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Youth Assembly Education Committee

“A curriculum for the 21st century –

Learning for Life and Work”

June 2025

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# Members of the Youth Assembly Education Committee 2023-2025

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# Executive Summary

The Youth Assembly launched its Big Youth Survey in January 2024. The survey was sent out to young people aged 11-21 years old in schools and youth organisations across Northern Ireland. The Youth Assembly debated the top ten topics from the survey during their second plenary in February 2024, and chose their committees based on a vote. This resulted in the formation of the Youth Assembly Education, Health, and Rights and Equality committees.

After their plenary, the committees met with Participation Officers from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY).

In May 2024, the Education committee members attended a committee planning day, where they participated in capacity building workshops and activities. They decided on their chosen topic of ‘A curriculum fit for the 21st century,’ with a focus on the Learning for Life and Work (LLW) curriculum.

In the months that followed, they examined research reports, frameworks, and studies to help inform their understanding. In August 2024, they held a Youth Assembly committee Stakeholder Day during which they heard evidence from experts such as the Department of Education and CCEA. Later in the year, they met with Queen’s University Belfast, the Secondary Student’s Union of Northern Ireland (SSUNI) and teachers from Strangford College.

In January and February 2025, the committee created a survey to examine the experiences of young people across Northern Ireland. They launched their survey in late March 2024 to all post-primary schools and youth organisations. The survey focused on pupils’ experience of LLW, the manner in which it is taught, the topics they learn and those they feel are missing. They received 1467 responses.

The Youth Assembly Education committee, supported by extensive pupil feedback, is calling for urgent reform of the Learning for Life and Work (LLW) curriculum. While pupils value the idea of LLW, they are frustrated by its current delivery and content. Their recommendations focus on making the subject meaningful, engaging, and genuinely useful for life beyond school.

**1. Make LLW practical and useful**

Pupils want LLW to equip them with real-world life skills. This includes financial literacy, housing rights, understanding employment and taxes, and knowing what to do in emergencies. The subject should function as a ‘toolkit’ for adulthood — not just theoretical learning.

**2. Modernise and expand the curriculum**

The current content is outdated. Pupils are calling for the inclusion of relevant social issues like media literacy, substance abuse and addiction, gender-based harm, grief, mental health, and inclusive, consent-based sex education. The curriculum should reflect the real challenges young people face today.

**3. Train and support LLW teachers**

LLW must be delivered by trained, enthusiastic teachers — not just those with a free period. Ongoing professional development and whole-school support are essential to ensure teachers are equipped to handle sensitive, fast-evolving topics.Teachers should have opportunities to share good practice.

**4. Make learning interactive and engaging**

Pupils want LLW to go beyond worksheets. They are asking for interactive teaching and learning methods such as guest speakers, workshops, debates, and real-life case studies. Lessons should create space for discussion, personal reflection, and active participation.

**5. Treat LLW with the respect it deserves**

LLW needs protected time in the timetable and a clear status within school life. It should be consistently delivered across schools and meaningfully recognised, potentially through project-based assessment. Pupils will only value the subject if schools do too.

**6. Ensure youth voice is heard on curriculum matters**

It is essential that schools actively listen to youth voice when making curriculum decisions. Involving students in shaping what they learn enhances engagement, ensures the curriculum is relevant to their needs, and empowers them to take an active role in their education.

# Youth Assembly Background

The Youth Assembly was established in June 2021. The current 90 Youth Assembly Members took their seats in October 2023. At the time of recruitment, they were in school years 9-12 which is approximately 12-16 years old. They are a diverse group. Membership includes young people from every constituency and recruitment was designed to ensure proportionate representation of Section 75 categories including gender, religious background, race, sexuality, disability, and young people with caring responsibilities. In addition, there is proportionate representation of young people with care experience and those in receipt of Free School Meals.

The Youth Assembly was established to perform three functions:

* To engage with the work of the Northern Ireland Assembly, specifically with Assembly Committees on legislation and inquiries relevant to young people.
* To undertake project work generated by the three Youth Assembly committees; and
* To enable consultation with government departments and to participate in youth voice projects.

The Youth Assembly Members established three committees for their focus in this mandate. These are Education, Health, and Rights and Equality.

# Youth Assembly Education Committee

## Formation of the committee

The Youth Assembly’s Education committee was formed in March 2024. There are two other committees in the Youth Assembly – the Rights and Equality committee and the Health committee.

The committees were formed following the [Youth Assembly’s Big Youth Survey](https://niyouthassembly.org/big-youth-survey-summary-report/) which asked young people aged 11-21 years old about the issues which matter the most to them and what would they like the Youth Assembly to focus on during their mandate. The Big Youth Survey went live in January 2024 and received nearly 1800 responses from young people from across Northern Ireland. The Youth Assembly debated the top ten issues from the survey:

1. Health
2. Education
3. Jobs
4. Rights & Equality
5. Environment
6. Sport & Leisure
7. Housing and homelessness
8. Poverty
9. Economy
10. Culture & Identity

Members voted on their top three issues from this list and those topics formed their committees – Education, Health, and Rights and Equality committees.

## Committee Planning Day

In May 2024, the Education committee attended a committee planning day. They participated in workshops and discussion-based activities to decide what issues were the most pressing. They also looked back at the results of the Big Youth Survey to see which concerns the young people had raised. They decided to examine the Learning for Life and Work curriculum.

They discussed issues relating to education within the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child’s Concluding Observations on the United Kingdom, 2023.[[1]](#footnote-1) This report called for curriculum reform to better serve young people in modern times. The committee questioned whether the current curriculum in Northern Ireland is fit for purpose in the 21st century. The last time the curriculum was reviewed was 2007. This is before most of the Youth Assembly Members were born.

They met with staff from the office of the Northern Ireland Children’s Commissioner for Children and Young People to discuss issues within education through the lens of children’s rights.

The next step in their process was to find out what work has already been done in this area.

## Research

After their planning day, the committee met to consider existing research on Learning for Life and Work. They examined the following:

**Independent Review of Education, 2023[[2]](#footnote-2)**

* + The Independent Review of Education highlights how emotional health and wellbeing are currently addressed in the Northern Ireland curriculum. In primary schools, this is taught through *Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU)*, and in post-primary schools, it falls under *Learning for Life and Work (LLW)*. These areas help pupils develop communication skills, thinking skills, and personal capabilities. Resources such as CCEA’s *Living. Learning. Together* and the *Wellbeing Hub* support wellbeing teaching at both stages. However, despite being part of the curriculum, emotional wellbeing is often not prioritised, particularly in the later years of education.
  + **Independent Review of Education Panel Conclusions on Wellbeing:**
    - The review panel strongly recommends that emotional health and wellbeing be given higher priority across all stages of education, from early years to post-16. This should include:
      * PDMU and LLW
      * Child development with a focus on attachment theory
      * Self-awareness
      * Emotional intelligence
      * Metacognition
    - They acknowledge that prioritising this is challenging in upper school years due to exam and assessment pressures. Still, they argue it is essential to raise the profile of emotional wellbeing and recognise its critical role in the curriculum. For this to be effective, investment in training and resources is necessary, and education should be part of a coordinated, cross-departmental approach to promoting mental and emotional health.
  + **LLW and the World of Work:**
    - The review also emphasises the importance of ensuring all pupils—not just those in pre-vocational routes—learn about the world of work. This is already part of the *Employability* section of LLW at Key Stage 3. While the aims of LLW are described in the report as “admirable,” the course is often not given high status in schools.

LLW covers essential areas such as:

* + - * Employability
      * Personal development
      * Wellbeing
      * Relationship and sexuality education (RSE)
  + These issues were identified by young people as issues of significant personal concern, yet they felt these topics were rarely well addressed in schools. The review panel called for:
    - Raising the status of LLW
    - Strengthening its content
    - Improving delivery through high-quality CPD (continuous professional development)
  + In summary, the report highlights both the potential and current shortcomings of LLW, particularly in its role in preparing young people for life, work, and emotional wellbeing. The panel advocates for a stronger, more consistent, and better-supported approach across all schools.

**Belfast Youth Forum Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Report, 2019[[3]](#footnote-3)**

* + As part of the 30th anniversary of the UNCRC in 2019, the Belfast Youth Forum conducted a research project to gather young people's views on the quality and effectiveness of RSE. The survey engaged 771 participants aged 14–24, primarily female and based in Belfast schools.
  + **Key Findings:**
    - Awareness of Rights: While 72% knew they had a right to RSE, only 52% felt this right was being met. Younger teens (14–16) felt more positively than older ones.
    - Quality of RSE: RSE was commonly described as basic, biased, unhelpful, and impractical.
    - Information Sources: Most young people relied on friends (62%) and social media (55%) for RSE information; only 54% cited school lessons.
    - RSE: Despite 86% agreeing that school is the best place for RSE, 60% found school-based RSE not useful. It was often taught in Biology or Science and influenced by religious ethos, which many found inappropriate.
    - Desired Content: Young people want lessons on personal relationships (66%), sexual intercourse (64%), STI prevention (62%), as well as topics like love, respect, consent, and LGBTQ+ relationships.
    - Delivery: 77% preferred RSE to be delivered through a structured course, and 42% wanted it taught by qualified RSE teachers.
  + **Recommendations**:
    - Rights-Based Approach: RSE should be rooted in sexual rights, prevention, and gender equality.
    - Co-Designed Curriculum: Young people should help shape a curriculum that is inclusive, age-appropriate, and relevant.
    - Qualified Delivery: RSE must be taught by trained, respectful educators, with accessible content for all, including disabled or excluded young people.
  + **Conclusion**:
    - There is a clear disconnect between young people's needs and the RSE currently provided. Young people overwhelmingly want comprehensive, inclusive, and professionally delivered RSE and to have a voice in how it is developed and taught. The research aims to influence future policy to ensure RSE better supports young people’s health, rights, and relationships.

**‘Let us Learn’ Report, Secondary Student’s Union of Northern Ireland (2024)**

* + **Purpose of the report**
    - The report was created by young people in Northern Ireland to highlight the inadequacies in Learning for Life and Work (LLW) education. It aims to initiate reform and ensure that students are better prepared for life beyond school.
  + **Key statistics**
    - 72.9% of students feel they have not received adequate LLW education.
    - 77% had not heard of the term RSE (Relationships and Sexuality Education).
    - 64% said they had not been taught about their rights in LLW.
  + **General perception of LLW**
    - LLW is often seen as a “filler subject,” not taken seriously by schools or teachers. Students report that it lacks structure, relevance, and practical application.
  + **Employability and financial education**
    - Students report minimal education on essential life skills such as taxes, budgeting, loans, insurance, CV writing, and interview preparation. Many feel unprepared for adult responsibilities and for the workforce.
  + **Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)**
    - Delivery is inconsistent and often uncomfortable. Students want age-appropriate, inclusive, and practical education on consent, contraception, healthy relationships, and sexual health.
  + **Mental health**
    - Mental health education is superficial, often limited to generic advice. Students want deeper understanding of mental illnesses, practical coping strategies, and support resources.
  + **Rights, equality, and justice**
    - Most students have not been taught about their rights. They want to learn about employment rights, human rights, and how to respond to injustice.
  + **Democracy and active participation**
    - There is little to no education on voting, political systems, or civic engagement. Students want to understand how democracy works and how to participate effectively.
  + **Top five recommendations**
    - Listen to the views of young people consistently.
    - Engage with pupils and parents regularly.
    - Provide proper training and resources for teachers.
    - Regularly review and update the curriculum.
    - Be creative and bold to make LLW inspiring and impactful.

**A Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland - A Foundation for the Future: Developing Capabilities Through a Knowledge-Rich Curriculum in Northern Ireland (June 2025)**

A recent report for the Department of Education by Lucy Crehan, titled " *A Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum - A Foundation for the Future: Developing Capabilities Through a Knowledge-Rich Curriculum in Northern Ireland (June 2025)*,” reflects many of the Youth Assembly members’ experiences of LLW. Youth Assembly Members were pleased to have the opportunity to meet with Ms Crehan twice during her research.

In her report, Ms. Crehan states that many stakeholders find that LLW is poorly delivered and has a negative image in many schools. The report recommends changes to LLW, especially in relation to Citizenship education. [[4]](#footnote-4) In her evidence to the Education Committee in June 2025 she stated:

*'So consistently did I hear that LLW is not taught properly, that I think, you know, the brand is beyond repair. I think the contents of it are fundamentally important: the employment, the citizenship and personal development. Those strands need to be given their due importance.'*

Youth Assembly Members agree that the elements of LLW are of fundamental importance and hope that the Minister will carefully consider appropriate reforms.

## Committee stakeholder day

In August 2024, the Youth Assembly Education committee held a stakeholder day in Parliament Buildings. They invited the following experts:

* Department of Education: Ray Caldwell, Director of Curriculum, Assessment, Teacher Education and Professional Learning, Sam Dempster, Deputy Principal, Rachel McBride, Staff Officer and Andrena Murray, Principal
* Assembly Research Officer: Sinead McMurray
* CCEA: Roisin Radcliffe, Deidre Coffey, and Liam Dempsey

The discussion focused on the support available for teachers and delivery of the LLW curriculum. While the young people agreed that LLW is important, issues remain in its implementation. These include staff training, unclear guidelines, no dedicated teaching time, and a mismatch between policy and practice. Concerns were raised about RSE, the poor image of LLW, inconsistent delivery of LLW, lack of accountability, and limited opportunities for young people to engage with governance and curriculum issues. There is a call for clearer expectations, more support for teachers, and meaningful youth involvement in shaping the curriculum.

After the Stakeholder Day, the Youth Assembly Education committee met to take further evidence from the following:

* Lesley Emerson, Deputy Head of PCGE Secondary Education, QUB and Lauren Bond, President of Secondary Student’s Union NI (SSUNI).
* Nadine Dorrian and Gillian Gibson, teachers from Strangford Integrated College.

Lesley Emerson (QUB) and Lauren Bond (SSUNI) gave a presentation on the origins, implementation, and issues around LLW. Lesley gave a brief overview of the LLW curriculum and spoke about how LLW and education are enshrined in rights.

Children’s rights to education are enshrined in two articles: Article 28, the right to education and Article 29, which is often overlooked, describes the goals of education. The latter being more specific to how children should be taught.

Lesley encouraged the committee to ensure that recommendations are rights based.

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Figure 1 Main issues with LLW (QUB)

Lauren spoke to the committee about the SSUNI report, *Let Us Learn,[[5]](#footnote-5) (2024),* why the SSUNI wanted to prioritise this issue, and what they learned from pupils about their experience of LLW.

In December, the Youth Assembly Education committee met with Nadine Dorrian and Gillian Gibson, from Strangford Integrated College. They spoke at length about how they deliver and structure LLW in their school. It is taught concurrently across Key Stages 3 and 4, with sixth form students also receiving lessons. Form teachers deliver the curriculum using resources available on Microsoft Teams.

Nadine and Gillian, teachers in charge of LLW, stressed the importance of student and parental voice, actively seeking pupil feedback at the end of each module. Some lessons are supported by Sixth form pupils, especially around sensitive topics such as consent and period dignity. Puberty education is delivered both in co-ed and gender-separated settings.

The school audits their LLW curriculum regularly to ensure the content is balanced and non-repetitive. Staff are given annual training, and a variety of appropriate external agencies support delivery. Focus groups with pupils are used to evaluate the effectiveness of guest speakers.

The school is responsive to current issues and has, when appropriate, collapsed the school timetable to address emerging concerns. They report no significant issues with Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) opt-outs, and staff generally take LLW seriously and enjoy teaching Personal Development (PD) in particular. Teaching LLW at the same time, across the school, allows staff to support one another if needed.

Despite the value placed on LLW and strong pupil need for this content, challenges remain. Staffing is a key issue, and while the preferred model involves a trained specialist team, this is not always feasible due to timetable constraints.

The committee met in early 2025 to plan their own survey for young people which was launched via ‘Citizen Space’ at the end of March 2025.

## LLW Survey

Bottom of Form

The committee created a survey via Citizen Space to further examine pupils’ experience of LLW. The survey went out to youth organisations and post primary schools across Northern Ireland and received 1467 responses from young people aged 11-18 years old. It asked questions relating to how LLW is being taught at Key stages 3 and 4 and pupils’ perceptions of the content.

The survey began with questions about the young people who took part in the survey.

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As noted from the above graph and statistics, the majority of young people who took part in the survey were aged between 12 and 16 years old.

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The majority of young people who took part in the survey attended a grammar school, totalling nearly 70% of the responses. 7% were from integrated schools and 2% from Irish medium schools.

The first set of questions focused on the overall experience of LLW for pupils ranging on the following areas:

* Importance of LLW
* Relevance
* Content
* How it is timetabled
* Pupil voice
* Teachers

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Only 38% agreed/strongly agreed that LLW is seen as an important subject. 35% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This would suggest that pupils have a varied experience of LLW in schools.

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The next question asked if pupils enjoy LLW as a school subject. The majority of pupils agreed or strongly agreed with over 46% of the vote. 24% of pupils either disagreed or disagreed or strongly disagreed.

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This question focused on the importance of LLW in relation to core subjects such as English and Maths. Over 60% of pupils disagreed/ strongly disagreed suggesting that LLW is not seen as important as ‘core’ subjects.

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In relation to age-appropriate lessons or topics taught in LLW, an overwhelming majority of pupils, nearly 77%, believed that LLW lessons are age appropriate.

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The next question focused on productivity in LLW lessons. The committee were aware of different levels of productivity in their own lessons. Some enjoyed thought provoking, active learning-based lessons, whereas some did nothing at all. Once again, this question had a mixed response. More than a third of pupils agreed/ strongly agreed that pupils are productive in LLW lessons and a third of pupils disagreed/ strongly disagreed. This could suggest that pupils have a varied experience depending on their school.

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Within LLW, sensitive issues such as sectarianism, racism or relationships and sexuality education are taught. 45% of pupils agreed or strongly agreed that they felt safe discussing these issues. However, over 24% disagreed or strongly disagreed, intimating again, that pupils have a varied experience of discussing sensitive topics in LLW lessons.

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The majority of pupils (58%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “Given the choice, I would study LLW”. This is worrying given that pupils recognise that the topics covered in LLW are important to them.

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This questioned focused on whether LLW or a similar subject should be compulsory for 16-18 years olds, as it is only a statutory subject until Key Stage 4. Again, the response from young people was quite varied with over 38% agreeing or strongly agreeing that it should be compulsory.

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Just over 38% of pupils agreed or strongly agreed that LLW lessons are relevant to them. Over 34% of pupils neither agreed/disagreed and over 27% of pupils either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

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Almost 58% of pupils either agreed or strongly agreed that LLW content is up to date. Many of those completing the free text boxes later in the survey made suggestions of content could make it more relevant.

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The next question asked if LLW takes up too much time on the timetable. Over two-thirds of pupils disagreed/ strongly disagreed with this statement suggesting that pupils are content with how much time LLW has on their timetable.

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Next, we focused on pupil voice on LLW and if pupils have a say on how it is taught in schools. Nearly 50% of pupils disagreed or strongly disagreed. Only 18% said that they have a say in how LLW is taught. This could suggest that there is no forum for pupils the opportunity to discuss LLW as a subject within schools.

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In relation to teachers being comfortable with teaching controversial or sensitive topics, over 70% of pupils agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Nearly 9% of pupils disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. This implies that most pupils feel that their teachers feel comfortable in this area.

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The above statement asked if pupils feel that LLW teachers have received sufficient training and over 67% of pupils agreed or strongly agreed. Only 13% of pupils either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

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Almost half (49%) of pupils agreed that teachers enjoy teaching LLW. However, nearly 36% neither agreed nor disagreed and over 13% of pupils disagreed or strongly disagreed.

### Key Stage 3 (KS3) LLW

The next section focused on LLW at Key Stage 3 by examining the topics which are outlined in the statutory curriculum. Pupils were asked, ‘The following topics are on the NI Curriculum for Citizenship/Personal Development/Employability at Key Stage 3 (years 8-10). Which have you been taught?’

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Subject** | **Topic** | **Yes** | **No** | **Don’t know** |
| **Citizenship** | Diversity and Inclusion | 65.44% | 10.16% | 24.27% |
|  | Human Rights and Social Responsibility | 75.73% | 8.04% | 16.09% |
|  | Equality and Social Justice | 62.37% | 12.82% | 24.68% |
|  | Democracy and Active Participation | 39.26% | 24.74% | 35.86% |
| **Personal Development** | Self-Awareness | 59.30% | 15.00% | 25.56% |
|  | Personal Health | 66.19% | 15.61% | 18.06% |
|  | Relationships (RSE) | 55.76% | 22.97% | 21.13% |
| **Employability** | Work in the Local and Global Economy | 45.06% | 25.90% | 28.90% |
|  | Career Management | 49.49% | 27.33% | 23.04% |
|  | Enterprise and Entrepreneurship | 42.33% | 29.58% | 27.95% |

Examining the above responses, between 39% and 75% of pupils said ‘yes, I have been taught about this.’ Given that LLW is compulsory, this is worrying. Perhaps they do not remember, or they were not taught these topics at all.

It could be suggested that most Citizenship topics are being taught, however, there seems to be a large deficit with Democracy and Active Participation, as it seems to be the least familiar. Within Personal Development, there seems to be a large focus on Personal Health compared to the other topics. And finally, within Employability, there was a response rate of less than 50% stating that they have been taught the main topics. Overall, it could be implied that topics covered in LLW at KS3 is rather varied in schools.

The next section focused on delivery of LLW in schools at KS3.

The first question asked pupils how LLW is delivered in their schools in relation to how it is actually timetabled on a weekly basis:

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As noted above, it is clear that most pupils receive LLW as a timetabled subject with over 96% response to this question. Over 9% responded stating that is delivered with their form time, over 7% responded stating that is delivered through other subject such as RE or Science, for example, over 13% through external organisations, over 16% through school assemblies and over 3% through collapsed timetable days. Finally, over 2% gave ‘other’ as their answer giving examples such as LLW delivered through their Careers lessons, for example.

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The above question focused on pupils having the same teacher for all three elements of LLW. The majority of pupils responded ‘Yes’ to this question with over 80% of the vote.

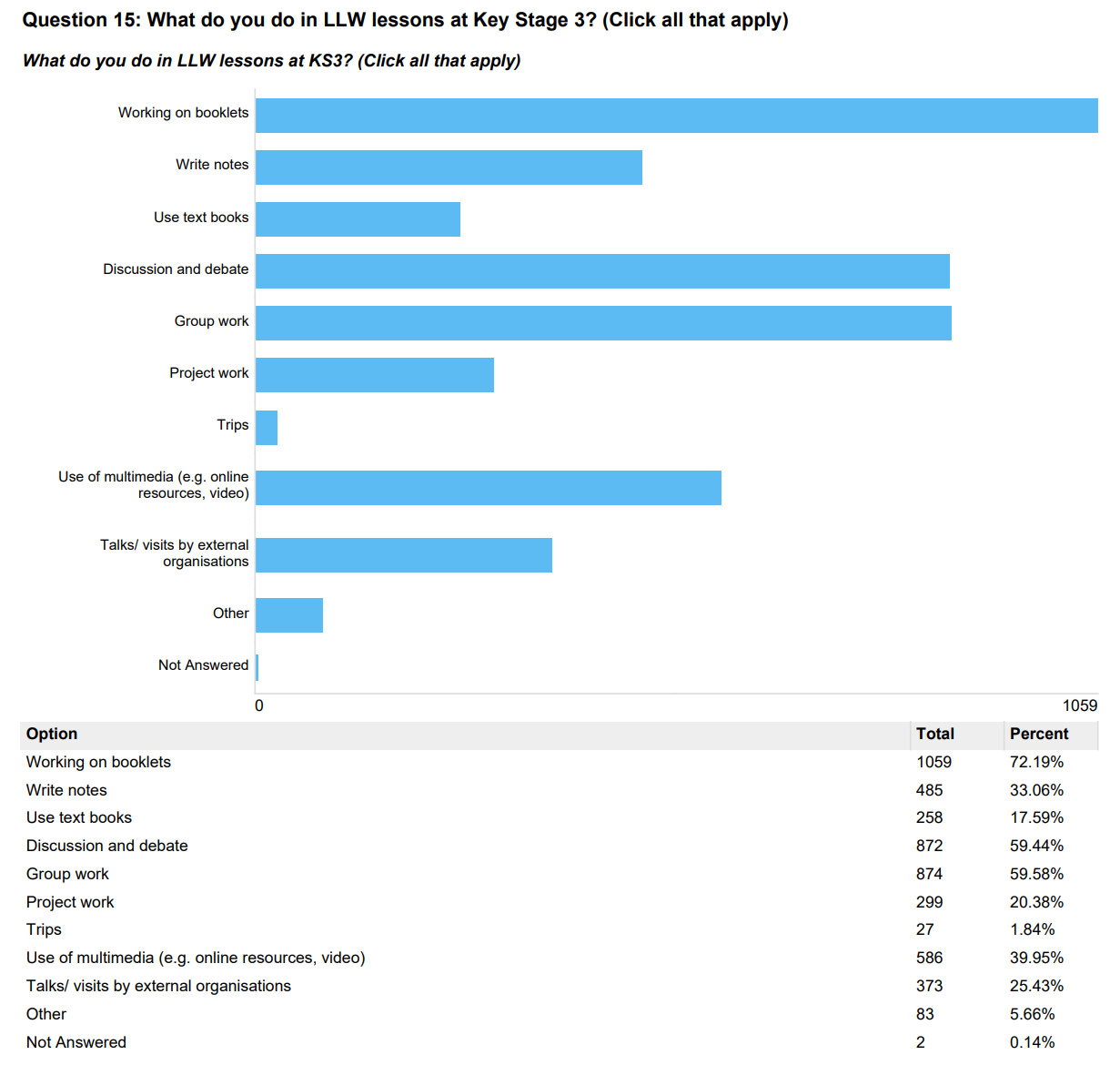
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The majority of pupils (78%) in their responses to the above question were aware of what will be taught and by which teacher and when within the academic year.



There were various responses to the above question as pupils could submit multiple answers. We can determine what pupils do in LLW classes by ranking their answers in order:

1. Working on booklets
2. Group work
3. Discussion work
4. Use of multimedia
5. Write notes
6. Talks/Visits by external organisations
7. Project work
8. Use textbooks
9. Other
10. Trips

The next question was a follow-up question to those pupils who answered with ‘Other.’ Pupils described LLW as inconsistent and often unproductive. Some said they did,

*“basically nothing”* or *“just listened to the teacher.”*

Others noted, *“the teacher lets us go on our phones”* or *“we revise or complete homework.”*

A few mentioned more engaging activities like,

*“walking debates,”* *“CPR training,”* or using *“iPads in an app called Showbie.”*

 One pupil summed it up,

*“It varies – I’ve had some teach me with discussion and some not teach at all.”*

### Missing topics in KS3 LLW

Pupils across all school types voiced significant frustration with the current KS3 LLW curriculum, calling for a shift away from abstract concepts like political structures toward skills that prepare them for adult life. Many said the subject fails to meet the promise implied in its title, "Learning for Life and Work."

One recurring theme was the absence of practical life skills. Students wanted lessons on how to manage a household, handle emergencies, set up a bank account, and understand the basics of adult responsibilities.

*“Basic life skills e.g. setting up a bank account or first aid.”*

*“How to cope with medical emergencies such as seizures appropriately in public.”*

*“Practical teaching — how to fill out a mortgage, taxes, day-to-day adult things.”*

There was also a strong appetite for education that connects with the modern digital and social world. Topics like online safety, media literacy, and recognising harmful behaviours such as misogyny were viewed as crucial and currently underrepresented.

*“Budgeting, media literacy, misogyny, how local and national political systems work.”*

**Students were clear: KS3 LLW should focus on empowerment through competence. They want to leave school equipped not just with facts, but with the confidence to live independently and responsibly.**

It is important to note that some of the topics in this section which were cited by pupils as ‘missing’, are in fact on the KS3 curriculum. This begs the question about why pupils feel they are not receiving this education.

### Financial literacy and money management

Financial education emerged as a top priority. Students believe that LLW should provide them with a foundational understanding of personal finance long before they face financial responsibilities in adulthood.

*“Relevant life advice — managing finances, information on politics that the average voter should know.”*

*“Again, there should be a bit about budgeting and managing money — lots of 16-year-olds have jobs and pay bills for phones or subscriptions.”*

*“How to manage money — budgeting, debt, credit cards, mortgages.”*

Many students specifically referenced needing to understand things like taxes, debt, interest, and credit scores. They emphasised that these skills are essential and should not be left for post-school discovery.

*“There should be a bit about financial management — how to pay for phone or broadband bills.”*

**The message is clear: financial literacy is not optional, and students feel unprepared to handle the demands of adult economic life.**

### Jobs, careers and employment

Students expressed disappointment in how careers education is delivered. Most felt that LLW does not provide a structured or meaningful pathway toward employment readiness.

*“How to prepare for careers and life outside of school — we can't be expected to choose our subjects around potential careers we are taught nothing about.”*

*“More information on how to start your own journey into employment.”*

*“Teach current topics better and teach us how to get jobs better.”*

**Students called for lessons on writing CVs, preparing for interviews, exploring industries, and learning about different career paths based on interests and strengths. They want more than a single careers week or isolated guest speaker — they want ongoing, embedded support.**

### Mental health and emotional wellbeing

Many students highlighted the growing pressures they face in and outside school and felt that LLW was a missed opportunity to address these through meaningful mental health education.

*“More focus on mental health and making sure the students feel like they have a meaning in life.”*

*“We need lessons on how to deal with stress in school — especially around exams.”*

*“Calming mechanisms should be taught alongside academic pressure.”*

**Students want to learn how to regulate emotions, seek help, and build resilience. They also expressed a desire for more supportive environments where mental health is openly discussed.**

### Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)

**RSE was another area where students called for depth, relevance, and inclusion**. Many felt their current education on relationships and sex was either skipped over, outdated, or not reflective of their realities.

*“We need more knowledge on relationships, and I think they are extremely important.”*

*“More in-depth RSE — about grooming and also safe sex.”*

*“More on family and relationships and life after school for jobs.”*

There were specific calls for content on consent, LGBTQ+ relationships, online safety, and abuse prevention.

### Drugs, alcohol, and risk awareness

**Students recognised the need for early, honest discussions about substance use, addiction, and risky behaviour. They wanted this to begin in KS3, not wait until KS4 or later.**

*“Neurodiversity and recognising addiction.”*

*“Drugs and substance abuse — teach us early before it’s too late.”*

*“Use of drugs and alcohol should be made more relevant and practical, not just textbook based.”*

### Teaching quality and format

**One of the most consistent criticisms was around the delivery of LLW.** Many students said the subject is often delivered by untrained teachers, and the teaching methods feel passive or irrelevant.

*“It’s mostly colouring in and doing booklets. Sometimes we just sit there and do nothing.”*

*“Our LLW teacher talks about sport and Martin Luther King Jr. all lesson — nothing is taught.”*

*“Teachers aren’t trained — they just read out of a textbook.”*

*“There needs to be enthusiastic and trained teachers — not just someone with a free period.”*

*“Make LLW more interactive — debates, guest speakers, activities — not just notes and silence.”*

## Key Stage 4 (KS4) LLW

The following section of the survey focused on responses from KS4 pupils. Like the section on KS3, it focuses on topics taught as per the statutory curriculum, if it is offered on the timetable at all, GCSE LLW, and delivery of LLW. Pupils were asked, ‘The following topics are on the NI Curriculum for Citizenship/Personal Development/Employability at Key Stage 4 (years 11-12) whether you take GCSE LLW or not. Which have you been taught?’

In total, 628 pupils responded to this section, as not all pupils who have completed the survey have reached KS4 in school yet, therefore there was an opt-out section for pupils who below this stage.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Subject** | **Topic** | **Yes** | **No** | **Don’t know** |
| **Citizenship** | Diversity and Inclusion | 27.74% | 6.95% | 8.18% |
|  | Rights and social responsibilities in relation to local, national, and global issues | 26.31% | 8.04% | 8.52% |
|  | Role of society and government to promote equality and to ensure that everyone is treated fairly | 22.77% | 9.82% | 10.29% |
|  | How to participate in a range of democratic processes | 16.36% | 15.13% | 11.38% |
|  | Awareness of key democratic institutions | 15.68% | 14.72% | 12.47% |
|  | Develop awareness of the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) | 15.75% | 13.84% | 13.29% |
| **Personal Development** | Health and well-being | 28.56% | 7.09% | 7.23% |
|  | Managing emotions and reactions to on-going life experiences | 23.45% | 11.11% | 8.32% |
|  | Manage risk in a range of real-life contexts | 21.47% | 12.47% | 8.93% |
|  | Relationships and sexuality and healthy relationships (RSE) | 26.24% | 9.68% | 6.95% |
|  | Parenting | 13.29% | 21.00% | 8.59% |
|  | Preparation for independent living | 12.95% | 20.52% | 9.41% |
| **Employability** | Self-employment | 15.95% | 18.34% | 8.59% |
|  | Impact of globalisation on employment | 15.61% | 17.52% | 9.75% |
|  | Recruitment and selection process | 14.45% | 17.52% | 10.91% |
|  | Rights and responsibilities of employees and employers | 20.11% | 14.31% | 8.45% |
|  | Effective working environment | 16.84% | 16.63% | 9.41% |
|  | Social responsibility of business in the community | 13.84% | 18.06% | 10.97% |
|  | Develop personal career plan based on relevant information and guidance | 14.86% | 15.95% | 12.07% |

The results were surprising. The figures were below 30% for all topics which is much lower than for KS3. Perhaps pupils do not remember or perhaps they were not taught these topics at all.

Overall, there were some topics within the curriculum which pupils were more aware of:

* Diversity and inclusion
* Rights and social responsibilities in relation to local, national, and global issues
* Role of society and government to promote equality and to ensure that everyone is treated fairly
* Health and well-being
* Managing emotions and reactions to on-going life experiences
* Manage risk in a range of real-life contexts
* Relationships and sexuality and healthy relationships (RSE)
* Rights and responsibilities of employees and employers

### KS4 LLW: Real-life preparation still missing

By Key Stage 4, students expect LLW to become more rigorous and directly connected to their impending adult lives. Yet, many said that KS4 LLW either disappears entirely or becomes even more insignificant.

*“Living and managing as an independent young adult — travelling, budgeting, childcare, job applications — we don’t learn any of this.”*

*“How to manage money (budgeting, debt, credit cards, mortgages), childcare, applying for jobs.”*

*“We didn’t even realise we were meant to be learning this stuff — our teacher just gave us homework.”*

*“We don’t do KS4 LLW — we gave it up for further maths. Shows how little value it’s given.”*

*“I think LLW should be a compulsory GCSE and should focus on preparing us for real life — like renting, employment, and independence.”*

### GCSE LLW

This section of the survey focused on the option of LLW as a GCSE in schools, content of LLW, statutory KS4 LLW (non-GCSE) and delivery of LLW within schools. Once again, only 628 pupils answered this section as those in KS3 did not answer.

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AI-generated content may be incorrect.

The above question asked pupils if GCSE LLW is offered in their schools and over 22% of pupils answered ‘Yes,’ with over 14% responded with ‘No’ and nearly 6% were not sure.

A screenshot of a computer

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

A white rectangular object with a long rectangular object in the middle

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

Overall, the majority of pupils felt that the content delivered at GCSE was ‘about right.’ Nearly 6% felt it was too much and less than 3% believed there was not enough content. However, an additional 20% did not answer this question.

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AI-generated content may be incorrect.

The majority of pupils were offered LLW at KS4 if they did not choose it as a GCSE. LLW is still compulsory at KS4, even if pupils do not choose it as a GCSE.

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AI-generated content may be incorrect.

A white rectangular object with a long rectangular object in the middle

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

There was similar response to the same question at KS3. The majority of pupils had LLW timetabled on a weekly basis through the academic year.

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AI-generated content may be incorrect.

A person holding a blue object

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

Once again, there was a similar response to the same question asked of pupils in the KS3 section. A better understanding of the responses can be viewed in ranking order:

1. Working on booklets
2. Discussion and debate
3. Group work
4. Use of Multimedia
5. Talks/visits by external organisations
6. Write notes
7. Use textbooks
8. Project work
9. Other
10. Trips

In relation to those who responded ‘Other,’ pupils spoke about how the time in LLW class was used as revision for GCSEs, doing homework, colouring in or watching a movie.

### General Comments

In the final section of the survey, pupils were asked to answer the following questions:

* Do you feel the LLW curriculum at Key Stage 3 or 4 needs to be changed?
* If so, how?
* Would you change how LLW is taught?
* What changes would you make to how LLW is taught in schools?

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AI-generated content may be incorrect.

42% of respondents felt that the LLW curriculum, at both KS3 and 4, should not be changed. However, over 37% were not sure and only 20% pupils felt it should change.

Secondly, they were asked if they stated ‘Yes,’ how would they change it and they responded with various suggestions:

**Curriculum content needs to be more practical and relevant**

* Strong demand for real-life skills education, including:
  + Money management (taxes, mortgages, student loans, budgeting, credit cards, inflation)
  + Job preparation (CV writing, interview skills, understanding GCSE/A-level pathways)
  + University and career guidance
  + Independent living skills (paying bills, managing a household, parenting)
  + First aid and emergency response
* Greater emphasis on mental health, grief, and managing stress, not just superficial activities like drawing.
* Political education seen as shallow — students want to understand party views and how the government affects their lives.
* Request for education on disability and employability.

**More inclusive and balanced curriculum**

* Students ask for:
  + Better LGBTQ+ education (not just “someone is gay”)
  + Diverse representation across race, religion, gender identity, and sexual orientation
  + Discussions on misogyny, domestic abuse, and violence against women and girls
* A small number felt that sensitive topics (e.g. abortion, sexuality) should be optional, not mandatory.

**Make lessons more engaging and less serious**

* Lessons are often described as boring, not taken seriously, or repetitive.
* **Teachers:**
  + Lack of proper training or interest
  + Relying too much on booklets or textbooks
  + Not allowing debate, freedom of speech, or student voice
* **Strong preference for:**
  + Group work, discussions, and debates
  + Educational trips and hands-on learning
  + Lessons taught like a proper GCSE subject

**Systemic issues**

* Inconsistency in how LLW is taught: variation by teacher, school, or year group.
* Lack of qualified or designated teachers.
* Statutory guidance is too vague and not enforced seriously enough.
* Many feel LLW is treated as a filler subject.

**What pupils want**

* A curriculum that:
  + Reflects real-world issues and modern life
  + Prepares them for life after school
  + Balances values education (equality, inclusion) with practical skills (finance, employment)

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AI-generated content may be incorrect.

A white rectangular object with a long rectangular object in the middle

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

The majority of pupils felt that LLW should not be taught differently, as 49% of pupils responded ‘No’ to this question. However, responses between ‘Yes’ and ‘Don’t know’ were fairly split, suggesting uncertainty overall.

The final question of the survey asked for general comments on the survey. Pupil feedback on LLW reveals a wide range of opinions, with many expressing frustration over how the subject is delivered. Several pupils described it as,

*“a waste of time”* or *“not useful, no point to it,”* while others felt it lacked depth, saying *“I already knew 90% of what I’m taught”* and *“we just sit there for half the lesson doing like absolutely nothing.”*

Some called for better teaching, with one stating,

*“Hire trained LLW teachers,”* and another adding, *“If teachers taught us by actually teaching and promoting healthy discussions.”*

There were also concerns about content and relevance. One pupil said,

*“LLW is an important subject, but it does need a serious change, especially towards human aspects and societal issues,”* while another noted, *“Stuff such as respect, consent, online pressure, harassment, personal, romantic and sexual relationships should be taught more.”*

Others felt the subject should be optional, with comments like *“It should not be compulsory”* and *“I would prefer if I didn’t have to take two qualifications.”*

Despite the criticism, a few pupils acknowledged its value. One said,

*“It is a good subject,”* and another shared, *“I love it so much.”*

However, even among those who saw its potential, there was a common call for improvement,

*“It’s good, it just needs to be more interesting and interactive.”*

# Youth Assembly Recommendations

**1. Make LLW practical and useful**

Too often, LLW feels like a subject that talks about life without actually preparing pupils for it. The content needs to be hands-on, relevant, and focused on real-world knowledge and skills.

What pupils want to learn:

* Managing money: Budgeting, saving, banking, credit scores, loans, and avoiding debt.
* Housing basics: Renting a flat, understanding contracts, paying bills, and knowing your rights as a tenant.
* Taxes and employment: How payslips work, what taxes are, how to file them, and what to expect in a real job.
* Emergency preparedness: Basic first aid, what to do in a crisis, understanding your legal rights and responsibilities.

**Key message: LLW should feel like a toolkit for adulthood — not just a list of definitions in a notebook.**

**2. Modernise and expand the curriculum**

Many pupils say the LLW curriculum is outdated, repetitive, or disconnected from what is really going on in their lives and in the world.

What needs to change:

* Replace generic citizenship content with up-to-date social issues and challenges facing young people today.
* Cover media literacy: how to spot fake news, understand algorithms, and critically evaluate online content.
* Include misogyny, sexism, and gender-based harm as key areas of discussion — not optional extras.
* Make space for mental health education, including coping with stress, grief, trauma, and emotional wellbeing.
* Update sex and relationship education to reflect real experiences: topics like consent, sexual health, identity, LGBTQ+ relationships, gender norms, boundaries, and digital safety all matter.

**Key message: Pupils want education that speaks to their actual lived experience, not outdated assumptions.**

**3. Train and support teachers who want to teach LLW**

It is not just what is taught — it’s how it’s taught and by whom. A big frustration among pupils is that LLW is often taught by teachers who have not had proper training or do not really want to be there. LLW is a complex subject such requiring teachers to be experts in human rights, citizenship, history, politics, personal development, health, financial education, careers, and employment rights to name a few. These are complex issues which are constantly changing. No formal training for teachers of LLW has been made available since its introduction after the 2007 curriculum review.

What needs to happen:

* LLW should be taught by staff who are trained, confident, and enthusiastic about the subject.
* Avoid assigning LLW to teachers just because they have a free period — pupils notice when a teacher is not invested.
* Provide regular, funded training to help teachers stay updated on sensitive, fast-changing topics like social media, mental health, or modern relationships.
* Give schools time and support to develop whole-school approaches to wellbeing, respect, and personal development.
* Provide regular opportunities for teachers to share good practice.

**Key message: Pupils respect teachers who take LLW seriously — they lose interest when the teacher clearly does not.**

**4. Make learning interactive and engaging**

Many pupils said that LLW lessons feel boring, passive, or like a box-ticking exercise. Worksheets and copying notes will not cut it anymore.

How to make LLW more meaningful:

* Use real conversations, case studies, and examples that relate to young people’s everyday lives.
* Bring in guest speakers — from charities, youth workers, health professionals, or people with lived experience.
* Use roleplays, debates, workshops, and group projects to explore complex topics in a safe but engaging way.
* Give pupils more choice and voice — allow them to explore areas they find most meaningful and involve them in shaping the content.
* Create space for open discussion where pupils can ask questions, share ideas, and develop their own opinions.

**Key message: LLW should be a space for exploration, discussion, and skill-building — not just copying from PowerPoints.**

**5. Treat LLW with the respect it deserves**

Pupils want LLW to be taken seriously — not treated as filler time, or a low-priority subject.

Steps to show it matters:

* Give LLW dedicated, protected time in the school timetable.
* Avoid cancelling it for cover lessons, exams, or admin.
* Consider how LLW can be recognised or assessed in a meaningful way (not necessarily through high-stakes tests, but through projects or portfolios).
* Encourage schools to value LLW as much as any other subject, especially given its role in wellbeing, inclusion, and preparing for adult life.
* Make sure all schools — regardless of postcode or language stream — deliver LLW consistently and to a high standard.

**Key message: If schools treat LLW like it does not matter, pupils will too.**

**6. Ensure youth voice is heard on curriculum matters**

It is essential that schools actively listen to youth voice when making curriculum decisions to ensure that the learning experience is both relevant and engaging for students. By involving young people in shaping the curriculum, schools can better align educational content with students’ interests, real-world issues, and future aspirations. This approach not only enhances students' engagement and motivation but also fosters a deeper sense of ownership and responsibility for their education. Furthermore, incorporating youth feedback ensures that the curriculum is inclusive, diverse, and reflective of the needs and experiences of all students. In doing so, schools promote an education system that values student perspectives and encourages active participation in their own learning journey, which can ultimately lead to better educational outcomes and a more inclusive, responsive school environment.

**A final word from young people**

Pupils across Northern Ireland are asking for something simple, but powerful:

**“Make LLW a subject that actually helps us with life.”**

They do not want more stress or more exams — they want lessons that equip them for the future: emotionally, practically, and socially. If done right, LLW can be one of the most important subjects in school.

# Thanks

We sincerely thank all the individuals and organisations who shared their expertise and insights with the Youth Assembly Education committee’s work on the Learning for Life and Work curriculum.

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* Thank you to all the young people who filled out the survey and to the Youth Assembly Members for creating the survey and promoting it through their communities and schools.

These contributions have been instrumental in identifying gaps, challenges, and opportunities to improve the curriculum and ensure meaningful youth involvement.

1. [UNCRC-Concluding-Observations.pdf](https://www.niccy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/UNCRC-Concluding-Observations.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Independent Review of Education - Final Report | Department of Education](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/independent-review-education-final-report) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [Any use? report](https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/youth-forum/any-use-report) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [NI Curriculum Review\_0.pdf](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/NI%20Curriculum%20Review_0.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [LLW Report - 'Let Us Learn' — SSUNI | Secondary Students’ Union of Northern Ireland](https://ssuni.org/llw-report-let-us-learn) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)