Mental Health Champion Response to the Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028 (TransformED) Consultation

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Summary

I welcome the ambition to create a more coherent, equitable and intellectually rigorous curriculum for Northern Ireland (NI). This work has the potential to strengthen progression, improve coherence across phases of education and provide a stronger entitlement for all pupils. However, there is a need for an overarching vision to direct the curriculum and TransformED as a whole. This should set out what we hope to achieve generally, and specifically, that the curriculum will enable children and young people to participate fully in society, and equip them to engage confidently with the world beyond school. The Independent Review of Education similarly highlighted the need for greater coherence across the education system, whilst recognising that educational success extends beyond academic attainment to encompass wellbeing, creativity, social cohesion and personal development. The curriculum should also align with efforts to build peace, embed trauma informed practice and end violence against women and girls as set out in our Programme for Government.

Educational excellence requires attention to both knowledge and human development. In a society emerging from conflict, schools have a unique role not only in transmitting knowledge but also in fostering trust, inclusion, emotional wellbeing and positive relationships, all of which are recognised as important foundations for both mental health and sustainable peacebuilding. While the proposed curriculum is explicit regarding the "powerful knowledge" children should acquire, it says little about the developmental processes and environments that enable children and young people to access, apply and benefit from that knowledge. A developmental assets framework should therefore underpin the design and delivery of the curriculum. Such an approach would recognise the importance of relationships, belonging, identity, participation, safety and opportunities for contribution, as foundations for learning, resilience and healthy development. Alongside this, outcome indicators need to be developed to enable us to ensure that the desired capabilities are evident, particularly for disadvantaged children.

The curriculum must also reflect the views and experiences of children and young people themselves, whose perspectives appear largely absent from the development process. Psychologists and health experts should also be involved in curriculum design to ensure that the material delivered is appropriate and aligned with what we know about child and adolescent development.

Over 4 in 10 16-year-olds here exhibit signs of mental ill-health, and academic pressure and relationships at school have an important contributory role. There is also growing recognition that excessive workloads are causing burnout, stress and anxiety in school staff. An independent assessment therefore needs to be undertaken into the potential impact of the proposed curriculum on both pupil and staff wellbeing before implementation is progressed. Equally, there should be a independent assessment of the curriculum's implications for inclusion, equity and access to developmental assets and capabilities, ensuring that all

children, particularly those who experience disadvantage, neurodiversity, adversity or additional needs, are able to benefit equally from the curriculum.

NI has seen 30 women and girls killed by men between 2019 and 2024**,** highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive RSE that develops understanding of healthy relationships, consent, respect, gender-based violence and coercive control. A major concern is therefore in relation to the status and content of Personal, Social, Civic and Careers (PSCC) Education. It is unclear whether PSCC is intended to operate as a discrete subject, as it is described as an "applied" subject. It lacks a clear progression framework and encompasses a breadth of content that is difficult to reconcile within a coherent subject structure. PSCC needs to be developed as a fully taught subject with clearly articulated developmental progression, dedicated curriculum time and guidance on the assessment of both knowledge and its practical application.

Furthermore, the proposed content of PSCC requires revision to strengthen learning relating to self-awareness, identity, wellbeing, and relationships and sexuality education (RSE). Important content relating to self-esteem, confidence, social and gender identity, sexuality and reproduction appears to have been reduced or removed from the version agreed by the writing team, and relationship education requires greater prominence. The dominance of ethics and moral reasoning at Key Stage 3 changes the focus of the subject, and the rationale and purpose of the community project, which will pose significant challenges for school staff, is unclear.

Finally, while the framework emphasises a number of important capabilities, it does not explicitly include relational capabilities, and they are not included within emotional understanding and empathy, or social and civic participation. Their absence may suggest that the development of healthy interpersonal relationships is not considered a core curriculum outcome. This is unacceptable when we consider the importance of healthy relationships in supporting wellbeing, and the urgent need to address intimate partner violence, coercive control and misogyny.

Recommendation 1: the content of the curriculum and capabilities needs to reflect the views of stakeholders, particularly children and young people, psychologists, and experts in child and adolescent development.

The curriculum was developed over a very short period of time, and it is unclear how key stakeholders, particularly children and young people, were involved in developing the content. In addition, particular concerns arise relating to the PSCC subject, where significant changes were made without the agreement of the expert team responsible for drafting the subject. The Office of the Mental Health Champion provided feedback on an earlier draft version of the PSCC framework, and it is now evident that many positive elements of the agreed final version were removed from the version that was put out for consultation. We need clarity on how, and why these modifications were undertaken.

It is important that the Department of Education ensure that children and young people have an influence over the content of the curriculum in general. This is particularly relevant to the PSCC subject in particular, since several young peoples' campaign groups have been campaigning for education in wellbeing, mental health and RSE. This is an important aspect of trauma informed practice (discussed further in the next section) and the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The need for the involvement of children and young people in the design of the curriculum is also set out in the Strategic Framework for Ending Violence Against Women and Girls which states: *"working together with young people and the education sector to strengthen and mainstream education on strong and healthy relationships throughout the curriculum for all ages and learning needs" and "further*

developing, in collaboration with young people, the design of relationship and sex education which is accessible, inclusive, and age and developmentally appropriate". The current consultation therefore provides an important opportunity to revisit these issues within PSCC and strengthen the developmental foundations of the curriculum as a whole.

The curriculum and capabilities need to align with our broader goals in relation to peacebuilding, violence against women and girls, trauma informed approaches, and current evidence on child and adolescent development. The Psychologists and health experts should therefore be involved in the next stages of development of the curriculum and capabilities framework in general and, the revision of the PSCC subject and development of relational capabilities.

Recommendation 2: A developmental assets framework should underpin the design and delivery of the curriculum, and outcome indicators developed to provide evidence of progression in relation to the capabilities, wellbeing, and development.

A significant limitation of the proposed curriculum framework is the absence of a clear developmental model. Evidence from developmental assets, positive youth development and thriving frameworks consistently shows that children flourish in environments characterised by safety, supportive relationships, belonging, participation, emotional growth and high expectations (Scales et al., 2000; Benson et al., 2006; Sege & Harper Browne, 2017). These conditions are not peripheral to learning; they are fundamental to wellbeing, development and the capacity to benefit from education. This is particularly important for children with SEND, autistic pupils, those experiencing social, emotional and mental health difficulties, and those affected by adversity and trauma. If these developmental assets are not explicitly embedded within curriculum design, existing inequalities in access to them may persist. A curriculum committed to equity should consider not only who has access to knowledge, but also who has access to the developmental conditions required to benefit from that knowledge (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Allen et al., 2021). Pupils with neurodiversity, special educational needs and disabilities should not have to earn or justify their place within education. They need to have the support and opportunities required to participate, contribute, learn and belong alongside their peers.

A trauma-informed approach is especially relevant in NI given the high prevalence of mental health difficulties, the legacy of conflict-related trauma and the intergenerational transmission of adversity (Mental Health Foundation, 2026; Walsh et al., 2025; Redican et al., 2022). Trauma-informed principles such as safety, trust, empowerment, voice, collaboration and relationship-building align closely with Developmental Assets Theory and the HOPE Framework. Recent findings from the 2025 Kids' Life and Times and Young Life and Times surveys further demonstrate the importance of belonging, supportive relationships, emotional safety and participation for children's wellbeing and flourishing. In the Children's Society's 2022 survey in England, the extent to which children felt listened to was strongly associated with their overall happiness with school (The Children's Society, 2022). Again research demonstrates that is associated with better mental health in young people here (Bond et al., in submission; Bond and O'Neill, 2026).

While the framework identifies communication, collaboration, creativity, self-management and problem-solving as important capabilities, it provides limited explanation of how these qualities develop. Greater attention should be given to the developmental experiences and environments that enable capability development, including through PSCC and across the wider curriculum. Schools should be supported to intentionally nurture developmental assets such as hope, belonging, resilience, identity, participation and positive relationships.

This is also relevant to curriculum breadth. Subjects such as art, music and physical education contribute not only to knowledge acquisition but to creativity, self-expression, wellbeing and personal development. A predominantly knowledge-focused approach risks overlooking these wider developmental functions, despite their importance within both *A Fair Start* and the Independent Review of Education.

Finally, curriculum success should not be judged solely through attainment and qualifications. As the framework recognises, capabilities are developmental attributes rather than discrete competencies and are not intended to be directly assessed. The Department of Education should therefore establish outcome indicators that capture wellbeing, belonging, participation, inclusion, learner engagement and personal progression alongside academic achievement. Physical presence, participation and belonging are related but different measures of inclusion, and all need to be reported on. Without such measures, there is a risk that the curriculum's success will continue to be defined primarily through attainment, overlooking the broader development and flourishing that the capabilities are intended to promote. Given the scale of the proposed curriculum reform, robust mechanisms for monitoring these broader outcomes over time are vital.

Recommendation 3. The impact of the curriculum on pupil and staff wellbeing (including neurodivergent pupils and pupils with SEN) should be examined prior to implementation in NI's schools.

There are important questions about how a knowledge-rich curriculum will affect children's wellbeing and their experience of school. Knowledge is important, but education should not become reduced to the acquisition and testing of factual knowledge. There is a risk that an increasingly test-driven system creates a culture in which children experience school primarily through measurement, performance and examination. It is important to note that children's happiness with school and schoolwork declined significantly over the period in which England operated a strongly academic and assessment-focused system,. Analysis of the Understanding Society survey reported by The Children's Society (2026) found that children aged 10 to 15 were significantly less satisfied with school and schoolwork in 2022/23 than in 2009/10. In 2025, getting good grades was the single biggest worry about the future for children and young people, with 43% saying they were very or quite worried about it. In the 2023 Youth Life and Times Survey the majority of young people identify pressure to do well at school as contributing to stress and anxiety (Bond & O'Neill, 2026). This should make us extremely cautious about assuming that the increased focus on knowledge acquisition will produce better educational outcomes. Indeed, if children become less happy, less engaged and more anxious about school, the very conditions needed for learning and attainment are undermined. It is for these reasons that we need a full independent review of the impact of the proposals on pupil mental health and wellbeing, including neurodivergent children and young people. This needs to incorporate the views of health experts, as well as children and young people themselves.

These risks and harm that can be caused by academic pressure are particularly important for children with special educational needs, neurodivergent children and those experiencing mental health difficulties or childhood adversities. We need to consider the extent to which these children may be disadvantaged in a system that prioritises knowledge acquisition and test performance rather than skills which may disadvantage autistic young people, young people with ADHD. An increasingly rigid, test-focused environment may create additional barriers to participation and achievement for these individuals and amplify existing inequalities. For example, for neurodivergent pupils, curriculum entitlement cannot be assessed solely by considering what the curriculum contains. It is also necessary to consider whether the way in which the curriculum is taught, assessed and experienced enables autistic pupils to access it in practice. Neurodivergent pupils differ considerably in their

communication, sensory, cognitive and support needs. Curriculum implementation should therefore allow for reasonable variation in how pupils engage with teaching, demonstrate learning and participate in school life, rather than relying upon a single model of participation or performance.

I am also deeply concerned about the impact of the new curriculum on staff workload and wellbeing. The unions have already highlighted the significant workload issues that remain unresolved and concerns are growing about the stress and pressure that teachers are currently facing resulting from their workload. There is therefore little doubt that this proposed curriculum will add additional workload and pressure that will invariably have a mental health impact. The potential shift towards a greater emphasis on testing and measuring children's attainment risks narrowing the educational experience which may have consequences for teachers. The change in focus could lead to increased dissatisfaction and, in some cases, moral injury, as they are placed in the difficult position of prioritising assessment outcomes over the broader developmental, emotional and relational needs of children. Many teachers enter the profession to nurture the whole child, foster wellbeing and support diverse learning needs. Where accountability measures place disproportionate weight on testing and performance indicators, teachers may feel unable to exercise professional judgement or provide the balanced, child-centred approach they believe is in their pupils' best interests. Stress and pressure on staff and teachers will also impact on the children and young people in classrooms, and across the school environment. It is absolutely vital that the impact on staff and pupil wellbeing is reviewed, and mitigations put in place to protect all parties, prior to the implementation of any changes.

Recommendation 4: PSCC needs to be a fully developed, taught subject, with developmental progression and assessment guidance for knowledge and its application.

The Personal, Social, Civic and Careers (PSCC) strand presents the clearest opportunity to develop powerful social and emotional learning within the curriculum. However, it does not currently possess a sufficiently robust developmental architecture to support the outcomes it aspires to promote. A curriculum committed to developing the whole child requires explicit progression not only in what children know but also in how they grow, relate, participate and flourish (Lerner et al., 2005; Benson et al., 2006).

I am concerned that the description of PSCC as an applied subject may mean that in some schools PSCC is not taught as an explicit subject with the infrastructure, resources and accountability mechanisms to ensure progression. In the version of the subject that was provided by the expert writing team PSCC is described as the *"cornerstone of a knowledge-rich curriculum because it both complements and completes more overtly discipline-based study".* In contrast, the document that went out for consultation describes PSCC as an *"applied subject which draws on a range of disciplines and complements traditional subject-based study"*. PSCC was originally described by the writing group as a "*cumulative and coherent" subject "with concepts deepening across stages". "Cumulative and coherent*" have since been modified to say *"ideas are revisited with growing complexity across the curriculum".*

We need clear assurances that PSCC is a separate subject with a specific and appropriate percentage of weekly curriculum time allocated against this subject separately from any other extracurricular activities which may be viewed as related to this work. If PSCC is not a distinct subject, schools could choose to deliver this content as a series of activities. The quality of the delivery and the material would vary widely, and the risk is that many children and young people may not receive this vital part of their education.

The proposal is that capabilities emerging from PSCC are not going to be monitored or assessed, is concerning, and fundamental capabilities relating to relationships is missing (see recommendation 5). Guidance on assessing the material in this subject needs to be provided. We need to be assured that all children and young people in NI have the knowledge and skills to manage their wellbeing, engage in healthy social relationships, and set and achieve their career and personal goals.

Recommendation 5: PSCC needs to be significantly revised to strengthen content on self-awareness, identity and wellbeing and RSE, and the capability framework needs to specify relational capabilities, particularly those related to partner violence and coercive control.

Themes, content and vision

The content of the PSCC framework is much too broad and brings together several areas of learning: personal growth, society and civic life, and economic participation. Fundamental aspects of social and emotional learning: personal growth, healthy relationships and the maintenance of wellbeing, are not adequately addressed. Through the vision statement, and in other areas of the document personal growth content is repeatedly positioned alongside learning, which may give rise to the interpretation that it is relevant only insofar as it relates to learning. The benefits in terms of maintaining wellbeing need to be strengthened. Identity development, and a sense of belonging are central to young people's wellbeing, self-awareness and personal development. They are also particularly important in a society that continues to grapple with the legacy of conflict, division and transgenerational trauma. These concepts are strongly associated with wellbeing, resilience and flourishing in contemporary developmental research (Allen et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Whilst hope is increasingly viewed as an asset that can be taught at school and is associated with positive mental health outcomes (Dixson, 2020; Deng et al., 2025; Snyder et al., 2003), it is not explicitly taught and named in this version of the curriculum. Related concepts such as aspirations, future pathways, motivation and confidence, are considered, again reflecting the theme of academic and career success.

Education in the formation of social identities and our multiple identities is vital in the context of peacebuilding. The evidence strongly points to the importance of inclusion, belonging and protection from discrimination for good mental health (Kirkbride et al., 2024; WHO, 2014). Equally, inclusive relationships, meaningful contact between groups and equitable institutions are important foundations for social cohesion (OECD, 2020). The vision statement refers to developing a secure sense of identity in an increasingly diverse society. However, it stops short of explicitly recognising the importance of helping children and young people understand their own multiple identities, respect and value diversity, and develop meaningful relationships across community, cultural and social differences, all of which are important for inclusion, social cohesion and peacebuilding in NI (Loader and Hughes, 2017). The subject should therefore be adapted to strengthen the content on identity and belonging. Hope should be included as a developmental and wellbeing construct, and the components taught and promoted.

Foundation stage

PSCC at foundation stage needs to be revised to recognise learning at this stage is through "play" (rather than "playful"), and that emotional regulation also involves coregulation with adults. It will not be biologically possible for many children of this age to self-regulate, and learn calming strategies, particularly for children with SEN or neurodiversity, or children with adversities and trauma exposure. The role of teachers and other staff in co-regulation, as a means of promoting the development of emotional regulation, needs to be recognised. This should include techniques such as modelling calm and emotionally regulated behaviour, emotion coaching, using appropriate language and tone, providing reassurance and proximity,

supporting children to identify and communicate their emotions, and helping them to develop strategies for managing distress. Staff can also support regulation through predictable routines, careful management of transitions, sensory and environmental adjustments, and guided problem-solving and repair following incidents of dysregulation.

The line *"Families can be different"* needs to be expanded to cover the diversity of family life in modern society and enable children from a wide range of backgrounds, including single-parent families, blended families, kinship care arrangements, adoptive families, and families with same-sex parents, to see their experiences reflected in the curriculum. This promotes inclusion, belonging and respect for difference, while helping to reduce stigma and prejudice. It also supports children's social and emotional development by recognising that positive family relationships are defined by care, support and commitment rather than a single-family model.

Key Stage 1

The emphasis of "Self and Learning" is largely upon emotional regulation to support learning, as indicated in the title, and a limited range of emotional regulation strategies are presented. Developmentally, it is at this stage that self-regulation may be emerging, however many children will require co-regulation alongside a trusted adult, and this should be acknowledged. The principle of co-regulation and environmental support should not be confined to the Foundation Stage. Approaches to emotional regulation should recognise that autistic pupils for example, may have different sensory, communication and regulation needs and should avoid assuming that regulation is solely an individual skill to be demonstrated by the pupil. The curriculum should not prescribe a single model of successful regulation and should allow sufficient flexibility to respond to individual need, with autistic pupils' views informing the support provided.

"Belonging" appears at KS1 in relation to communities, and pupils learn about communities, relationships and inclusion. Belonging at school (important for those children who cannot attend school because they do not feel safe in that setting), and belonging as a condition for wellbeing are not addressed.

Key Stage 2

At Key Stage 2, content supporting the recognition that people may have relationships with someone of the same or a different sex, that was agreed by the writing team, has since been removed. It is helpful that different forms of abuse are referred to however the phrase "domestic abuse" needs to be expanded to include all forms of intimate partner violence including an age-appropriate understanding of emotional abuse and coercive control. Whilst related concepts are included, it is surprising that bullying is not explicitly referred to in this or the other Key Stages.

Despite strong evidence that comprehensive relationships and sexuality education (RSE) plays an important role in preventing sexual abuse, exploitation and unplanned pregnancy (UNESCO, 2023; WHO, 2026) basic factual information about human reproduction has been removed from the Key Stage 2 curriculum that was agreed by the writing group. Content relating to diverse sexual orientations, including age-appropriate discussion of terms such as heterosexual, gay, lesbian and bisexual, has also been removed, alongside learning about how to challenge homophobic language and bullying. Gender identity is completely missing from the curriculum which means that young people are not provided with essential knowledge on gender, gender identity, and gender non-conformity. These omissions are particularly concerning given that many children at this age are developing an understanding of their own identity and relationships. In a context where homophobic and transphobic bullying remain significant issues in NI (Department of Education, 2017). Schools have an important role in providing accurate, inclusive information and creating safe environments in which children can develop self-understanding, respect for others and a sense of belonging. Access to factual

education helps ensure that young people are equipped with the knowledge and confidence to understand themselves and navigate relationships safely and respectfully.

Key Stage 3

The very limited coverage of RSE at Key Stage 3 is a significant cause for concern. Young people and their representatives have been calling for adequate RSE for many years[1]. A key aspect of social and emotional learning, healthy relationships, is almost completely absent from the Key Stage 3 content. The relationships section contains specific content on identities, conflict and that conflict can have consequences, but the content on how to manage and strengthen healthy social relationships refers to the "digital context" only. There is no information that would build upon the concepts relating to relationship violence presented in Key Stage 2. Adolescence is a period in which many young people begin to form romantic relationships and develop interpersonal skills that influence later relationship quality and wellbeing. Schools therefore have an important role in supporting young people to understand the characteristics of healthy relationships, including communication, consent, mutual respect, and personal boundaries (Lantagne & Furman, 2017; Gómez-López, Viejo & Ortega-Ruiz, 2019). Young people therefore need education about managing romantic and peer relationships at this critical stage of development, as these relationships have a profound influence on their wellbeing, mental health, and daily functioning.

This is particularly important in a society where male violence against women remains a significant concern, often occurring within the context of romantic and intimate partner relationships. It is in this area of the curriculum that education in coercive control should be positioned. The absence of education on healthy relationships at this Key Stage runs counter to the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework which states *"working together with young people and the education sector to strengthen and mainstream education on strong and healthy relationships throughout the curriculum for all ages and learning needs".* In contrast, the content on ethics and moral reasoning at this stage is now much lengthier, and more detailed than the previous version agreed by the expert writing team. This completely changes the emphasis of the subject and the way that it is taught. The rationale for this, and the other changes made to the document produced by the subject team are not set out, and the core elements that were removed need to be reinstated.

The initial draft included important content on the factors that support a healthy decision to become sexually active, and also content on coping with difficulty, disappointment, and endings. This material is extremely important to supporting young people's mental health and for suicide prevention, because relationship crises are associated with suicidal behaviour in young people (Price et al., 2016; Hink et al., 2022). The current focus on avoiding pregnancy and STDs is wholly inadequate and sends a worrying message to young people regarding behavioural expectations. Young people also need to understand the full range of contraception methods, the health impact of hormonal methods and side effects, how they are used correctly, and the effectiveness of various methods in preventing sexually transmitted diseases. In addition, the information on how to obtain an abortion ("from health services") needs to be expanded to include the medical and surgical methods of abortion and how to access reliable, scientifically accurate, and impartial information about abortion services in NI.

[1] A 2019 study of 14-24 year-olds found that 86% agreed that school is the best place to receive RSE**,** 77% wanted RSE delivered through a structured course (Lohan et al., 2019). A 2022 survey of just over 1,000 young people cited in the NI Assembly's recent inquiry found that only 35% thought the RSE they received was adequate. The Assembly inquiry concluded that provision appeared inconsistent and was not meeting the needs and expectations of many young people. A separate 2021-22 study of 604 sixth-form students across 30 NI schools found that only 51.7% considered their RSE useful, while 64.7% said they had never been asked for their views about RSE**.** The researchers found particular demand for relationship-based and socio-emotional content (Lohan et al., 2019; NI Assembly Committee for Education, 2024). Research commissioned by the NSPCC found that many young people viewed current provision as inconsistent and inadequate, while emphasising that schools remain the most suitable setting in which to receive relationships and sexuality education (Renold et al., 2023).

In keeping with the earlier point on diversity the material at Key Stages 2 and 3 needs to include more information about family structures and ways of being a family.

RSE should be designed and delivered in ways that are accessible to autistic pupils. Providing the same content to every pupil does not necessarily provide equal access to that learning. For example a number of practical principles are relevant to autistic pupils' access to RSE, including clarity and predictability; autonomy and self-advocacy; accessible social and emotional learning; person-centred and sensory-aware delivery; prevention; and appropriate training and professional development. Important concepts need to be communicated explicitly and accessibly, with provision for different communication and learning needs. This is not simply an issue of adapting provision after difficulties arise. RSE should be designed from the outset so that different learners can access and apply the learning.

The rationale for the inclusion of a community project in this subject is unclear. Furthermore, such a project would create a range of challenges for schools as they work with external organisations and would be difficult to monitor and assess. This should be replaced with a Personal Development and Goal-Setting Project. This would provide a practical way for pupils to develop self-awareness, resilience, motivation and future-planning skills. It would move beyond academic attainment alone and help young people reflect on who they are, what matters to them, and how they can achieve meaningful goals.

Consideration should be given to explicitly including content on neurodiversity. Increasing awareness of neurodevelopmental differences, including autism and ADHD, can help promote understanding, acceptance and inclusion, reduce stigma and bullying, and support positive peer relationships. This is particularly important given the increasing recognition of neurodiversity within education and society. The curriculum should explicitly acknowledge that children and young people differ in how they think, learn, communicate and process information, and that understanding these differences is important for inclusion, belonging and educational equity (Chapman, 2021; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022)

Suicide prevention, trauma and grief/ bereavement

Suicide prevention should be part of the curriculum. Evidence suggests that well-designed, age-appropriate, school-based suicide prevention programmes can improve young people's knowledge, attitudes and help-seeking behaviours, with research also indicating potential reductions in suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Pistone et al., 2019; Walsh, McMahon & Herring, 2022). Recent UK research by Saini and colleagues further suggests that schools are an appropriate and acceptable setting for suicide prevention, and that structured programmes can be feasible and safe to deliver when adapted to the needs of young people and supported by staff training (Ashworth, Thompson & Saini, 2024; Ashworth et al., 2026). Every young person should know that suicidal thoughts are a sign that something needs to change, not that you need to end your life. Young people need to know how to support each other and how to get professional support for a friend who feels suicidal.

The curriculum should acknowledge the impact of trauma, grief and adversity on behaviour, wellbeing and learning. Pupils should be able to differentiate between normal and healthy stress, trauma and mental illness. The goal should be to promote empathy and supportive responses in affected pupils and their peers. However, in keeping with a developmental assets approach, the overall goal of the curriculum should move beyond preventing ill-health to promoting flourishing by helping pupils identify their strengths, develop a sense of purpose, nurture optimism and build the skills needed to thrive throughout life.

Bereavement and grief also need to be included within this curriculum subject. All children and young people should have opportunities to learn about, discuss and understand these experiences in a safe and supportive environment. Grief is a universal part of life, yet many children encounter loss without having the language, knowledge or confidence to express how

they feel. Integrating age-appropriate learning about bereavement and grief at each Key Stage would help pupils develop emotional literacy, resilience and empathy, while also reducing stigma around conversations about loss. This should be embedded within the curriculum in a way that maps onto children's developmental trajectories and stages, ensuring that learning can be tailored to the differing needs and experiences of children and young people as they progress through their education. Such an approach can help equip pupils with important life skills and provide a stronger foundation for supporting their own wellbeing and that of others during times of loss and change.

Relational capabilities

The capability framework is intended to describe the broader qualities that emerge from a knowledge-rich education. In that context it is striking that relational capabilities, the capacities required to form, sustain and navigate healthy interpersonal relationships with others, are not named. Instead, relational development is to be inferred from emotional understanding and empathy, social and civic participation, language and communication, physical health and wellbeing and the knowledge delivered about relationships in PSCC (which is very weak in Key Stage 3). This is a major omission given that relationships are one of the principal contexts through which emotional development, belonging, identity, resilience and wellbeing are experienced. Even if PSCC included knowledge about healthy relationships, consent and abuse through all the Key Stages, evidence of the capacity to navigate relationships well is necessary. The curriculum proposals are inadequate in this regard and run counter to the actions in the Strategic Framework for Ending Violence Against Women and Girls and efforts to tackle coercive control and intimate partner violence.

Yours sincerely

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