



Department of Education consultation on new statutory curriculum for Northern Ireland (NI)

Response

September 2026

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Summary

The Commission for Victims and Survivors for Northern Ireland (CVS) supports the Department of Education's proposals to embed compulsory universal teaching and enhance knowledge and understanding about the Troubles/conflict and its legacy in the new Key Stage 3 History curriculum from September 2028 onwards. This position is based on previous CVS evidence-based research and the consultation with victims and survivors and a range of stakeholders conducted in support of this response. This is a significant and timely development which can help ensure that all Key Stage 3 secondary school students in Northern Ireland (NI) leave formal education with a more informed, balanced and evidence-based understanding of the conflict and its continuing legacy.

In the period following the consultation CVS requests that the Department provides greater clarity on the specific content to be taught, ensures that teachers have access to appropriate training and research informed resources, and embeds safeguards that support sensitive, age-appropriate and trauma-informed learning. CVS further requests that victims and survivors and community-based organisations are meaningfully engaged in the development and review of curriculum content. CVS can help facilitate this engagement to ensure the voices of victims and survivors are reflected in the next phase of the curricular development process. Ongoing monitoring and reporting on the outworking of the current History curriculum proposals including collating student and teacher feedback will be necessary to assess learning experience and training and support requirements moving forward. Further, the consultation proposals provide a timely opportunity to advance commitments of the Strategy for Victims and Survivors 2024-34. The Strategy which seeks to build a better future for victims and survivors and wider society recognises the importance of cross-departmental cooperation including with the Department of Education in supporting educational measures which can enhance knowledge and understanding of the continuing impacts of the Troubles and its legacy. CVS would therefore welcome ongoing engagement on the outworking of the new curriculum where it intersects with the Troubles/conflict and its legacy to ensure the lived experiences of victims and survivors are reflected in the content and resources accessed under the new Key Stage 3 syllabus.

Introduction

1. The Commission for Victims and Survivors for Northern Ireland (CVS) was established in June 2008 under statute and is a Non-Departmental Public Body of the Executive Office. The principal aim of CVS is to promote awareness of the interests of victims and survivors of the Northern Ireland conflict. It has several statutory duties that include the review and adequacy of law, practice and services and the submission of advice to government and departments. CVS ensures that the views of victims and survivors are sought in the delivery of these functions and convenes a deliberative forum of victims and survivors for consultation and discussion. The Commissioner may undertake research, publish and issue guidance and advice to any body on matters relating to victims and survivors of the Troubles/conflict.
2. CVS is pleased to respond to the Department of Education consultation on the development of a new statutory curriculum for Northern Ireland (NI). Drawing on a significant research study produced by QUB in partnership with CVS in 2021¹ we note the key finding from the Strategic Review of the NI Curriculum last year that ‘...eighteen years on from the introduction of the current curriculum, universal teaching of the conflict and subsequent peace process should be included in the curriculum. It should appear before the end of compulsory History study, in order to better support all young people to make truly informed decisions throughout their lives’.² CVS welcomes the included proposals to extend learning about the Troubles/conflict within all secondary schools. With the new statutory curriculum intended for introduction from September 2028, months following the 30th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, there is a renewed opportunity for all students to learn about the past to build a better future for us all. There are, however, several issues and concerns which will need to be addressed if the full potential of this significant curricular development is to be fully realised.

Background

3. This response focusses on the proposed changes to the new History curriculum in particular how Key Stage 3 students will engage in learning about the Troubles and the conflict’s enduring legacy. As acknowledged by the Minister for Education NI in July 2026 there is currently ‘no statutory requirement to teach any aspect of the history and development of

¹ See McAlister, S. et al (2021) ‘*It Didn’t End in 1998*’ – *Examining the Impacts of Conflict Legacy Across Generations*, QUB / CVS. Report can be accessed here: [Microsoft Word - CVS-Final-Full-Report-02.docx](#)

² Crehan, L. (2025) *A Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum – A Foundation for the Future: Developing Capabilities Through a Knowledge-Rich Curriculum in Northern Ireland*, June: 111.

Northern Ireland at primary level and at Key Stage 3 only a general, high-level reference to the partition of Ireland and how it has influenced Northern Ireland today. Beyond this, there is no legally mandated content on the history of Northern Ireland.’³ This is confounding given the seismic socio-economic and political changes impacting the island of Ireland since partition including the devastating and enduring decades of the civil conflict here known as the Troubles.

4. Support for schools-based access to Troubles/conflict related education is an area that CVS have surveyed the adult population in recent years. In 2021, 43% of the NI adult population said that the teaching of the history of the Troubles/conflict in the formal education sector should be compulsory for all ages (5-18 years) while 28% said that it should be compulsory only at secondary school level. Interestingly among respondents who said that the teaching of history should be compulsory for all ages (5-18 years), 72% of students (over the age of 18) agreed with this statement. This can be viewed as an encouraging finding from a cohort of the population who had recently come through the formal education sector and overwhelmingly recognise the importance of young people learning about the history of the Troubles/conflict.⁴
5. A significant reason why enhancing access for secondary school students to Troubles education and learning about what life was like for individuals and families living here during the conflict and subsequent years relates to current efforts to address our troubled past. Recent years have witnessed the enactment of part of the provisions of the NI Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023; the publication of a Joint Framework last year by the Irish and UK Governments, the ongoing passage of the NI Troubles Bill by the UK Parliament and the forthcoming implementation of the Legacy of the Troubles Bill in the RoI. If each of these pieces of legacy legislation are implemented, it will establish a new infrastructure to support Troubles-related investigations and information recovery as well as oral history and memorialisation work. In this unique and evolving context, an unprecedented and growing body of legacy related material will potentially be released into the public domain through mechanisms including the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (ICRIR) / Legacy Commission, the Independent Commission for Information Recovery (ICIR) and Oral History and memorialisation provisions. The outworking of these legacy mechanisms and processes will shape the

³ Minister for Education NI Paul Givan, MLA written response to Assembly Question submitted by Jon Burrows, MLA, 3rd July 2026.

⁴ Lucid Talk (2021) *Population Survey 2021: Northern Ireland (NI)*, Commission for Victims and Survivors NI. Survey can be accessed here: [population-survey-2021-summary-of-main-results.pdf](#)

developing educational environment in which secondary level students study in and, will deepen knowledge and understanding about the Troubles and conflict legacy. In turn this emerging post Agreement generation, through their engagement with a foundational level of facts-based, multi-perspective knowledge of the Troubles/conflict can increasingly engage in critical thinking and informed discussion. This can support better understanding and acknowledgement of the lived experiences of victims and survivors and their families in the years ahead.

6. A central pillar of the current Strategy for Victims and Survivors (2024-34) endorsed by the NI Executive is to build a better future for victims and survivors and wider society. In improving the quality of life for victims and survivors and addressing enduring conflict legacy issues the Strategy recognises the imperative of cross-departmental cooperation. This includes working with existing and new formal and informal education programmes to enhance knowledge and mutual understanding about the trans-generational impacts of the Troubles.⁵ This consultation provides a timely opportunity that can facilitate ongoing engagement between the Department of Education and the Executive Office, CVS and other strategy partners to support the development and outworking of the new curriculum and other relevant education-based initiatives in the years ahead.

Troubles-related proposals: key findings from CVS consultation

7. This section provides an overview of the responses that were received from both the consultation session with the Victims and Survivors Forum and from the stakeholder survey issued in recent weeks. The Forum comprises 13 members with 10 participating in the consultation session. Set in statute⁶ the Forum provides a place for consultation and discussion to inform the work of CVS on a range of strategic, policy, legislative, service and research related issues affecting the wellbeing of victims and survivors of the Trouble/conflict. Members are from a range of backgrounds and different lived experiences of the conflict. Meanwhile, the stakeholder survey was circulated to over 500 stakeholders including individual victims and survivors, academics and those whose work intersects with the victims and survivors sector. The survey was also shared with 38 funded community-based victims organisations who provide essential services to support the health and wellbeing of many individuals and families across NI. Below is a summary of key points received from the different areas of the survey questions.

⁵ The Executive Office (2024) *Strategy for Victims and Survivors of the Troubles/Conflict 2024-2034*, TEO: 24.

⁶ See Article 6(6) of the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006: [The Victims and Survivors \(Northern Ireland\) Order 2006](#)

Views on making Troubles education a mandatory requirement for all Key Stage 3 students

8. There was a consensus in favour of including the Troubles/conflict and its legacy as a required part of History teaching for students aged 11-14 years. Among almost all the 48 survey respondents there was general support for making Troubles education at Key Stage 3 a mandatory curriculum requirement. Collectively among those respondents who agree with the Department's proposal to include learning about the origins, course and legacy of the Troubles views included the following:
 - a. The **importance of understanding local and shared history**: respondents repeatedly described the conflict as a major part of recent history that has shaped society, communities, identities and family life.
 - b. **Learning from the past**: many respondents said that Troubles education can help prevent a repetition of violence, discourage paramilitarism and resolve difference peacefully.
 - c. **Reaching all students**: some respondents identify Key Stage 3 as the appropriate point as History is still compulsory allowing the subject to reach students before GCSE choices are made.
 - d. **Addressing limited knowledge**: several respondents noted that younger generations may know little about parental or grand-parental experience – or may receive incomplete or inherited accounts within families and communities.
9. Importantly, a small number of respondents and several members of the Victims and Survivors Forum expressed concerns around the introduction of the Troubles/conflict at the age of 11-14. Among the issues highlighted by Forum members were that there is a need to understand and be empathetic to families where the impacts of conflict-related injury and bereavement are still very much felt and talking about the Troubles/conflict remains personal and complicated. Another view suggested that Troubles education should not be mandatory across a largely segregated education system in which conflicting narratives are held among young people and their families linked to many different Troubles related incidents. All Forum members who were part of the discussion acknowledged the complex challenges involved for secondary school teachers responsible for delivering content across this period of our troubled past.

Representing victims and survivors lived experiences accurately, sensitively and fairly within Key Stage 3 education about the Troubles and its legacy

10. Respondents to a question relating to how the lived experiences of victims and survivors can be represented accurately, sensitively and fairly in the delivery of Troubles education

at Key Stage 3 highlighted the importance of direct engagement with individuals and families impacted by conflict legacy. Primarily this could be undertaken by students accessing a broad, verified range of personal testimonies. The testimonies could be gathered from different cohorts of victims and survivors including the bereaved, injured and others directly affected. They could be collected through academic research and/or through victims organisations providing a valuable resource to aid student learning. Additionally, respondents proposed a representative advisory group or panel that would include victims and survivors from different community backgrounds to inform teaching materials and content suitable for pupils aged 11-14.

Other Departmental considerations in developing Troubles education delivery at Key Stage 3

11. A prominent theme to emerge from the survey consultation was a shared expectation that teaching about the Troubles/conflict should be factually-based, balanced and sensitive to the continuing lived experiences of victims and survivors. Specific considerations highlighted by respondents included:
 - a. **Understanding the human impact and continuing legacy:** respondents commented that they would like students to understand the effects of conflict-related bereavement, injury and how the continuing disruptive impacts of conflict legacy are still affecting the daily lives of many today.
 - b. **Recognition of the diversity of victims and survivors:** many responses call for the experiences of people from different communities and backgrounds to be acknowledged without creating a hierarchy of suffering.
 - c. **Age-appropriate and trauma informed delivery:** respondents stressed the use of sensitive language, careful selection of material and avoidance of unnecessary graphic imagery in teaching about the Troubles and its legacy.

Support for students and teachers

12. A key theme explored in the survey to inform this consultation response relates to the support and safeguards that should be in place for both students and teachers when learning about the Troubles and its legacy. Given the contested, enduring and complicated range of Troubles related issues it can explain in part the reluctance within sections of the teaching profession to deliver learning in these areas. **A strong theme to emerge from the survey and consultation session was the need for a trauma informed, carefully planned approach to Troubles education in schools generally and at Key Stage 3 in particular.** Survey feedback highlighted the need to recognise potential impacts on the

emotional wellbeing of students, teachers as well as families. Key safeguards and supports identified by survey respondents included:

- a. **Advance notice and informed preparation:** Many respondents recommend warning pupils, parents and staff about sensitive content in advance, outlining what will be covered and providing opportunities to raise concerns privately.
- b. **Trauma-informed teaching:** Teachers and classroom assistants should receive specific training in trauma awareness, sensitive language, managing difficult discussions and recognising signs of distress. Several respondents point to existing practice developed by specialist victims' and trauma organisations as a potential model.
- c. **Safe classroom practice:** Respondents call for respectful ground rules, carefully selected materials, non-sensational language, opportunities for reflection and follow-up, and a learning environment in which disagreement can be managed without personal attack.

13. A key recommendation contained in CVS's 'It Didn't End in 1998' report was that current teacher training on the Troubles/conflict and wider cross community issues needs to be expanded to develop capacity and confidence to aid their facilitation of challenging and sensitive topics in the classroom.⁷ In addition to drawing on the extensive existing teaching practice delivering Troubles education as part of the GCSE History syllabus in recent years, early career and experienced teachers can access a considerable set of useful resources. This includes CCEA's publication 'Teaching Controversial Issues at Key Stage 3' as well as the range of resources specifically on the Troubles produced by the History Teachers Association NI (HTANI).⁸ Meanwhile, **outside of the teaching profession several useful resources and programmes were recommended by survey respondents. This included the WAVE Trauma Centre Citizen Education Programme,⁹ a trauma-informed training programme delivered by 'Citizen Educators' that includes engaging with a range of professionals across different sectors about the human impact of the Troubles.** One respondent recommended the incorporation of the Programme into teacher training which would enhance knowledge on the long-term impacts of the Troubles/conflict on the health and wellbeing of individuals and families – that in turn can develop capacity and confidence among teaching staff.

⁷ McAlister, S. et al (2021) 'It Didn't End in 1998' – *Examining the Impacts of Conflict Legacy Across Generations*, QUB / CVS: 130.

⁸ See link to resources on the HTANI website: [NI Troubles Resources – History Teachers Association Northern Ireland](#)

⁹ Further information on the Programme can be accessed here: [Trauma Education » Wave Trauma | Northern Ireland](#)

14. **Two other Troubles-related resources that teachers can utilise with Key Stage 3 and 4 students in developing their knowledge and skills when engaged in learning about the Troubles and its legacy are the Oral History Toolkit for Young People and the House Virtual Reality Experience.** Developed by Professor Chris Reynolds with young people from the NI Youth Forum in partnership with CVS and the Ulster Museum the Toolkit (which is due to be launched in October 2026) can aid learning through providing an accessible, age-appropriate and evidence-based approach to engaging the views and lived experiences of the 'ordinary lives' of family, friends and other acquaintances during the Troubles. These learning experiences derived from using the Toolkit to conduct interviews would not only enrich their teaching about the Troubles/conflict and wider peace process, but it will provide a broader level of empathy from hearing the different experiences of those who lived through the decades of violent conflict and its aftermath. Moreover, the House Virtual Reality (VR) experience which CVS have utilised previously to facilitate access to multiple Key Stage 3 students in secondary schools across NI is an immersive creative project designed to help people, including young people to explore the continuing social and intergenerational consequences of the Troubles/conflict.¹⁰ The House which originated as a collaboration between CVS and the Big Telly Theatre Company drew on key themes and findings from the It Didn't End in 1998 research study including intergenerational trauma, the influence of family experiences and attitudes on younger generations and the continuing consequences of conflict for young people who may not themselves have experienced the conflict.
15. Importantly, a virtual reality experience enables dissemination to wider audiences including young people in schools and youth organisations. **Both the Oral History Toolkit and the House / House VR project are good examples of research informed resources that can facilitate intergenerational interaction which enhance awareness, knowledge and critical thinking around the lived experiences of people who lived through the Troubles and are still impacted by enduring legacy issues.**

Post-Agreement period: learning about the impacts of conflict legacy

16. During the Forum consultation members noted the limited temporal scope of the CCEA GCSE History syllabus extending to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. They expressed the view that it was imperative that Key Stage 3 students examining the post-Agreement years

¹⁰ Further information on the House can be accessed here: [The-House-PDF-Booklet.pdf](#) and the House Virtual Reality Experience here: [The House Virtual Reality Experience - Commission for Victims & Survivors](#)

including significant events notably the Omagh Bomb as well as the enduring nature of conflict legacy linked to ongoing paramilitarism and the challenges to address the past until and including the major legislative developments in recent years. CVS notes how the new Key Stage 3 History framework intends to cover the ‘experience of ordinary life during the NI Troubles’ including ‘how political violence and security measures affected everyday routines, travel and community relations...[and] the search for safety and security and the role of family and neighbourhoods in sustaining daily life...’ **It will be equally important for Key Stage 3 students to learn about what life has been like for victims and survivors and their families since the 1998 Agreement and the pervasive impact of failing to adequately deal with legacy issues.**

17. Significant work is being delivered under government strategies for victims and survivors notably the current Strategy for Victims and Survivors 2024-34 including the invaluable contribution of community-based organisations providing services and support to individuals and families affected by the legacy of the Troubles/conflict. Allied to this since the 1998 Agreement there have been multiple political negotiations, agreements and implementing arrangements that have shaped the legacy landscape from the Consultative Group on the Past report in 2009 to the Stormont House Agreement in 2014 to more recently the UK-Irish Joint Framework on the Legacy of the Troubles and the ongoing Northern Ireland Troubles Bill. **While acknowledging the significant level of strategic, legislative and policy activity during this period and ensuring the appropriate development of content for Key Stage 3 students it will be important for those students to engage with some of these key developments during this period.**

[More detail on the proposals required](#)

18. The lack of clarity on how the new History curriculum will address the legacy of the Troubles/conflict with Key Stage 3 students extends to a broader criticism of a lack of detail and specificity around the proposals. **Given the significant body of teaching and learning experience, albeit an optional and uneven set of experiences around the Troubles/conflict under the current NI curriculum over the past decade the CCEA GCSE History syllabus provides an important reference to inform the new Key Stage 3 History curriculum.**
19. The current CCEA GCSE History Specification document published in September 2017 contains a detailed breakdown of the content to be covered under Option 2: Changing Relations: Northern Ireland and its Neighbours 1965-98. From the O'Neill Years and the

campaign for civil rights in the late 1960s to the collapse of power-sharing in the early 1970s to the Downing Street Declaration and Good Friday Agreement in the mid-late 1990s, many of these key political developments will inform a factual understanding of the origins and course of the Troubles/conflict. **It is surprising that the new draft History curriculum framework contains no reference to established teaching and learning experience at Key Stage 4 and how it could help shape the delivery of similar, age-appropriate content at Key Stage 3.**

20. CVS shares the significant concerns expressed by several educational commentators related to the absence of a specific breakdown of content to inform teaching of the Troubles/conflict and wider legacy issues at Key Stage 3. McAuley (2026) has highlighted how despite the design intention of the new History curriculum to be 'knowledge-rich' and the period of the Troubles, peace processes and conflict legacy spanning a period of five decades there are no sub-points and limited examples or indication of events, developments or issues that students should cover. McAuley points to the new draft History curriculum rather than offering a 'blueprint for change' as advocated by the Independent Curriculum Reviewer, Lucy Crehan, the paucity of Troubles-related syllabus content reflects a continuation of avoidance by the Department when examining the history of our troubled past.¹¹
21. **Clearly significant work is required to develop and finalise the Key Stage 3 History curriculum including the syllabus content capturing key developments and events during this extensive period of our recent troubled history.** As part of this process CVS would encourage Department of Education officials and members of the History Subject Working Group to engage with victims and survivors, as well as community-based practitioners who work with individuals and families impacted by the conflict's legacy. These engagements will provide useful insights in informing learning content and approaches to teaching different topics related to the Troubles while raising awareness of the lived experiences of victims and survivors continuing to be shaped by current developments in addressing conflict legacy. **As providing advice to government and departments and promoting awareness and safeguarding matters relating to victims are statutory duties of CVS, we stand ready to provide support and advice to the department to facilitate this engagement.**

¹¹ McAuley, C. (2026) "Whatever you say, day nothing": the Troubles' in Northern Ireland's draft History curriculum..., *Sluggie O'Toole*, 13th August.

Monitoring, Reporting and Engagement

22. **Monitoring and reporting on the outworking of the current proposals to make it mandatory for all secondary schools to deliver Troubles education at Key Stage 3 will be important on several levels.** From the student's perspective, it will be important to collate their feedback on their learning experience including engagement with a range of educational resources to gauge changing levels of knowledge, understanding and critical thinking about different aspects of the legacy of the conflict. Further, capturing teacher feedback could inform workforce training and development including the sharing of good practice when delivering learning on controversial issues that could be integrated into the delivery of Troubles education to Key Stage 3 students. Aligned to this is establishing the extent to which trauma informed practice is supporting both teachers and students within the learning process. At a quantitative level in extending Troubles education to new cohorts of Key Stage 3 students, it will be helpful to establish a publicly accessible database of student numbers learning about the Troubles and its legacy. Equally, it would be useful to understand how increased access to Troubles-related education impacts on students choosing GCSE History. Relatedly, it will be interesting to understand if the extension of Troubles-related education encourages more schools to offer access to Option 2: Changing Relations: NI and its Neighbours 1965-98.
23. A positive development that could emerge from this consultation is enhanced engagement with victims and survivors in developing curricular content relating to the Troubles/conflict and its legacy. While CVS recognise the important work conducted by the History Subject Working Group comprising teachers, academics and subject specialists there is a need for more regular engagement between Department of Education officials and Executive Office officials responsible for delivering the Strategy for Victims and Survivors 2024-34. **CVS would also welcome further engagement on the outworking of the new curriculum where it intersects with the Troubles/conflict and its legacy to ensure the lived experiences of victims and survivors are reflected in the content and resources accessed under the new Key Stage 3 syllabus.**

Concluding Summary

24. CVS supports the Department of Education's proposals to include compulsory Key Stage 3 learning on the origins, course, peace processes and legacy of the Troubles/conflict in Northern Ireland. This represents a timely and important opportunity to ensure that all secondary school students have the opportunity to develop a foundational, facts-based understanding of this key period of our recent history and its continuing impact on

individuals, families, communities and wider society. For the proposals to achieve their full potential, further detail will be required on the specific content to be taught, different perspectives to be reflected, and the resources and safeguards needed to support sensitive and age-appropriate learning. Teachers should be able to access training including effective shared teaching practice and research informed resources to deliver challenging content with confidence and empathy and multi-perspectivity.

25. CVS welcomes continued engagement with the Department of Education and other key stakeholders as part of the process to inform curriculum content, teaching approaches and supporting research in the months ahead. As reflected in our approach to consulting with a range of stakeholders including victims and survivors as part of this consultation we would welcome further opportunities to facilitate engagement with our partners to inform this vital work going forward.

26. We also request that the implementation of Troubles-related education is monitored and reviewed over time, including through feedback from students and teachers. This will help ensure that the new curriculum strengthens knowledge, understanding and critical thinking among young people, while contributing to a more informed and reflective society in the years ahead.