



Response to the Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028 (TransformED) Consultation

October 2026

Summary

The Northern Ireland War Memorial (NIWM) welcomes the ambition of TransformED to create a clearer, coherent, and knowledge-rich curriculum for Northern Ireland.

We particularly welcome the proposed History framework's emphasis on historical enquiry, evidence, local history, and engagement with material culture. These are principles that closely reflect the work of museums and the contribution they make to children's historical learning.

However, NIWM is concerned about an unintended consequence of the proposed sequencing of History: the loss of explicit visibility for the Second World War at primary level.

Under the draft framework, Key Stage 1 (KS1) provides opportunities for pupils to study historically significant events, individuals, places, and objects in their localities. At Key Stage 2 (KS2), chronological content extends broadly to c.1100 CE, alongside provision for a theme or local study extending beyond this period. The Second World War appears explicitly at Key Stage 3 (KS3), including Northern Ireland's wartime experience, the Belfast Blitz, and Northern Ireland's strategic importance.

Primary schools would therefore not be prevented from teaching the Second World War. However, its absence from the illustrative content at Key Stages 1 and 2, combined with its explicit positioning at Key Stage 3, may lead schools to conclude that the subject is no longer intended for primary study.

This matters beyond any single historical topic. Northern Ireland's experience of the Second World War provides primary pupils with an accessible route into local history, family, and community history, historical enquiry, material culture, and intergenerational learning. It also connects children in communities across Northern Ireland with major national and international events through the histories of their own places.

NIWM is therefore proposing a small clarification to the existing framework rather than a change to its chronological structure.

Recommendation 1: At Key Stage 1, Northern Ireland during the Second World War and its impact on local communities should be included as an illustrative example within the existing provision for historically significant events, individuals, places or objects in pupils' localities.

Recommendation 2: At Key Stage 2, Northern Ireland during the Second World War should be included as an illustrative example within the existing provision for a theme or local study extending beyond 1100 CE.

These amendments would not make the Second World War compulsory at primary level, alter the chronological sequence of the proposed curriculum or duplicate the more detailed study envisaged at Key Stage 3. They would simply make clear that Northern Ireland's wartime history remains a valid and valued option for primary schools.

1. Why curricular visibility matters

Curriculum frameworks do more than determine what schools may teach. They also signal what schools are expected and encouraged to teach.

Under the current Northern Ireland Curriculum, *The World Around Us* has given primary schools considerable flexibility to explore the Second World War through themes including change over time, movement of people, place, community and local history. This has supported sustained engagement between primary schools and museums, archives and heritage organisations whose collections allow pupils to encounter this history directly.

TransformED creates a clearer chronological sequence for History. NIWM recognises the educational rationale behind this approach and is not proposing that the detailed Second World War study currently positioned at Key Stage 3 should be transferred to primary education.

Our concern is that when a topic is explicitly identified at one Key Stage but disappears from the illustrative content of earlier stages, teachers may reasonably interpret that sequencing as indicating where it should be taught. Over time, this could substantially reduce primary engagement with Northern Ireland's wartime history even though provision technically remains for schools to study it.

The distinction between permitting a topic and making its continued place within the curriculum visible is therefore important.

A short illustrative reference at Key Stages 1 and 2 would resolve this ambiguity without changing the overall architecture of the History framework.

2. Connecting children with the history of where they live

The Second World War offers a particularly effective bridge between local, national, and international history. Northern Ireland's wartime experience was not confined to Belfast or the Belfast Blitz. Communities across Northern Ireland were affected through evacuation, agriculture and food production, civil defence, military service, airfields and military bases, wartime industry, and the presence of Allied forces. This allows children to begin with places, objects, buildings, and family stories that are familiar to them before connecting those experiences with much larger historical developments.

For pupils in Belfast, this might involve the Blitz, air-raid precautions, or wartime industry. Elsewhere, it might begin with an airfield, an evacuee story, agricultural production, an American military presence, civil defence activity or a family member who served during the war. This is precisely where museums and local collections can strengthen a knowledge-rich curriculum. Objects, photographs, testimony, buildings, and archival material allow pupils to connect substantive historical knowledge with tangible evidence from their own communities.

NIWM's education programme demonstrates that interest in this history extends well beyond Belfast. In 2025/26, 74.3% of schools engaging with NIWM were located outside Belfast, with participating schools drawn from every county in Northern Ireland. Engagement also crossed school sectors, including Controlled, Catholic Maintained, Integrated, Preparatory, Irish-medium, and Special schools.

Northern Ireland's Second World War history therefore offers a subject through which children from different geographical and community backgrounds can encounter a history that is locally distinctive while forming part of a much wider shared story.

3. Museums as partners in a knowledge-rich curriculum

TransformED places considerable emphasis on knowledge, historical enquiry and children's engagement with different forms of evidence. Museums are particularly well placed to support these aims.

At NIWM, pupils encounter original objects, photographs, oral testimony, and personal stories relating to evacuation, rationing, the Belfast Blitz, military service, wartime work, and everyday life on the Home Front.

Learning through these sources requires children to do more than remember information. Pupils ask questions, examine evidence, compare accounts, consider different perspectives and draw conclusions from the traces people have left behind.

Object and source-based learning also makes abstract historical events tangible for younger pupils. It enables them to understand that history is constructed from evidence and that individual people experienced the same event in different ways.

These approaches closely align with the disciplinary ambitions of the proposed History framework, including historical questioning, evidential reasoning, perspective-taking, and engagement with oral histories, material culture, photographs, film, and the built environment.

The value teachers place on this learning is clear. In NIWM's August 2026 survey, 100% of responding schools rated the importance of learning about the Second World War at primary level 5/5, while 100% rated the impact of engagement with NIWM on pupils' learning and understanding 5/5.

Teachers particularly highlighted the Belfast Blitz, evacuation, rationing, and the Home Front, alongside the opportunities the topic creates for children to bring family photographs, medals, and stories into the classroom.

4. Access, equity, and teacher support

The question of curricular visibility also has implications for access. TransformED rightly identifies educational disadvantage and equity as significant concerns. Museums and heritage organisations can support this ambition when programmes are designed to reduce financial, geographical, and practical barriers. NIWM is free to visit and provides travel grants to schools to help with the cost of travelling to Belfast. Free educational resources support learning before and after visits.

For schools unable to travel to the museum, NIWM delivers outreach throughout Northern Ireland and provides loan boxes that bring objects, replica material, and hands-on historical learning directly into classrooms.

These different models mean that engagement with museum learning does not have to depend upon a school's proximity to Belfast or its capacity to finance educational visits. They also provide teachers with specialist historical knowledge and prepared resources.

Teachers responding to NIWM have specifically identified this as an advantage, with one commenting:

"Their trips are amazing and the resources provided reduce teacher workload."

Curricular alignment matters to the sustainability of this provision. If modern local history becomes less visible at primary level, schools may become less likely to access established programmes that already provide specialist teaching, resources, and support.

5. A wider question for Northern Ireland's museums

NIWM's concern forms part of a wider question about how museums and the heritage sector connect with Curriculum 2028.

Museums hold the material evidence of Northern Ireland's local, social, industrial, migration, military, and community histories. Their collections allow children to explore precisely the kinds of evidence highlighted within the proposed History framework: objects, photographs, oral histories, documents, buildings, and other traces of the past. Changes in curricular sequencing can therefore have consequences for patterns of engagement between schools and cultural institutions.

If modern history becomes substantially less visible at primary level, museums whose collections principally relate to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries may find long-established primary learning programmes less clearly aligned with curriculum expectations. The potential consequence is not simply fewer museum visits. It is reduced access for children to the histories of the communities in which they live and to the specialist knowledge, collections, and facilitated learning held within Northern Ireland's museums. This is particularly important given the emphasis within the emerging Museums Policy for Northern Ireland on the educational and social contribution of museums.

As Curriculum 2028 moves towards implementation, NIWM would therefore encourage continued dialogue between the Department of Education, curriculum bodies, and Northern Ireland's museum and heritage sector about how cultural institutions can support curriculum delivery.

Conclusion

Northern Ireland's experience of the Second World War provides an unusually powerful route through which primary pupils can connect the history of their own communities with wider national and international events. It allows children to build historical knowledge from familiar places, encounter original evidence, explore different experiences and perspectives, learn across generations and develop skills in enquiry, critical thinking, communication and historical reasoning.

NIWM is not proposing that the Second World War should become compulsory at primary level or that the substantive study planned for Key Stage 3 should be moved. We are asking for a small clarification within provisions that already exist.

Explicitly identifying Northern Ireland during the Second World War as an illustrative option at Key Stages 1 and 2 would preserve teacher choice and the proposed chronological framework while reassuring schools that modern local history remains a legitimate and valued part of primary historical learning.

It would also help ensure that Curriculum 2028 makes full use of one of Northern Ireland's greatest educational resources: the museums, collections, objects, stories, and community histories that allow children to encounter the past in the places where it happened.