmarks and a range of additional guidance – will be replaced. This paper highlights the approaches Education Scotland intends to make to reworking the technical framework through the CIC.

The aim of the approach is to create a 3-18 framework; it will cover the universal full-time Early Learning and Childcare up to the end of S6. E’s and O’s currently cover up to CfE Level 4 and is aimed at the Broad General Education (BGE) stage – from ELC to the end of S3.

A key criticism of the OECD in 2021 was that the articulation between BGE and Senior Phase needs to be improved. The OECD said that the Senior Phase does not currently reflect full aims of CfE and that a “clearer definition of the role of knowledge in learning and competency development ... would enhance the transition into the Senior Phase” (OECD p63). The December 2024 Paper says—

“An evolved 3-18 technical framework would offer the opportunity to reduce complexity and confusion over the use of terminology, clarify progression between the BGE and senior phase and would offer the chance to focus learning on the development of conceptual understanding, whilst maintaining the range of pathways available to learners in the senior phase.” (p31-32)

The December 2024 Paper outlined two approaches to how the new frameworks may be structured: a Know-Do-Understand model; and a Big Ideas approach.

The Know-Do-Understand model is intended to help differentiate the knowledge expected at different levels. The December paper noted that this model is used in other jurisdictions, [such as British Columbia](#). The three-fold model splits knowledge into:

- Know: the essential content
- Do: the skills or competencies expected
- Understand: the generalisations, principles and the key concepts important in an area of learning

The Big Ideas approach fits into to the Know-Do-Understand model under the “Understand” part. The December 2024 Paper stated—

“Establishing the Big Ideas for a curriculum area should be an initial objective for those involved in the Curriculum Improvement Cycle. These Big Ideas should encompass epistemic knowledge [e.g. knowing how to think and act like a mathematician, historian or scientist etc.] and inform the parameters for identifying key concepts for each curriculum area. This alignment will, in turn, provide clear guidance for determining what learners should know and be able to do, and by when, ensuring a progressive, cohesive and future-oriented framework.”

In March 2025 Education Scotland published its latest paper, [Working Together to Make Change Happen](#) (“March 2025 paper”). This set out how the work of the CIC will take place.

CfE is currently split into 8 “curriculum areas”, which can broadly be mapped onto subjects or groups of subjects. One of these: Languages includes literacy and English, literacy and Gàidhlig, Gaelic (Learners), modern languages and classical languages. Three areas are considered to be the ‘responsibility of all’ staff: literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing. These are considered to be foundational to learners’ ability to access the curriculum. Taken together, the curriculum areas are one of four contexts for learning in CfE. The other three are “opportunities for personal achievement”, “ethos and life of the school as a community”, and “interdisciplinary learning”.

The CIC programme will have 13 workstreams: 10 are focused on curriculum areas (with ‘Languages’ split into ‘Literacy and English’, ‘Literacy and Gàidhlig’, and ‘Languages’). The remaining cover the three other contexts for learning.

There is also work being undertaken on a number of crosscutting themes such as: Learning for Sustainability; creativity; entrepreneurship; digital literacy; careers education; political literacy; and social justice, rights and equalities.

The CIC is intended to take around 10 years. The March 2025 paper envisages the current cycle running to 2033-34, and then next cycle will begin. The March 2025 paper suggests that each cycle will start with an exercise similar to the National Discussion which took place in 2022-23.

The March 2025 paper set out the structures that would be adopted to carry out this work. The aim is that the CIC will be a collaborative and co-created process. There is a particular focus on engaging practitioners and the structures are complicated; the March 2025 paper suggests that the process will “feel messy” but that “active participation and engagement with the process will ultimately bring clarity and direction” (p22). Each workstream will include

- **Collaboration Groups** made up of around 100 participants, of which around 75% will be practitioners. Among other things, the purposes of these groups will be to:
 - explore what is working or not working in the current provision;
 - explore possible options or proposals for change;
 - explore emerging proposals including testing those proposals
- **Core Groups** made up of around 15-30 participants drawn from the wider Collaboration Group and will be supported by Education Scotland officials and secondees. The role of the Core Groups will be, among other things, to develop the possible options or proposals for change made by the Collaboration Group.
- **Steering Groups** will be “co-chaired” by officials from Scottish Government, Education Scotland and ADES (Association of Directors of Education Scotland). Members will be drawn from national government and agencies, local authorities, and higher education. Their role will be to develop a “coherent response to the implementation of change”.

The March 2025 paper also envisages several cross-cutting groups to support the work under each work stream. The overall process will be overseen by the [Curriculum and Assessment Board](#).

The Scottish Government’s National Improvement Framework, Improvement Plan for 2026 said:

“A key highlight in 2026 will be the publication of a draft evolved “technical framework” covering all curricular areas. Detailed evidence and analysis papers will be published alongside a package of communication and engagement to support implementation. As we implement these reforms, all

key partners will retain a strong focus on our shared end goals: to ensure the curriculum remains forward looking and supports high quality teaching and learning; to improve the position of knowledge; to provide clarity on progression; to support successful transitions across early years, primary and secondary, and; to build a strong alignment between Broad General Education (BGE) and the Senior Phase.”

Responsibilities, Autonomy and Capacity

The OECD’s review of CfE suggested that the “division of responsibilities for CfE” should be revised and clarified. This should entail minimising duplication and ensuring that those who “hold responsibilities should have matching capacity and resources” (p124) It suggested that, in determining the division of responsibilities, the system should consider:

- Who is in charge of CfE’s strategic orientations and coherence?
- Who is responsible for reviewing the CfE framework and keeping its key components up to date with research and societal developments?
- Who takes charge of providing schools and practitioners with the support they need to design and enact their curriculum?
- Who holds responsibility for offering diversified learning experiences to learners?

The OECD 2021 review said, “stakeholders agree that schools and the profession should hold responsibility for the conception, implementation and outcomes of their own curricula, provided the rest of the system fulfils their own responsibilities to support schools and the profession within a clear policy framework.”(p116) Later it recommended that there should be provision for “dedicated time to lead, plan and support CfE at the school level” including “additional, dedicated and ring-fenced time for all teachers, for curriculum planning, for monitoring of student achievement and in support of moderation of assessment outcomes”(p125). It noted a tension between the responsibilities that CfE gives to teachers to develop curricula and relatively high contact time. It noted:

“Reducing class contact time in any school system makes sense only when the teaching workforce is already well qualified and has demonstrated capacity for innovation and collaboration, and when school leadership has the capacity to ensure that this scale of investment delivers improvement for learners.” (p125)

This Parliamentary session, the Scottish Government has sought to reduce teacher contact time by 90 minutes and this has been linked to plans to increase the number of teachers in Scotland’s schools. The national tripartite (local government, the Scottish Government, and teaching unions) negotiating mechanism, the SNCT, has not been able to agree a reduction in contact time. [The EIS has balloted its members on industrial action and its members have backed Industrial Action over teacher workload.](#)

[Speaking to the Committee](#) in January, the Cabinet Secretary said the Government will be funding pilots of reducing contact time in the next financial year. She noted that

“since 2018, the pay of classroom teachers has increased by 40 per cent” and that the Scottish Government “could not have forecast that situation when we came into power again in 2021.” She also said:

“The other factor, which is inherently linked, is that the teaching unions separate pay and conditions from their negotiations. In my view, if they want to force my hand—I want them to force my hand, because I think that this would make a huge difference—they should tell me that they want to include reducing class contact time in their pay claim.”

The 2021 OECD review of CfE suggested that there should continue to be a focus on “curricular capacity at various levels of the system using research”. It suggested that this would include “site-specific, collaborative approaches of researchers and practitioners” to support curriculum development, professional learning, classroom improvement, school development. It also suggested more “system-wide monitoring” of both curriculum and classroom practices and student experiences, outcomes and destinations. (p122)

The Centre for Teaching Excellence was established in September 2025. The CTE is led by the University of Glasgow. There are three “hubs” of this centre – at the Glasgow and Dumfries campuses of the University of Glasgow, and at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. Each hub will support:

- Locally relevant professional learning and practitioner enquiry
- Thematic communities of practice
- Opportunities for teachers to engage with research and with one another

The Glasgow-based hub will have a co-ordination role as well as supporting teachers directly. The Dumfries hub will have a focus on rural education and Learning for Sustainability, and the hub at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig will have a focus on Gaelic education.

The “refocused” [Education Scotland is expected](#) to have a continuing “role in supporting a thriving professional learning sector through a national framework for professional learning and will build on the existing and well-regarded national leadership professional learning programmes.” It is also expected to:

“Work with local authorities to inform approaches to wellbeing, inclusion, behaviour and enabling better support for those with additional support needs. The national agency will also employ its unique national perspective to inform, share and promote wider approaches to improvement to close attainment gaps as set out in the National Improvement Framework.”

In CfE, and indeed in any system, teachers interpret overarching curriculum and policy, plan schemes of learning or lessons, and are involved in how this plays out in a classroom. All of these processes lead to how and what pupils learn. Teachers have a crucial role in interpreting the curriculum or taking part in “curriculum-making”.

[Professor Mark Priestley suggests](#) that agency “is not something that people have; it is something that people do or, more precisely, something they achieve” and that “Curriculum making is a process that requires the active engagement – and agency – of teachers, as research-engaged and research-literate professionals”. Priestley

has developed an “ecological” model of teachers’ professional autonomy whereby the agency of a professional can be seen through the lenses of three aspects: the teacher’s professional and personal past; the way in which teachers can envisage the future; and the current cultural, structural and material conditions under which they are working². [Reflecting study from around 10 years ago, he suggested](#) that:

“Many teachers lack an educational language with which to engage critically with policy, and to develop their practice. ... in Scotland at least, many teachers simply use the language of the latest policy. There is evidence, mirroring previous studies by scholars such as Cuban (1998)³ and Swann and Brown (1997)⁴ that curriculum change is often superficial, comprising little more than changing the terminology to re-label existing practices as being constitutive of new policy.”

In [a January 2025 paper for Reform Scotland \(now known as ‘Enlighten’\) Professor Lindsay Paterson and Bruce Robertson](#) set out their perspective on the role of the expert teacher:

“The key to [a knowledge-based and content-rich curriculum] working in practice is having expert teachers. They need to know thoroughly the detail of the knowledge and skills that the curriculum specifies, and also to know how to work closely with colleagues in different subject areas. They need to know how students learn the subject matter, and they need to know also the typical misconceptions which students have. This body of professional expertise has been called pedagogical content knowledge: that is both knowledge of the content of the subject and also knowledge of how to teach the subject. Teacher professionalism is not reinventing the content; it is adapting it to the students in front of them and taking account of their whole lives inside and outside school.”

Qualifications

The assessment approach for CfE was set out in the 2011 document, [Building the Curriculum 5, A Framework for Assessment](#). This said:

“Assessment practice will follow and reinforce the curriculum and promote high quality learning and teaching approaches. Assessment of children’s and young people’s progress and achievement during their broad general education to the end of S3 will be based on teachers’ assessment of their knowledge and understanding, skills, attributes and capabilities, as described in the experiences and outcomes across the curriculum. Assessment practices for the next generation of National Qualifications from S3 (for National Literacy and National Numeracy) and in the senior phase and beyond will be aligned to Curriculum for Excellence.”

² These aspects are described respectively as Iterational, Projective and Practical-evaluative. See Priestley, M., Biesta, G.J.J. & Robinson, S. (2015). *Teacher Agency: An Ecological Approach*. London: Bloomsbury Academic

³ Cuban, L. (1998). How schools change reforms: redefining reform success and failure. *Teachers College Record*, 99, 453-477

⁴ Swann, J. & Brown, S. (1997). The implementation of a national curriculum and teachers' classroom thinking. *Research papers in Education: Policy and Practice*, 12, 91-114

A key criticism in the OECD's 2021 review was that there was a disconnect between BGE and the Senior Phase; it described this as the "single biggest barrier to the implementation of CfE" (p127). In part, the OECD envisaged that a better articulation of knowledge within the 3-18 curriculum should address this, but it said that focus of learning in Senior Phase (with the exception of Advanced Highers) was out of step with the approach of CfE and overly focused on subject knowledge. It recommended that Scotland should "adapt the Senior Phase to match the vision of CfE". It said that Scotland should review the "coherence of CfE enactment for learners aged 15 to 18 years, as the qualifications focus the attention on 'traditional' exam- and memory-based assessment, and limit the wider purpose and scope of CfE". (p121) However, the OECD observed:

"The OECD team found complete consensus on this issue, but no enthusiasm for a root and branch review of qualifications, given the disruption to the system that would follow, and no agreement as to what a qualification system aligned with CfE would look like. The contestations in the past around the development of the qualifications as part of the CfE reforms, including difficulties with unit-level assessment and the impact on teacher workload of the quality assurance measures, remain unresolved. As time passes, these unresolved issues have become increasingly problematic for the system." (p127)

OECD suggested that consideration should be given to: "more portfolio assessment approaches", i.e. assessment of cross-curricular learning; "more emphasis on flexible, formative and continuous assessment components"; "more use of digital opportunities"; and utilising teachers' judgement more along with "appropriate, manageable and cost-effective means of moderation". (p121) More broadly the OECD said:

"Aligning qualifications, system evaluation and curriculum to deliver on the commitment of *Building the Curriculum 5* is essential. Scotland could first identify and develop approaches to student assessment that could be used in school and external settings at Senior Phase levels, in alignment with the four capacities and CfE philosophy. Second, Scotland could re-develop a sample-based evaluation system to collect robust and reliable data necessary to support curriculum reviews and decision making. Actions in two areas are needed to support the assessment framework outlined in 2011. The first concerns qualifications in the Senior Phase. The second concerns the commitment to ongoing monitoring of local and national progress and achievement." (p126-127)

The OECD also suggested that one option would be to develop more structured pathways in Senior Phase "with a limited number of compulsory courses, specialisation courses, and room for additional or optional units." (p121) It noted that "upper- secondary education systems usually work with defined pathways broadly split between academic, vocational, and in-between tracks to provide some structure to student choice". (p122) The OECD noted that upper secondary links to both the preceding learning and the opportunities for learning post-school, and therefore "reforms introduced in this phase can have wide-ranging implications at individual and system levels".

In 2021 the OECD published a second report written by Professor Gordon Stobart, [Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland, A comparative perspective](#) (the Stobart Report). The working paper was commissioned by the OECD to complement work on the 2021 review. Rather than providing recommendations, the paper lists assessment options for consideration. In his paper, Professor Stobart describes Scotland as an:

“...international leader in adopting broader ‘21st century’ capacities for education and life outside schooling.” – p9

However, the challenges of assessing the capacities of curricula such as CfE are also highlighted:

“At present there are few examples of how national examinations can assess broader global skills such as creativity, collaboration, and communication.” – p14

The paper compared Scotland’s system of certification in upper secondary to a variety of other countries’ systems. He also noted that Scotland’s students are more frequently examined than in other jurisdictions. During evidence to the Committee in 2021, [Professor Stobart said](#) he was surprised at the number of examinations in Scotland and the complexity of the system. The Stobart report set out options for the future of assessment for Scotland to explore, including:

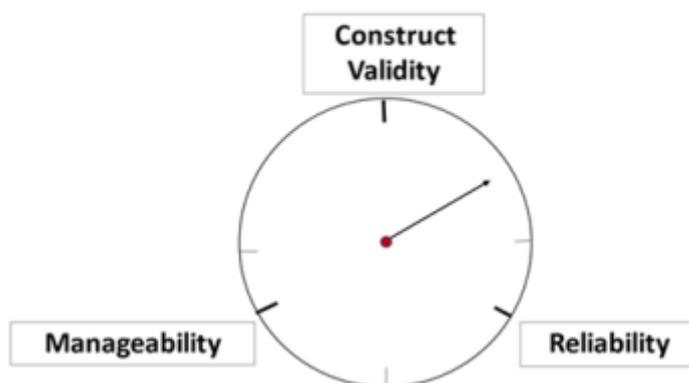
- Removal of National 5 examinations in S4 and move toward a school graduation certificate or diploma.
- Better alignment of assessment with CfE and pedagogy through broadening forms of assessment.
- Ensuring student views are considered and used to shape assessment arrangements.
- Further developing the role of vocational qualifications.

Stobart suggested that there are three aspects of an assessment system:

- Validity – how well the assessment measures what it is intended to measure
- Reliability – how consistently the assessment is, i.e. whether a grade in one school is the same as another, or is consistent over time.
- Manageability – how easy it is to administer or undertake

More broadly, Stobart argued that any system involves trade-offs in these aspects. He produced a “one handed clock” to demonstrate this idea, reproduced below.

Dependability: The one-handed clock



Stobart explained:

“The hand can only be in one place, illustrating the inevitability of trade-offs. At 10 minutes we have a valid and reliable assessment that may require costly and expensive processes, for example, training an airline pilot; at 50 minutes we may have a valid and manageable teacher assessment that has limited reliability. What is to be avoided is to be at 30 minutes – a manageable, machine marked (reliable) test which is easy and reliable to assess but bears little relation to the construct, for example, a multiple-choice test of creativity.”

Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment (the Hayward Review)

Following the two OECD publications on Scottish Education in 2021, the Government commissioned Professor Louise Hayward to lead an Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment. Its [final report was published in June 2023](#).

Some of the key recommendations in the report are:

- Adopting an SDA (Scottish Diploma of Achievement) as a graduation certificate for all senior phase educational settings.
- Removing exams in all subjects up to SCQF level 5 (e.g. National 5s), examinations may be retained in levels 6 and 7 (e.g. Highers and Advanced Highers).
- a digital profile for all learners which allows them to record personal achievements, identify and plan future learning

When [giving evidence to the Committee in September 2023](#), Professor Hayward said that the vision for the future of qualifications and assessment in Scotland is a crucial part of this work. The proposed vision is for—

“an inclusive and highly regarded Qualifications and Assessment system that inspires learning, values the diverse achievements of every learner in Scotland and supports all learners into the next phase of their lives, socially, culturally and economically.”

Scottish Diploma of Achievement

The Review recommended that the SDA be made up of three, equally weighted parts. These are:

“Programmes of Learning

“In-depth study of individual areas of the curriculum, subjects and vocational, technical and professional qualifications, will remain a fundamental part of qualifications. However, the new approach to qualifications should go further to improve alignment with CfE.

“Project Learning

“Learners should have opportunities to demonstrate how they can use knowledge from across subjects/technical and professional areas to tackle challenges. These kinds of experience are closer to those learners will have beyond school or college, for example being able to work as part of a team, to investigate, to solve problems and to look for creative solutions.

“Personal Pathway

“Learners are individuals and should have opportunities to demonstrate their individuality- the courses they choose, the projects they undertake, their interests, their contributions and aptitudes. Together, these combine to help learners make good decisions about what they might do next. This wider, more personalised information will provide colleges, employers and universities with a better evidence base to inform their decisions about which students or employees are likely to be best suited to which course or job.”

The intention is that the programmes of learning will be graded and assessed as they are currently, project learning will be assessed at an SCQF level but not graded, and the personal pathway element will be neither graded nor assessed.

Under Programmes of Learning, the review envisages a broader range of assessments to be used. The review was critical of too much reliance on external examinations, but that these should be retained (at levels 6 and 7) “where they are an important part of the assessment methodology”.

Under Personal Pathway, the review lists a number of possible activities that this element could include:

- Contributions to the community
- Cultural or sporting activities
- Supporting wellbeing of themselves and others

- Work, enterprise or entrepreneurial activities

The review says that the focus in this aspect should not be about collecting experiences, rather it should be on what has been learned through those experiences.

Government response

The Government [published its response to the IRQA report in September 2024](#). In her foreword, the Cabinet Secretary suggested that, at least in the short term, the Government would not be focused on reform of senior phase qualifications. Her foreword highlighted other areas such as attendance, relationships and behaviour, structural reforms, and the centrality of the teaching profession to improvement more broadly. Nevertheless, the Government's response indicated that it supports an "evolution of Scotland's approach to assessment" as part of wider reform to improving the curriculum and outcomes for young people. The Cabinet Secretary said, "I propose a focussed, incremental and deliverable plan for change".

The Cabinet Secretary said that her approach in this regard was informed by the results of an online survey of teachers and college lecturers which was open in autumn 2023. The survey sought views on the recommendations from both the National Discussion on education and the IRQA. There was little agreement among respondents about the IRQA's recommendations. A majority of respondents:

- Agreed with a recommendation about time for education staff to access professional learning, to collaborate and to engage with the proposed changes (68%)
- Disagreed with proposals to reduce the number of external examinations in the Senior Phase; increase the breadth of assessment methods including digital assessment methods, and remove external assessment up to SCQF level 5. (57%)

No other recommendation received a majority of responses either in favour or against.

Returning to the Government's response to the IRQA, the Government agreed that there should be a change in the balance of assessment in the senior phase. The Government said that changes should be led by the views of teachers to ensure that different subjects' requirements are taken account of. The Government said that external examinations would remain a feature of the qualifications in Scotland, including at National 5. The Government asked the SQA to explore removing external exams from some practical subjects and the SQA announced in March 2025 that in 2025-26 exams would be removed from National 5 Practical Cake Craft, Practical Metalworking and Practical Woodworking. In 2024-25, these courses attracted 1,275, 1,755, and 9,040 entries.

The response also highlighted a number of other streams of work. These included:

- SQA/QS to work towards/explore:
 - Extending the range of "approved assessment methods" for national qualifications

- Modularisation of courses
- Rationalise offer of certain qualifications
- Foreground SCQF levels of qualifications
- Development of digital profile: this is hosted on SDS' My World of Work
- Scottish Government to undertake “further testing” with teachers on “the best and most appropriate route forward which may support a leaving certificate in the future”

Some of these were reflected in the Scottish Government's 2025 [Curriculum, Qualifications and Assessment Reform – Progress to Date and Next Steps](#)

Challenges in policy implementation

The 2021 OECD report observed:

“Following the publication of the Building the Curriculum series, however, the system adopted a somewhat ad hoc approach to CfE implementation and review. The material produced to support implementation came from various sources that were not always aligned, and lost coherence, until the Statement for Practitioners was published for clarification purposes in 2016.” (p114)

In contrast, the OECD suggested a strategic and structured approach to developing and implementing changes to CfE. It said:

“Leading the change process itself will require reinforcing the stability, trustworthiness and effectiveness of the decision-making processes, especially to define the next steps of CfE: what needs to be done, by whom, when and how it will be measured. On this last point, Scotland should consider setting up the metrics needed to understand progress with implementing CfE actions over the long run.” (p130)

A paper by Professors Chris Chapman and Graeme Donaldson published in March 2023, [Where Next for Scottish Education, Learning is Scotland's Future?](#), said—

“Education systems are complex, messy, and often inflexible. They are composed of a diverse range of stakeholders including learners, parents, the profession, business, and local and national government. Of all public services, it has been claimed that education systems are the toughest to reform.”

Professor Hayward [told the committee in 2023](#) that the report provides a “longer-term direction of travel for qualifications and assessment in Scotland”. She also touched on implementation; she said—

“What we have learned from the curriculum in Scotland, but also internationally, is that it is not enough to plan for the educational aspect of innovation; there has to be a plan for change. The process of change has to be carefully planned, and, to be effective, it has to be co-constructed. So, everyone who is involved in making it work has to be involved in the process.

The pace of putting ideas into practice should depend on the level of resourcing that is available. It is about working through the ideas and being realistic about the investment that can be made as they develop.”

In relation to changes in assessments and qualifications, the Stobart report noted that:

“Assessment reforms may be inhibited by a number of factors, including the resistance of teachers and parents. In Ireland, opposition from teacher unions to the reform of the Junior Certificate, taken at the end of lower-secondary education (at 15-16 years old), provides a case study. Successful change requires public confidence and trust, something not easily achieved in historically embedded systems. In jurisdictions such as England, the reliance of the high-stakes school accountability system on schools’ performance in national examinations limits innovative assessment formats. In systems such as in Hong Kong, China, where results are central to highly competitive university selection, the pressures to ensure comparable results limit what changes can be made.”

The [Scottish Government published an Implementation Framework](#) of the recommendations of the OECD’s 2021 report in October of that year. This indicated that work on all of the recommendations would have begun by the end of 2022. The framework said that the Government would adopt the OECD’s [implementation framework for effective change in schools](#). In this, the OECD noted that “policy reforms do not always translate into concrete actions and visible results in schools, however well designed they may be ... effective education change requires recognising that implementation is as important as the policy design itself, and is in fact a key aspect of the policy success in reaching schools and classrooms”.

The June 2025 update from the Scottish Government on progress on reform set out an indicative timeline of “key dates”:

- Start of a new qualification product type design phase in the autumn of 2025
- The publication of the draft evolved curriculum technical framework in the summer of 2026
- Rebalancing assessment in existing national qualifications, with a change of approach in the first subjects from 2026
- A significant period for preparing for the evolved technical framework from January 2027
- Start of new qualification development phase at subject level in 2028
- Formal adoption of the evolved technical framework in two stages from 2028
- Adoption of changes to Early, First, Second and Third Level from August 2028
- Phased adoption of changes to fourth level and beyond from August 2029
- Level 4 and Level 5 National Qualifications aligned to the evolved curriculum technical framework from 2031.

Qualifications Scotland published its business plan [Accelerating Change](#) in February 2026. Under reform of qualifications, it said:

“We will rebalance assessments in National Courses, exploring how to decrease reliance on high-stakes external exams and increase the use of internal and continuous assessments. We will also streamline and modernise our wider qualifications portfolio to clarify progression pathways. This work will form part of a wider programme of curriculum and assessment reform, in collaboration with Education Scotland and the Scottish Government.”

The tasks under the business plan focused on setting up a “new School Partnership Team” which would “play a vital role, building stronger relationships with schools and using innovative engagement methods to give everyone the opportunity to have their voice heard and to shape the future of qualifications.”

The [National Improvement Plan for 2026](#) said that the Scottish Government has:

“commissioned work to develop a Monitoring and Evaluation Strategy which will propose a structured approach to systematically monitor progress and evaluate the Impact of Curriculum, Qualifications and Assessment reform project (as well as the wider Education Reform Programme) over time. This project includes the development of a theory of change model, data mapping and an evaluability assessment.”

Ned Sharratt, Researcher (Education and Culture), SPICe

Date: 03/03/2026

Note: Committee briefing papers are provided by SPICe for the use of Scottish Parliament committees and clerking staff. They provide focused information or respond to specific questions or areas of interest to committees and are not intended to offer comprehensive coverage of a subject area.
The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP www.parliament.scot

Annexe B

EIS Response to the Scottish Parliament's Education, Children and Young People's Committee on the Curriculum Improvement Cycle

Introduction and Background

The EIS, Scotland's largest trade union representing nearly 65,000 teachers and lecturers at all grades and in all sectors of Scottish Education, welcomes this opportunity to provide written evidence to the Education, Children and Young People Committee in relation to the Curriculum Improvement Cycle.

The EIS welcomes the recent work on curriculum review and the development of a systematic Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC.) Indeed, the EIS believes that such work is long overdue. We made clear in our [evidence](#) to the Scottish Parliament's Education and Skills Committee on Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) Priorities and Challenges as far back as 2017 that the education system in Scotland had reached a stage in the development of CfE at which reflection on progress to date and on future direction, measured against the original aims and philosophy, was required.

Whilst the [Refreshed Narrative of CfE](#) (2019) was helpful in reframing existing documentation about CfE, with a view to supporting teachers and schools to engage with and make sense of the curriculum, it has not fundamentally improved the situation whereby teachers are overwhelmed by volumes of unclear and confusing documentation; where the curriculum – particularly at primary level - is highly cluttered with an accretion of (often externally-imposed) priorities; where teaching and learning, especially in the Senior Phase, are distorted by over-reliance on external assessment, and by attainment data-driven accountability demands; and where over-worked teachers and schools simply lack the time and the material resources to properly engage with and implement CfE as a purportedly 'empowered' system expects. More recently, the [Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment](#) (2023) highlighted in stark terms how Scotland's Senior Phase, contrary to design intention, had become dominated by high-stakes academic exams and driven by attainment metrics, far from the aims and visions of CfE, and having created distortion in the curriculum as a whole. Yet reform of Senior Phase exams, at this stage, has been minimal.

It is within this context that the EIS has, thus far, been supportive of the work of the CIC, and has positively encouraged its members to participate in its work. Whilst we commend the approach of Education Scotland in committing to a model of co-creation predicated on the participation of front-line teachers in all sectors of school education, we note that this is a project of considerable complexity and ambition whose success is dependent on the continued participation of those teachers and of the wider teaching profession – including the ability of schools to release teachers in the course of the working week. This, of course, requires considerable investment; and at this stage, the EIS is concerned that the investment required to sustain the engagement of the profession has not been forthcoming.

Representative Teacher Voice

In the initiation of the Pilot Reviews and the wider CIC project, the EIS welcomed the approach of Education Scotland in seeking to avoid a 'top down' approach by engaging teachers as appointees and by seeking the engagement of classroom teachers as core participants in the project and we remain, in principle, supportive of this approach. We have also stressed to Education Scotland, however, that the representative voices of teachers should be incorporated at key stages of the review process in each area. It would have been helpful, for example, for teacher professional associations to have been included in the discussions around development of the early pilot reviews and in the initial national sessions.

Whilst EIS representatives are engaged at Curriculum Assessment Board-level (CAB) and have been invited to participate in subsequent pilot review activity, and whilst the EIS has actively encouraged its members to engage in all aspects of review and CIC activity, we remain unclear as to where Education Scotland sees the representative voices of the teaching profession in the CIC work going forward. The EIS is clear that project governance must be absolutely transparent and that the representative voices of teachers must be hard-wired into each stage and level of the process, including being involved in overview of the project as a whole. Moreover, whilst the EIS commends the significant amount of work done so far, it is evident that translating the ambition of the CIC into reality - particularly if practitioner engagement is to be continued - will require sustainable resourcing.

Teacher participation

EIS members who have participated in the reviews and who have shared their perspectives with the union, speak positively of the purposeful and collaborative nature of the activity, and of the professional and collegiate approach of Education Scotland staff. However, they have also raised significant concerns in relation to release from school with Primary and Early Years teachers, and those working in ASN settings, speaking of a 'struggle' to get out of school due to staffing pressures, and local authorities taking, in the eyes of some teachers, a less-than-sympathetic approach. Such members have expressed concern that the depletion in the numbers of Early Years and Primary teacher participants, if left unaddressed, will skew the outputs of the CIC by diminishing the rich experiences and professional input of Early Years and Primary practitioners, and will fail to address the significant issue of Senior Phase priorities creating adverse 'backwash' into the BGE. The EIS notes that Education Scotland is cognisant of the problems in this area but at this stage it is unclear how it intends to resolve this. The EIS would stress that capturing voices from all sectors in a representative manner is crucial for this project, given the significant contextual differences in each sector.

However, we would challenge strongly the well-intended suggestion mooted by Education Scotland that a solution would be '*a model similar to that used by the Scottish Qualifications Agency (SQA) to secure markers for central marking events. This may include paid weekend or holiday working as a means to reduce in-school pressure*'. Essentially, this is a proposal that teachers – who, according to [independent research](#) commissioned by the EIS, are already working on average in excess of 11.5 hours per week beyond contracted hours – work overtime in order to help fix the system that already generates that excessive workload. Furthermore, the analogy with the model for SQA markers is an unhelpful and unhealthy one,

undermining the concept of teacher professionals collaborating in co-design of the curriculum which all teachers teach and holding it in equivalence to the narrow SQA/marker relationship – which, in itself, has been subject to much scrutiny of late in terms of equity and efficacy.

The EIS has made clear to both Education Scotland and the Cabinet Secretary that such an approach to teacher participation in curriculum review, in the context of last year's National Review of Mathematics 'summer school' is entirely unacceptable and a worrying portend of the system's capacity to support the CIC more broadly. Given the explicit recognition Education Scotland has made of the risks of openly recruiting an 'insufficiently diverse range of participants which limits the range of voices and perspectives', it is disappointing that Education Scotland has ignored such concerns and has, we understand, scheduled similar activity in respect of the Expressive Arts review during teacher non-working time. It is obvious that, whether paid or unpaid, scheduling such activity for holiday periods will have direct equity impacts and will exclude a significant proportion of teachers (in a profession where sectoral gender-composition is of critical significance) who have caring responsibilities or who simply wish to take holidays to which they are entitled.

Timeline of Reform

The EIS notes that the first outputs of the CIC work are, according to the timeline of reform published by Scottish Government, due to be released to the system in June 2026. This initial release, we understand, will consist of draft frameworks and guidance, and does not signal the commencement of implementation. Nevertheless, it is clear that the release will be the first stage in an accelerating level of activity in which all Scotland's teachers will be obliged to engage. The EIS is clear that given the scale and complexity of the emerging proposals, the reform work envisaged cannot be delivered within current INSET and collegiate time arrangements alone, and therefore we have called on the Scottish Government, working in partnership with local authorities and the teaching profession to commit to **a multi-year programme of additional INSET days, with appropriate lead-in time and explicitly linked to the Scottish Government's reform timeline.**

This would require to be fully supported and resourced in order to ensure a consistency of high-quality professional learning and engagement across all schools. Such a commitment would be a clear acknowledgement of system-wide support for curriculum improvement, of the key role of teachers as curriculum-makers as envisaged by CfE, and of the practical realities of delivery. There is precedent, during previous significant reform, for the allocation of additional INSET days. Moreover, experience shows that the timing of additional INSET days is critical to maximizing their impact.

The EIS acknowledges that throughout the CIC work, there has been a desire on the part of Education Scotland and partners to be transparent whilst simultaneously conscious of the risk of releasing incomplete outputs to the system for fear of 'setting hares running', which is a realistic risk in an increasingly top-down performative system. It is vital, in our opinion, that teachers, school leaders and education authority leaders have a firm and common understanding of the nature and timeline of the CIC reform work, to avoid premature, rushed or unco-ordinated implementation.

De-cluttering the Curriculum

For some time, EIS members have expressed deep concern that the curriculum – in Primary in particular, but not exclusively - was heavily cluttered and over-accessorised, with teachers and pupils being placed in the position of having to respond within their teaching and learning to too many national, local authority and school priorities and initiatives; moreover, that curricular frameworks and guidance designed to support teachers, exacerbated the challenges they faced. This has resulted in significant pressure to cover a breadth of multiple priorities within class time at the expense of depth and coherence of learning. **Put simply, the experience of teachers is that schools are expected to do too many things, and rather than things being removed or rationalised, more is added.** This has been a significant driver of workload for teachers, contributing to the present situation where teachers in Scotland have to work in excess of 11 hours per week outwith their contracted time. It has contributed also to a significant erosion of the breadth and depth of learning which CFE envisions for children and young people. For teachers, the attractiveness of a cycle of curriculum review, such as the CIC, lies in its potential to address this unsustainable and irrational situation.

We would note, however, that de-cluttering the curriculum has been a long-trailed ambition in Scottish education, yet teachers have seen little progress in this regard; in fact, the demands placed upon children and young people and their teachers have increased as CfE has become embedded. Whilst a number of additions to the curriculum enhance learning and are responsive to social, technological and environmental change, a limitless accretion of curricular priorities is both unsustainable and educationally counterproductive, leading to a poorer learning experience for children and young people and an intensification of teacher workload.

The EIS sees merit, therefore, in a systematic cycle of review allowing teachers with partners in the system to make rational decisions around which curriculum content can be prioritised and deprioritised and to align priorities within a streamlined, coherent whole, within the capacity of the system (which *must* be a realistic accounting of resource issues such as time, staffing capacity, professional learning and material resources).

We would note, however, that clutter has accrued not simply due to the contextual changes specified – it is also the result of a top-down system (and an accompanying political and organisational culture) which purports to empower teachers but which regularly imposes external policy priorities and which at each level is imbued with accountability pressures and driven by narrow bands of attainment data, which are often highly susceptible to performativity. By way of illustration, while 1+2 languages policy, STEM and PE minimum learning hours are well-intentioned, they have generated additional work for teachers and placed additional strain on an already overcrowded curriculum. Most recently, and to the bewilderment of teachers who have taken the official commitment to declutter the curriculum at face value, residential outdoor education has – with the support of the Scottish Government, apparently oblivious to the high priority by being accorded by the national agency to addressing curriculum clutter - been mandated in legislation. In making such policy interventions, clear direction has to be given by Scottish Government and local authorities who make such demands, that such priorities must replace rather than be additional to existing priorities. Lack of time at school level has resulted in models of

curriculum design which have tended to incorporate additional initiatives without taking account of potential duplication. Schools have little time to reflect on whether an initiative is worth pursuing or whether their learners are already engaged in similar activities. A robust cycle of curriculum improvement, therefore, must by design be capable of resistance to such pressures and must be explicit in its purposes and aims, to challenge the culture of unmediated policy imposition, top-down accountability and performativity if it is to declutter the curriculum. It must also take account of the fact that external demands, often uncoordinated, inevitably result in increased clutter at school level and must empower teachers and educational leaders to challenge that culture.

For the avoidance of doubt, EIS members are clear that de-cluttering the curriculum is a key task of the CIC, and its success will be determined by the extent to which, in the interests of both learners and teachers, the demands on schools are fewer, not more. This we believe, will result in better outcomes for learners.

The Present Technical Framework

The CfE journey for teachers has been complex as the aim of empowering educators by granting them freedom to shape the curriculum, has been undermined by a lack of system support, and by a deluge of confusing, unclear and bureaucratic documentation. Teachers have frequently expressed feeling unsupported amidst this complexity, a situation exacerbated by a system heavily focused on accountability and attainment data, which often feels at odds with the broader aims of CfE and contrary to the principles of an empowered profession. Indeed, the relatively ‘open-ended’ aspect of CfE – in a system which claims to empower teachers but in reality, disempowers them – has exposed it to being ‘over-accessorised’.

EIS members report that the current curriculum technical framework- the Experiences and Outcomes (Es and Os), Benchmarks and the accompanying welter of guidance, policy and practice papers – is emblematic of the clutter that bedevils CfE. It is so voluminous as to be confusing and disorientating, overly open to interpretation and duplication, and resistant to practical application. Rather than supporting the effective and coherent planning of learning, audit approaches to Es and Os are frequently used to ‘tick off’ coverage, whilst Benchmarks have largely failed to provide the intended clarity on the knowledge and skills required to progress at each level. In an entirely reductive fashion, the curriculum framework is often applied as a list of things that must be done, rather than a tool to support the breadth and depth of learning envisaged by CfE.

Moreover, [evidence](#) suggests that in Secondary schools, the BGE in many subjects is a rehearsal for the Senior Phase with lip-service paid to the BGE framework itself. The EIS noted in a 2016 [submission to the Cabinet Secretary](#) that, ‘At the moment many establishments continue to use approaches to the planning and assessment of learning and teaching which calls upon each individual E&O in all curricular areas. There are currently 675 Es & Os across the BGE with 15 more in the denominational sector. Coverage of individual Es and Os, therefore, makes such processes unwieldy and highly time-consuming’. This was accompanied by a call for ‘clear advice from, and provision of support by, Education Scotland, with reinforcement of messages through the inspection process, in relation to streamlined approaches to teaching, learning and assessment around the ‘significant aspects of learning’ in place of an

Experiences and Outcomes auditing approach'. However, additional layers of well-intentioned advice – and a failure to move on other challenges confronting the system – have not only failed to address the challenges but have exacerbated them, with many teachers continuing to be enmeshed in planning processes which are multi-levelled: strategic, monthly and daily. Rather than support teachers with a clear understanding of national standards and lines of progression, Benchmarks have contributed to the general confusion and have compounded issues in relation to assessment and workload. It is apparent that the understanding of the purposes and applications of such documentation and guidance, and their relationship to the wider vision and aims of CfE are unclear and inconsistent. Time that could be better spent by teachers planning quality, deep learning responsive to individual learning needs, engaging in professional dialogue around understanding of standards and growing their confidence around assessment judgements has been consumed, to a large extent, by the demands of a tick-box, workload-intensive accountability culture.

Evolving the Curriculum Framework

The central plank of the CIC currently led by Education Scotland, is to 'evolve' the current technical framework via a co-created approach, to more effectively align the curriculum with the aims and vision of CfE. Education Scotland has stated that the technical framework 'is used by educators and practitioners to plan what children and young people will learn' and is in principle designed to support teachers in 'developing and implementing a curriculum which fully captures the skills, knowledge and learning which every learner should experience and achieve'. The EIS is supportive of Education Scotland's ambition in principle, and agrees with its view of what the technical framework *should* be as it has been clear to the EIS for some time that the current framework is not working in line with the visions and principles of CfE

Education Scotland's CIC work has also identified issues experienced by teachers around progression and transitions under the current framework, with concerns around clarifying what knowledge learners should have acquired at particular points in their learning journey, and in particular at key transition points, for example moving from Primary to Secondary school. This would chime with the feedback provided to the EIS, where Primary members for example highlight the demands of covering all curriculum areas and cross curriculum themes within a framework that is open to vagueness, interpretation and inconsistency, whilst Secondary members also highlight unclear and inconsistent expectations around the knowledge learners require as they transition to Secondary BGE and how completion of the BGE is aligned appropriately with the Senior Phase.

A significant part of the CIC project thus far has been clarifying the role of knowledge in the curriculum, with a focus on developing conceptual knowledge. The EIS would concur, broadly, that the clarification of what knowledge learners need to progress is important and that the current design and operation of the framework of Experiences and Outcomes and Benchmarks is an impediment. The EIS is absolutely clear, however, that such clarification must be in the form of more support and 'steer' for teachers in this area, and that this should be in alignment with or embedded within the wider framework. We would be wary of the construction of overly prescriptive and reductive models of progression which would be misaligned with CfE's ambitions for breadth and depth of learning and its embrace of the primacy of teacher professional judgement, supported by collegiate dialogue and moderation of a range of formative assessment sources.

Moreover, we are clear that progression is centred on the structured and planned development of individual learners' understanding, skills and knowledge and not merely the creation of additional rungs of 'attainment', which have the potential – in the present attainment data-driven and accountability culture – to be misapplied as performance metrics, as we have seen in the collation of ACEL data and how it has been instrumentalised in politicised educational discourse.

We are clear also that the CIC offers an opportunity to address issues in respect of transitions across sector and between the BGE and the Senior Phase. The critical issues of inconsistency and a lack of clarity identified in the January 2024 [CAB paper](#) in relation to the role of knowledge in the curriculum were construed in the media as 'secondaries starting again', when the paper pointed more accurately to structural issues at key join points including Primary BGE to Secondary BGE and Secondary BGE- Senior Phase, where the backwash of the exams-dominated upper school creates considerable distortion to the extent that, arguably, the BGE is either openly truncated or tacitly discarded.

The EIS is clear that the OECD report provided a general endorsement of CfE as a strong curricular framework which is much respected internationally. The report counters some of the anti-CfE narratives promulgated by those who would favour the prescription of narrow, 'traditionalist' curricular content. Indeed, equity and inclusiveness, remarked upon by the OECD as characteristics of Scotland's education system to be celebrated, have in large measure been as a result of the more open nature of CfE relative to other curricula. We are clear (and we believe the CIC is also clear) that framing the position of knowledge as a dogmatic and dichotomous contestation between 'autonomy' versus 'prescription' would be a caricature of the position in Scottish Education; rather there is a sound curricular foundation, but teachers require more clarity and support. This has been the position of the EIS for some time. The preference for differing degrees of prescription in some curricular areas highlighted by Education Scotland's initial pilot reviews appears to be one of practicality in context rather than of underpinning philosophy. The EIS believes that it is critical that the voices of practitioners are listened to in this respect and that any model adopted is adaptable to the particular needs of curricular areas and sectors in a rational way; moreover, that the CIC is characterised by genuine and equitable collaboration across sectors. We would emphasise that practitioners in different sectors will likely have differing perspectives based on the challenges they currently face and will face under an evolved model.

An obvious illustration is that Secondary teachers may work primarily within their curricular area whereas Early Years and Primary teachers work across all curricular areas. The discussion around the place of knowledge in the curriculum and the degree of prescription or otherwise must also be informed by an acknowledgement that the Senior Phase, as highlighted in the OECD and IRQA reports is currently characterised by curriculum narrowing, a high degree of rote learning and 'mission creep' into the BGE, encouraging superficial and fragmented learning.

In the course of the pilot reviews, the identification of cross-curricular competencies has highlighted and delineated a significant number of themes, which appears to be, on the face of it, counter-intuitive to the ambition of decluttering the curriculum. The EIS would caution that the scope for misinterpretation is significant here, as teachers are clear that simplifying and streamlining should mean 'less' and not 'more'; it is

critical therefore that ongoing review must explore overlap/duplication and potential integration/synthesis between cross curricular themes; that their relevance is evaluated ongoingly; and that an embedded, rather than 'bolted-on' approach is taken. Illustrations abound in the Secondary sector of challenges in this area but particularly in the area of 'Responsibility of All' – the nomenclature of which is as confusing as its application in practice. The EIS is clear that whilst Literacy, Numeracy and Health and Well-being are rightly core elements that are fundamental across learning, the concept of Responsibility of All requires revision; moreover, it is correct to explore how curriculum organisation should 'house' cross-curricular themes in the most practical and natural areas, in a rational and practical way.

A Know-Do-Understand model

The current project to evolve the technical framework along the lines of the Know-Do-Understand or 'Big Ideas' model (as used in British Columbia and other jurisdictions) flows from a specific suggestion of the OECD report. The EIS believes that such a model aligns with our members' call for CfE to have clarity without tight prescription and that this would be an appropriate step relative to the current stage of curriculum evolution in Scotland and the challenges at hand such as overcoming fragmented learning and decontextualised knowledge and prioritising deep learning over rote memorisation.

The promotion of flexibility and autonomy for teachers implied in the model will also strike a chord – although teachers will recall how CfE at present is often celebrated for the flexibility and autonomy it purports to allow, but which has transpired for far too few teachers. Since the publication of the CAB paper on the position of knowledge in the curriculum, an unhelpful and ill-informed public discourse has emerged which counterposes 'knowledge' against 'skills'. While the need for clarity on what, broadly, children should learn at particular phases of their education is widely accepted and indeed desired by teachers, the EIS is clear that CfE is premised on interconnectedness and interplay between knowledge and skills. Whilst teachers will likely find a more explicit articulation of essential conceptual knowledge (through a 'Big Ideas' or other model) across curricular areas and contexts for learning helpful, what they emphatically do not want is a rigid, prescriptive curriculum that stifles creativity and adaptability in teaching and learning. The goal must be clarity and support, not an abandonment of the very principles of depth and breadth that CfE aimed to foster.

The EIS has highlighted to Education Scotland, however, the imperative that any model – or elements of specific models – adopted, take account of the Scottish context and in particular the priorities of teachers. In considering the deficiencies of Scotland's curriculum and in considering how best to remedy them, it would be remiss to fail to point out that the evolution of CfE over the last fifteen years has taken place in a context of fiscal austerity which has undoubtedly compounded the challenges of implementation. Continued under-resourcing of education and other public services, in the Institute's view, is a significant barrier to making *any* model work. An evolved framework must be underpinned by proper resourcing to allow teachers to plan and prepare quality learning for a diverse range of learners in a context where over 43% of learners in mainstream classes have additional support needs. The EIS is clear that this requires action on the part of government and employers to reduce teacher class-contact, to reduce class sizes and to provide proper funding for Additional Support for Learning.

BGE and Senior Phase Alignment

The CIC work undertaken so far has confirmed the findings of a number of reviews, including the OECD report and the IRQA in relation to the disconnect between the BGE and the Senior Phase. This disconnect creates considerable obstacles during critical transitional periods for students, affecting their progression and the continuity of their learning. Moreover, the 'backwash effect' from a Senior Phase driven by high-stakes exams has influenced the pedagogical approaches within CfE overall, resulting in a narrowing of the curriculum's focus at earlier stages. This has led to a BGE in Secondary schools which for many learners is a highly fragmented learning experience of studying many discrete subjects in an unconnected way, as a preparation for the Senior Phase rather than as a continuation of their BGE.

The Secondary BGE phase, which in spite of the pressures, generally does feature greater creativity than the Senior Phase, is frequently cut short with S3 pupils, rather than completing the BGE phase, being prepared for qualifications that they should sit within the Senior Phase, because time is too short in S4 to ensure proper coverage of the course content. In the Senior Phase, timetabling and the annual presentation patterns and the associated assessment and exam treadmill - actually, the persistent legacy of a previous system - strangle creativity, whilst breadth and depth, and often enjoyment of learning, are sacrificed in place of rushed, superficial learning in preparation for exams. In addition to the compromises that this forces with regards to breadth, depth and enjoyment of learning, the divergence from the more learner-centred, equitable approaches that characterise the BGE, are displaced by the demands of course coverage within truncated timescales.

In the early stages of the CIC work, the EIS has been encouraged to see that Education Scotland and SQA/Qualifications Scotland staff are in the same room. We have viewed this as essential collaboration as extant official documentation pertaining to the BGE and Senior Phase gives the impression that previously there was little co-ordination between the two national bodies which effectively determine school learning at each stage. Indeed, the lack of clarity around articulation of BGE level 4 with the commencement of the Senior Phase, as well as persistent, practical problems in transitioning from BGE has been emblematic of the perennial disconnect in the system. There has been a lack of detail, thus far, on how such disconnect, is planned to be overcome.

The EIS is clear that close collaboration of all actors in the system- with the input of classroom teachers from all sectors – will be necessary as clearly the alignment work required between the BGE and the Senior Phase is complex but must result in a streamlined technical framework which will be user-friendly to all practitioners and support smooth transitions, clear progression, and the development of diverse learner pathways. The EIS would reiterate that it sees the work of the CIC and of Senior Phase Reform as absolutely inter-connected and mutually dependent.

CIC and Senior Phase Reform

The EIS is clear that the pilot reviews, as a response to the OECD report, cannot sit in isolation from the wider context of education reform and in particular, the [Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment](#). Indeed, the OECD report is clear that 'the structure, learning practices and assessment approaches in the Senior Phase also need adapting to be consistent with CfE's vision, and to allow for the

smooth curriculum experience promised from 3-18'. This aligns entirely with what the EIS has said for over a decade regarding the disconnect between the BGE and the Senior Phase, in large part as a result of the approach to presentation of learners for SQA qualifications on an annual basis, at the expense of time and space for breadth and depth of learning. Indeed, the urgency of review and reform in this area is underscored by an apparent intensification of retrograde practices in the Senior Phase, with [SQA data](#) revealing a persistence of dual presentation and significant increases in double presentations; and EIS members and local associations reporting schools continuing with, or reverting to 'traditional' 2+2+2 curriculum architecture and 'banking' NQ evidence in the BGE, in what appears to be a retreat from the vision and aims of CfE, driven by a focus on a narrow band of attainment data and a lack of support from government to support rich and diverse learning and pathways in the Senior Phase.

The Scottish Government has failed to act sufficiently on the overwhelming evidence generated and the consensus that emerged from the IRQA of the harms caused by the 'two-term dash' and of a system where the predominant metric of success is NQ attainment data. ***The EIS is clear that the success of the current curriculum review activity is inextricably linked to the successful implementation of the recommendations of the IRQA, and vice-versa.***

The EIS would elaborate by highlighting that Scottish Education has been characterised by a lack of strategic focus on the curriculum as a whole – caused in no small part by political imperatives, such as (among others) the rushed implementation of National Qualifications and the subsequent surrounding protracted issues, and the obtrusive imposition of National Standardised Assessments, whose purpose and utility are deemed 'questionable' by the OECD and have been roundly rejected by teachers and many parents. Most recently, we have seen a broad and robust consensus across all stakeholders coalesce around the recommendations of the IRQA, and specifically the urgent need to address the Senior Phase 'two-term dash'; only to see that consensus challenged in what has appeared as a cynical and opportunistic fashion by government. We are clear then that, notwithstanding the intent behind the CIC to create a rational and strategic approach to review, the potential for politicised interventions of this character into its work, and a failure to tackle the persistence of a culture where formal assessment and external accountability demands are preponderant, present considerable risk.

Conclusion

The EIS's position on the CIC is underpinned by the view of our members that the key principle of CfE is the promotion of deep learning and the fullest development of the four capacities for all learners, and that significant further work is required to create the requisite time and space for this to be realised more effectively, both within the Broad General Education (BGE) and the Senior Phase, a view that was subsequently echoed strongly in the OECD Report, '[Into the Future](#)'. We believe that the CIC, if it remains committed to the model of co-creation with the teaching profession and if it is fully resourced to allow for the equitable levels of teacher participation from all sectors, to develop and to implement an evolved framework, has the potential to contribute significantly to a better realisation of the vision and aims of CfE.

However, the EIS believes that the CIC alone cannot achieve this, and must be accompanied by increased resourcing of education and a concerted effort to tackle

decisively the hierarchical, accountability culture, which undermines the capacity of the teaching profession to develop and maintain the levels of creativity promised by CfE. A plethora of education reform reports have highlighted the imperative for culture change and for trust in teachers and their professional judgement. Most recently, the final report emerging from the National Discussion called for teachers to lead the way in human-centred educational improvement, using their professional expertise and judgement to inform decision and actions. We have yet to see this transpire in practice.

Of particular concern to the EIS is that, despite the creation of a new, purportedly independent, office of HM Chief Inspector of Education, there has been little indication of a decisive move away from the existing high-stakes model of external scrutiny, and the role of the inspectorate in the CIC remains unclear. For the CIC to succeed in its aims, it is imperative, in our view that the system is released from the dead hand of top-down accountability demands and that schools are freed from the monocular focus on attainment data which, in our present system and culture, engenders performativity and counter-educational practices.

Further, teachers in Scotland are among the most class-contacted in the OECD, currently sitting in third worst position and despite this, the Scottish Government and COSLA continue to delay implementation of the SNP manifesto commitment to reduce class contact by one and a half hours, failing to acknowledge that the time must be given for teachers' preparation and correction. Similarly, the continuation of large class sizes and overcrowded classrooms, and the physical layout of classrooms and school buildings generally, frequently militate against teachers employing the kinds of creative pedagogies, with emphasis on personalisation and choice, that they would wish to, for the benefit of their learners, who increasingly present with more and more complex additional support needs.

We would reiterate that the CIC is a project of significant ambition and complexity which can only succeed with the full support of Scotland's teachers. To maintain that support, the CIC must be properly resourced, and must address the concerns of Scotland's teaching profession that we have highlighted above.