Insights into the process of developing policy and guidance for Transition Year programmes

Paul Behan* and Michelle Geraghty

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

Abstract

Transition Year (TY) is an optional standalone programme in the senior cycle of post-primary education in Ireland. As part of the redevelopment of senior cycle, a revised *Transition Year Programme Statement* was published by the Department of Education in September 2024, to be introduced into schools in September 2025. In November 2022, the Council of NCCA (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment) approved the convening of a development group, comprised of a range of experts and experienced school practitioners in the area of TY. The role of the development group was primarily to support the Council in developing its advice on a revised *TY Programme Statement*. This article provides a description of the development of the statement by NCCA and how effective aspects of TY programmes shaped the development of the statement. The Council approved a draft *TY Programme Statement* which went for an extensive public consultation in the second half of 2023. Insights are presented on how the feedback from the consultation findings informed the final development of the *TY Programme Statement*. A final reflection is given on some lessons learned from the TY process regarding NCCA practice for the subsequent tranches in the redevelopment of senior cycle.

Keywords: Transition Year, Development Group, NCCA, TY Programme Statement

Author Note

*Paul Behan can be contacted at paul.behan@ncca.ie or at ESRI Building, Whitaker Square, Sir John Rogerson's Quay, Dublin 2, D02 K138, Ireland.

Transition Year (TY) is an optional standalone programme in the senior cycle of post-primary education in Ireland. Post-primary education is composed of a three-year junior cycle, followed by a two- or three- year senior cycle depending on whether students take part in a TY programme as the first year of their senior cycle. The typical age cohort for students in post-primary education is 12-19 years of age. TY focuses on the broad holistic development of the student, without state exams, where schools have high levels of autonomy to design their own curricula.

The Background paper and brief for a revised *TY Programme Statement* (NCCA, 2022b, pp.2-3) outlines the origin and evolution of TY. Briefly, and in reference to that paper, in 1974 TY was introduced to three schools on a pilot basis. A first evaluation in 1979 showed positive impacts on school climate, though uptake remained low. A reduction to a three-year Junior Certificate programme, introduced as part of post-primary curriculum changes, contributed to a significant increase in TY uptake in 1986, with 115 additional schools offering TY. In 1993 the Department of Education published new guidelines for TY Programmes, and the following year TY was mainstreamed into senior cycle as part of a suite of four senior cycle programmes. The number of schools offering TY increased to 450, approximately 60% of all schools, and was supported by significant funding for professional development. The number of schools offering TY rose steadily, and in 2024, over 99% of schools offered TY and approximately 80% of students participated in TY programmes (DE, 2024a).

The 1993 guidelines were the main guidelines for schools until the publication of the revised *TY Programme Statement* in September 2024 (DE, 2024b), on the 50th anniversary of the introduction of TY. The *TY Programme Statement* is to be introduced into schools in September 2025, with the preceding year to be used by schools to audit their existing TY programmes for alignment with the new statement (DE, 2024c).

NCCA conducted a review of senior cycle education from 2016 to 2020, which informed the *Senior Cycle Review Advisory Report*, published in March 2022. The report identified an audit of effective aspects of TY programmes as an area of action for a revised *TY Programme Statement*. The findings from this audit are discussed and some reflections are offered on how the findings from the audit informed the development of the statement. The intention of this article is to provide insights into the development of the *TY Programme Statement* through three action questions (AQ), addressed in chronological order.

AQ1 What are the effective aspects of current TY programmes?

AQ2 How to create a *TY Programme Statement* that embraces effective aspects identified in the audit?

AQ3 After consulting widely on a draft *TY Programme Statement*, how could it be strengthened?

The article concludes with a final takeaway and a reflection on some changes in the practice of curriculum development in NCCA, followed by the timeline of NCCA documents telling the story of the development of the *TY Programme Statement* (Appendix A).

Background for the development of a revised *TY Programme Statement*

The *Senior Cycle Review Advisory Report* (NCCA, 2022a) was published in March 2022 following a response from the Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD. In relation to TY, the Minister announced that "a revised Transition Year programme will be established, and greater access to Transition Year for all students will be encouraged" (DE, 2022a).

The advisory report provided a strong foundation for the phased redevelopment of Senior Cycle. It set out areas of action specific to the redevelopment of TY, which included conducting an audit to help identify the positive features of TY programmes in schools, and the most effective aspects of schools that "fulfil the aims and ethos of TY as a standalone year" (NCCA, 2022b, p.10).

AQ1: What are the effective aspects of current TY programmes?

The 1993 guidelines are divided into two sections, Curriculum Principles and Organisation, with a broad appendix of varied possible curricular experiences. They aimed to guide schools to develop the personal, social, academic and vocational competences of students through experiences inside and outside the classroom. Almost all post-primary schools now offer TY programmes, though there is considerable divergence across schools and amongst students in beliefs about the purpose of TY and experiences of TY (Clerkin, 2019). The audit of effective aspects of current TY programmes comprised a desk-based component and a school-based component carried out from April to October 2022.

Audit: desk-based component

TY is a unique concept in the international educational landscape (Clerkin, 2016). The desk-based component of the audit used secondary data to explore the enactment of the TY programme in schools primarily through research into TY (Clerkin, 2016, 2018, 2019; Jeffers 2007, 2015) and inspectorate reports (DE, 2022b, 2022c). This component of the audit informed the criteria by which schools were selected for the school-based component. The effective aspects were analysed through five themes:

• Programme components

- Teaching, learning, assessment and reporting

- Vocational learning and skills

- Personal development and social awareness

- Programme planning and evaluation.

Synthesising the findings through these lenses, the desk-based component suggested that there are specific actions and approaches that schools can take to create an effective programme for the school context that meets the aims of the 1993 guidelines. This includes a whole school approach to planning and implementation, a student-centred vision, clear communication to stakeholders about the vision and goals, imaginative and adaptive co-ordination and top-down support that is consistent and authentic. While positive features are evident across schools, research suggested that implementation of various aspects of the current guidelines varied widely (NCCA, 2022b, p.11-14). The specific context of a school, such as location, size and socio-economic setting, can also be a significant factor in shaping TY programmes (Clerkin, 2019; Jeffers, 2007).

Audit: school-based component

The school-based component began with an open call for expressions of interest to all post-primary schools in April 2022. The application form was structured through the five themes used to examine effective aspects of TY programmes. This enabled schools to be identified whose TY programmes demonstrated the positive, effective features described in the existing research and how they addressed their own set of challenges. Eighty-six post-primary schools applied, approximately one-eighth of all schools, to participate in the audit. For the selection process, the schools identified were anonymised and then chosen by a designated TY audit group to form a stratified sample, representative of the national profile of post-primary schools. An island school and an Irish-medium school were also selected from the applicants. The 14 selected schools were visited to gain further insights into the effective aspects of their TY programmes (NCCA, 2022b).

All school visits were completed between early September and early October 2022. During each visit, data was collected across a full school day. Two education officers facilitated each focus group meeting comprising senior management, the TY coordinator and guidance counsellor, a mix of six teachers across various subjects and modules, and a diverse mix of 10 students from 5th Year who participated in TY the previous year. The findings from the school-based audit confirmed much of the desk-based research while also further informing the background paper. The common features of the effective aspects of TY curricula are shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1:

*Common effective aspects of TY programmes
(based on NCCA, 2022b, pp.16-21)*

The school-based audit of effective aspects found that each school has a clearly articulated vision aiming to foster qualities like adaptability, openness, and empathy, as well as interpersonal, vocational, and digital skills. Each school tailored its vision to its unique context while aligning with the 1993 guidelines. The audit found that the components of the school's TY curriculum collectively strive to serve the vision. A shared purpose, acted upon daily in the school community, especially by students and teachers, safeguards the vision and nurtures a sense of belonging. The qualities envisaged for the students are embodied by the TY programme itself and by the educators involved. Schools tend to build on what works in their TY programmes, established through consistent evaluations, and endeavour to further improve their programmes from the resources available to them. This has the effect of creating new and varied opportunities for students and teachers.

The effectiveness of enacting the TY programme in these schools tends to be linked to a visionary, collaborative TY coordinator and a school-wide culture that genuinely nurtures the creativity of the teachers and values professional autonomy. TY programmes built purposefully on the passions and creativity of teachers tend to become self-sustaining environments where professional learning and innovative techniques can flourish. This often induces the emergence of new practices across the school. The choice of an optional or a compulsory programme is highly valued by schools and is often accompanied by a strong sense of responsibility to the student and the community. Of the 14 schools audited, five had compulsory TY programmes and nine had optional TY programmes (NCCA, 2022b, p.16).

A system for recognising achievement that everyone believes in and values is another effective aspect identified. When used purposefully, it enables reflective practice, encourages self-reliance, and motivates students across the whole year. Structured portfolios tend to be an integral part of this process of recognising and reporting. Effective TY programmes are also fluid and responsive, which need to be underpinned by some creative, adaptable planning. The renewal of the TY programme is built on evaluating its successes and failures.

The background paper and brief for a revised *TY Programme Statement* was published in November 2022.

AQ2: How to create a *TY Programme Statement* that embraces effective aspects identified in the audit?

The processes of curriculum development involve many elements. For example, a background paper and brief are written to guide the work of the development group. The Council approves the convening of a development group, comprising a range of experts and experienced school practitioners. The role of the development group is primarily to support Council in developing its advice. The development group brings their experience and expertise to creating draft versions of the document. The oversight of the work is carried out, in the case of TY, by the Board for Senior Cycle, and their deliberations inform the decision-making of the Council. The development group met six times from November 2022 to April 2023.

There was no single determining element that contributed to ways to address AQ2, and there was no element that could be considered in isolation. For the purpose of this reflective piece, four significant elements are discussed:

• The development group

• Influences on the development process

• Coherence as a guiding principle

• Emerging Key Competencies of Senior Cycle.

Identifying these four interconnected elements neither implies they were the most significant ones nor assumes the revised *TY Programme Statement* definitively addresses AQ2. They are chosen as the most interesting and relevant to some of the insights that follow.

The development group

The development group had its first meeting in November 2022. It comprised 16 nominees from bodies represented on NCCA's Council, national bodies involved in education, two co-options, a chairperson and two education officers to support the work of the group. There were six meetings during this period. The diversity of the group, coupled with the vast experience as TY Coordinators of many members, generated fresh and innovative thinking alongside a strong sense of how TY programmes work at a practical, day to day level in schools. Many of the findings of the audit resonated with how their own TY programmes evolved, or could evolve in the future. For example, the importance of the passion and commitment of the TY Coordinator, who is supported by a core team and senior management, was noted. This aspect is reflected across the *TY Programme Statement* (DE, 2024b).

Influences on the development process

Impact of the background paper

The initial meetings of the development group examined the purpose and vision for the revised statement. This involved an extensive and detailed use of the background paper, and in particular lessons learned from the audit of effective aspects. The inclusion of findings from schools, who met the criteria for effective aspects, provided a constant touchstone for the group and influenced the nature of discussions and sometimes the direction of thinking.

For example, the audit found that the developmental growth envisaged for the students, such as being more adaptable, flexible, outward-looking, reflective and curious, tended to be the qualities modelled by the schools that were chosen for audit of effective aspects of TY curricula. The development of the student towards acquiring these qualities became a driver for the structure of the emerging statement. This crystallised in the creation of four Student Dimensions as "the key foundations upon which TY programmes are designed" (DE, 2024b, pp.11-15). When speaking to school culture and how to sustain effective practice, the *TY Programme Statement* resonates with the audit findings:

> Equally important for the successful evolution of the programme is a culture that supports and fosters teacher-led curricular innovations within TY. In this way schools can build additional capacity, offering students a wider range of components, while also supporting and promoting internal professional learning, creativity and collaboration. (DE, 2024b, p.17)

NCCA research on curriculum making

Following the publication of the *Senior Cycle Review Advisory Report*, NCCA engaged

in the development of a paper on curriculum making and the technical form of specifications (NCCA, 2023a). This work also informed the structural design of some TY development group meetings while challenging the development group with curriculum theory (NCCA, 2023a, pp.20-32). For example, the Tyler Rationale (NCCA, 2023a, p.21) was one approach which assisted the group in maintaining a purpose and reflecting on their progress. His rationale comprises four questions for curriculum development for schools, which remain relevant for developers today:

1. What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?

2. What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?

3. How can these educational experiences be effectively organised?

4. How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained?
   (NCCA, 2023a, p.21)

The development group, while scaffolded and guided by the NCCA education officers during each meeting, worked fluidly and iteratively throughout the process to ensure the guidance was practical and coherent. They decided that the entire basis of the statement needed to be not only student-centred, but student-driven in how they formulated the guidance for schools to develop their TY programmes. This was influenced by various curriculum theorists (Ergas, 2017; NCCA, 2023a) and deeply informed by their vast and diverse TY experiences. They organised their thinking under the working concept of the Developing Student. As they iterated around the rationale and vision for the revised *TY Programme Statement*, they simultaneously examined the qualities and developmental growth envisaged for TY students – as young people, as members of their communities, in their careers, and as learners and future citizens. The deliberative nature of curriculum development in Ireland allowed for the development group to come to a consensus and frame these parameters for learning and development. These parameters came to be known as Student Dimensions. Some initial names for the various categories of Student Dimensions ranged from Career Readiness to Personal Development. The four Student Dimensions became: Personal Growth, Being a Learner, Civic and Community Engagement, and Career Exploration (DE, 2024b).

Coherence as a guiding principle

As the development group were looking at how students could develop within the four Student Dimensions, they also examined potential experiences during TY that needed to be aligned with student development. Student Dimensions broadened into an interconnected set of developmental indicators and student experiences. These

are the key foundations upon which TY programmes are intended to be designed (DE, 2024b).

With these foundations laid, and while refining the Student Dimensions, the group focussed more intently on the organisation of the student experiences into a TY curriculum. As mentioned previously, the group had been creating the Student Dimensions through the working concept of the Developing Student. They had also created a parallel concept of the Developing TY Programme. Initially, there was potential for crossover in names and content between these two organising concepts, in terms of the TY community as reflective practitioners or through teaching and learning, for example.

Echoing the curriculum principles of the 1993 guidelines, the group developed four Curriculum Dimensions, through which schools are guided in designing their TY programmes while also being supported in exercising their autonomy to create an effective TY curriculum. The four Curriculum Dimensions are: Components, Teaching and Assessment, Recognising and Reporting, and Reflection and Renewal (DE, 2024b). The composition of the group and the findings from the audit again greatly influenced the development of the four Curriculum Dimensions. The development group consciously built the Curriculum Dimensions upon the foundations laid through the Student Dimensions. A key insight from the audit was that qualities envisaged for the students participating in TY programmes were the qualities modelled by the schools. Therefore, the Curriculum Dimensions needed to capture those qualities such as being responsive, willing to adapt and being a reflective practitioner. They are one of the primary mechanisms in the statement for facilitating schools towards developing more effective TY programmes, as described in the background paper. The overview of the *TY Programme Statement* is shown in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2:

Overview of the Transition Year Programme Statement (DE, 2024b)
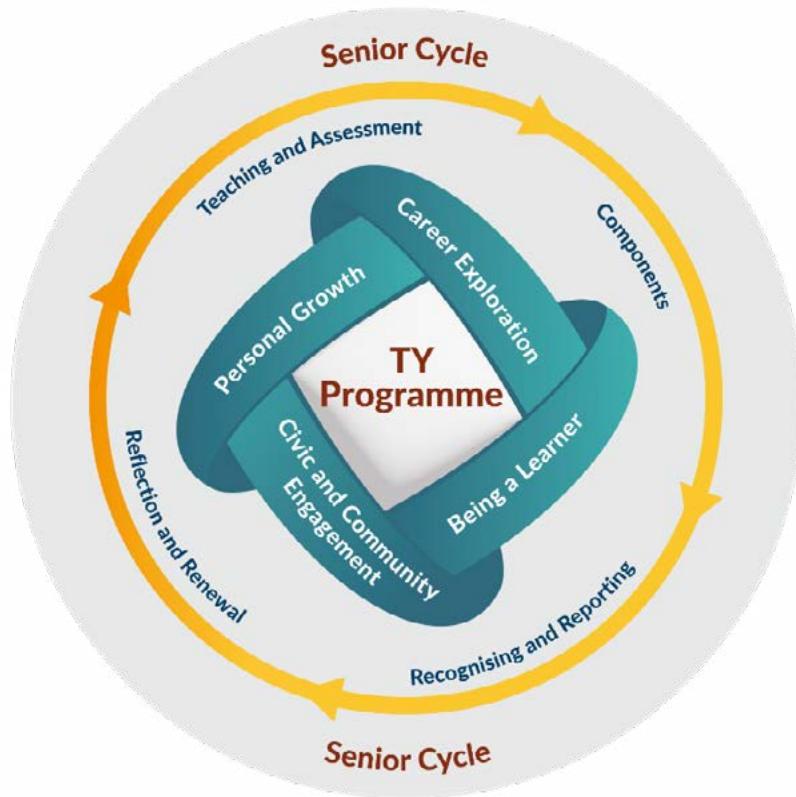
Components (one of the Curriculum Dimensions) is described as "the means by which most of the student experiences, described in the Student Dimensions, are translated into the school's TY curriculum" (DE, 2024b, p.17). By aligning the Curriculum Dimensions to the developmental indicators and student experiences, the statement creates a coherent closed loop between the nature of the curriculum and the development of the student. In framing how schools could report on these components, the statement says that "a broad form of reporting that is aligned to the developmental indicators across all four Student Dimensions is necessary in order to recognise the development of the student" (DE, 2024b, p.25). Ascertaining whether a TY programme is effective, and then responding with actions, is encapsulated, for example, in the Curriculum Dimension of Reflection and Renewal at the programme level, and through Assessment and Reporting at the student level. This process of self-evaluation and improvement aligns to Department of Education frameworks such as *Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools* (DE, 2022d). The wider issue of the impact of the enactment of the *TY Programme Statement* on student development is addressed in the final section.

Emerging Key Competencies of senior cycle

At the same time as the development group puzzled over the integration of Student and Curriculum Dimensions, NCCA had commissioned a research-informed analysis of issues to consider in developing a framework for key competencies in senior cycle (McGuinness, 2023). The work of the development group and the analysis of key competencies not only spoke to each other, but also the design of each influenced the other, while respecting the ethos of TY as a standalone year. The education officers working on the development group and the lead researcher on key competencies liaised during this period to ensure some levels of consistency in both processes. For example, the developmental indicators for each Student Dimension are written in a register where students develop by being more open, showing more initiative, working more co-operatively, broadening their presentation skills, and so forth. There is a strong developmental language used where TY students begin from where they are and move towards a destination during TY. This design approach strongly influenced the language register that was subsequently applied to the Key Competencies, but with a stronger emphasis on the destination of their development at the end of senior cycle: so, a key competency is demonstrated when students are "being creative by combining ideas" or students are "communicating by being open to diverse perspectives" (NCCA, 2023d). In turn, some of the attributes associated with each key competency enabled the TY development group to strengthen, or reflect upon, the scope and nature of the developmental indicators.

The development group developed a draft *TY Programme Statement* (NCCA, 2023c) which was approved for consultation by the Council of NCCA in June 2023. The consultation ran from August to October 2023, and the full report on the consultation was published shortly after (NCCA, 2024).

AQ3: After consulting on the draft *TY Programme Statement*, how could it be strengthened?

The consultation engaged with participants in a variety of ways:

- A public survey

- A dedicated survey open to all post-primary schools

- Webinars for teachers and parents

- School visits to a representative sample of 10 schools, with five focus groups (students, teachers, TY coordinators, school leaders, and parents) in each school

- Two co-hosted seminars with the Irish Second-level Students' Union and with the TY Teacher Professional Network

- A bilateral meeting with two leading researchers with extensive expertise in TY. (NCCA, 2024, pp.2-12)

The development group met twice more after the consultation ended to deliberate on the findings from the consultation. Of the many themes to emerge from the consultation (NCCA, 2024), the following two are discussed:

- improving the draft *TY Programme Statement*

- supports for successful enactment in schools.

Improving the draft *TY Programme Statement*

There was a very broad and positive welcome for the new statement (NCCA, 2024). Many practitioners felt it affirmed current, effective practice, respected the autonomy of schools, and placed a structure upon the design of TY programmes through the Student Dimensions and Curriculum Dimensions. The student-driven approach and the coherence in the structure was seen to be practical and forward-looking while also creating a clear identity for TY as a standalone programme (NCCA, 2024, pp.4-5).

The area most in need of strengthening was the section on encouraging participation and engagement. The main feedback was to include more variety in how schools could encourage engagement based on the experiences of schools (NCCA, 2024, p.12). This included more emphasis on student voice and on students who had participated in TY speaking to the younger student cohort, but also more emphasis on the importance of student responsibility to the success of the school's TY programme. There was also feedback on the need to communicate what the TY programme is about, how students can benefit from TY in ways that can now be described using the Student Dimensions, and how stakeholders can support the renewal of a school's TY programme. On some sections of the draft statement, the feedback sought to make changes that were mutually incompatible. For example, the language of the developmental indicators was broadly considered to be accessible and sufficiently comprehensive. In some cases, feedback described them as not accessible while other feedback looked for greater detail. The development group in these cases would balance the overall thrust of the feedback and bring their expertise to bear on how best to shape the final text. The other consistent piece of feedback was greater consistency in some of the language describing the Student Dimensions and to provide more clarity on the use of the developmental indicators, which further strengthened the document.

Supports for successful enactment in schools

While the coherence, practicality and usability of the draft *TY Programme Statement* were welcomed, these are only the first steps for successful enactment. The participants identified some key factors for next steps after publication (NCCA, 2024, pp.13-14). The three supports for successful enactment consistently identified by participants were time, continuing professional development (CPD), and funding:

Time

Participants felt that more time would need to be set aside in schools for coordination and for TY Coordinators in particular. A common piece of feedback was that coordinating a standalone programme of this nature and magnitude requires a dedicated standalone post in all schools that offer TY.

CPD

Participants felt targeted CPD from March to June 2024 would be required, given the short window to raise awareness of the parameters of the revised *TY Programme Statement*.

Funding

Participants discussed the need to lower the TY fee charged to families and increase the TY capitation grant to schools to ensure that TY programmes are viable in supporting the Student Dimensions.

Final Reflections

A model for developing background papers and briefs

In March 2022, as part of setting out plans for a redeveloped senior cycle, the Minister requested that NCCA prepare a schedule of senior cycle subjects to be reviewed and redeveloped in tranches (DE, 2022a). Tranche 1 subjects were under development at the same time as the *TY Programme Statement* was being developed. The background papers and briefs for these subjects were mainly informed by desktop research, with the school-based consultation carried out after the paper had been approved. However, the development of background papers and briefs for all tranche 2 and tranche 3 subjects and programmes followed the model used for the *TY Programme Statement*, by incorporating school-based consultations in advance. (These background papers can be accessed on https://ncca.ie/en/senior-cycle/curriculum-developments/.) All background papers for these subjects were therefore informed by school consultation visits involving focus groups of teachers, students and school leaders. It is expected that all subsequent tranches of the phased redevelopment will follow the same model.

Reviewing the enactment of the *TY Programme Statement*

It was previously discussed that the purpose of TY could be reviewed at school level, and the consultation also suggested some next steps required for successful enactment. For NCCA to address the enactment of the *TY Programme Statement* at a national level would involve some form of early enactment review. This process has been completed for Leaving Certificate Computer Science and Leaving Certificate Physical Education in 2023, five years after their introduction (NCCA, 2023e, 2023f). At junior cycle, ongoing reviews of subjects and short courses are concluding, following their phased introduction under the *Framework for Junior Cycle*. (The reports for these reviews can be accessed at https://ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/curriculum-developments/.)

A final reflection on the development of the *Statement*

Three Action Questions are identified in this article on the curriculum development process. The audit of effective aspects found that the qualities envisaged for how students develop were modelled in the qualities of the school's TY programme and in the school generally, such as flexibility, adaptability, collaborative skills, reflectiveness and responsiveness to feedback. In schools that have striven for this, the audit found that over time teachers and students begin to take ownership of the programme in highly organic and self-sustaining ways, enabled by the TY Coordinator and other school leaders. The puzzle to be solved by the development group was how to create a *TY Programme Statement* that could also encourage and foster a similar template for organic growth and sustainability for the TY programmes in schools. The solution offered by the development group is a practical, student-driven structure, building on the foundations of four Student Dimensions and scaffolding the development of the school's TY programme through four Curriculum Dimensions. The next steps will be the enactment of the *TY Programme Statement* in schools, supported by aligned professional development and the wider supports of families and other stakeholders.

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Appendix A

The story of the development of the *TY Programme Statement* told through NCCA and DE documents
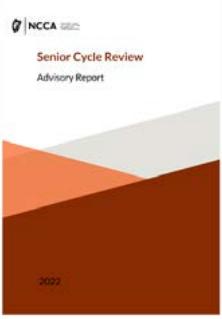
March 2022

[Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report](#)

November 2022

[Background Paper and brief for a revised TY Programme Statement](#)
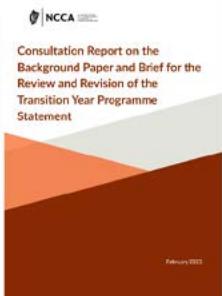
February 2023

[Consultation report on the Background paper and brief for the review and revision of the TY Programme Statement](#)

June 2023

[Draft TY Programme Statement for consultation](#)
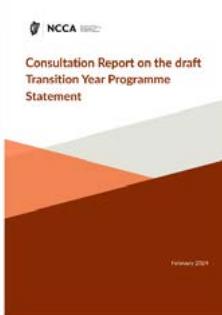
February 2024

[Report on the consultation on the Draft TY Programme Statement](#)

September 2024

[TY Programme Statement](#)