

From Loss to Learning: National Tragedies and the National Curriculum

Briefing Note

Wednesday 25th March 2026, 17:00-19:00

Macmillan Room, Portcullis House, House of Commons

Purpose of the event

This event brought together parliamentarians, educators, researchers, subject association representatives, and members of disaster-affected communities to consider how education might respond to national tragedies in ways that are accurate, respectful, and educationally meaningful.

The discussion was framed by a shared concern that major tragedies are often absent from sustained treatment within the formal curriculum, despite their significance for public memory, justice, democratic accountability, and social learning. Speakers explored what can be learned from Holocaust education, and how local initiatives developed around Hillsborough and Grenfell may offer important models for future curriculum thinking and practice.

Opening framing

Ian Byrne MP opened the event by arguing that many national tragedies are marked not only by devastating loss, but also by institutional failure, denial, and cover-up. He stressed that education has an important role in ensuring that these events are neither forgotten nor misrepresented. He linked this to wider efforts to secure justice, including the ongoing campaign for the Hillsborough Law, and argued that embedding such events in education can help communities better understand the actions of the state and the importance of truth-telling.

Dr Wonyong Park welcomed participants and noted that the event was intended to open a careful and thoughtful discussion rather than offer simple prescriptions. He emphasised that current curriculum reform in England gives the conversation particular urgency and possibility. He also highlighted the importance of bringing together perspectives from Parliament, schools, universities, subject associations, and disaster-affected communities.

Dr Nigel Fancourt, chairing the session, acknowledged representatives from other affected communities, including infected blood, Manchester Arena, Borough Market, and Aberfan, and a minute's silence was observed in memory of those lost.

Main contributions

Holocaust education

Dr Bea Lewkowicz reflected on the place of the Holocaust in the National Curriculum and on the wider ecology of Holocaust education in England. She noted that the Holocaust has been explicitly named in the curriculum since 1991, but that the statutory wording at Key Stage 3 remains brief and broad. There is no prescribed teaching time, no required case studies, and little guidance on pedagogy. In practice, this means that implementation varies considerably between schools and is shaped heavily by teacher expertise and confidence.

A key message from this contribution was that the relative success of Holocaust education has depended not only on formal curriculum inclusion, but also on the wider infrastructure supporting it. Dr Lewkowicz highlighted the role of organisations such as the Holocaust Educational Trust, the National Holocaust Museum, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education, and a range of archives and research centres.

She also stressed the central importance of survivor and refugee testimony. Although testimony is not explicitly mentioned in the curriculum, it has played a vital role in making Holocaust education personal, human, and meaningful for pupils. Testimony was also described as important for survivors themselves, offering agency, recognition, and a sense of legacy.

Looking to the future, Dr Lewkowicz identified several challenges: the decline of the survivor generation, the rise of digital and interactive testimony, the need for media and testimony literacy, and the increasing politicisation of Holocaust memory in the context of contemporary antisemitism. Her contribution suggested that curriculum inclusion alone is insufficient without teacher support, clear aims, and strong educational resources.

Hillsborough and the Real Truth Legacy Project

Ian Byrne MP introduced the Real Truth Legacy Project as a community-based educational initiative developed in response to the discovery that many young people in Liverpool knew little about Hillsborough. The project created an assembly, supporting materials, and guidance for teachers, with the aim of presenting the truth of Hillsborough in a form suitable for schools. He emphasised that the process of creating the project was deliberately inclusive and collaborative, involving bereaved families, survivors, educators, and others connected to the tragedy.

Jenni Hicks spoke from personal experience as a bereaved mother who lost both daughters at Hillsborough. Her contribution moved beyond curriculum in the narrow sense and highlighted the broader educational significance of truth, justice, and institutional accountability. She argued that one of the most important lessons from Hillsborough is the need for access to documentation and evidence. In her view, education is not only about remembrance or combating misinformation; it is also about understanding how truth can be obstructed and how justice can be delayed. She stressed that access to official documentation was crucial in the Hillsborough campaign and remains essential for other disaster-affected communities.

Mo Ungi, a deputy headteacher in Liverpool, reflected on piloting the Hillsborough assembly with primary pupils. She described initial hesitation about whether such a sensitive topic could be taught to younger children, but reported that the experience was one of the most powerful educational moments of her career. She noted that very few pupils initially knew about Hillsborough, even within Liverpool, but that they responded with maturity, empathy, and thoughtful questioning. Her reflections underlined the importance of high-quality resources, carefully planned timelines, and direct testimony in helping children engage with difficult material.

Grenfell Curriculum Project

Hanan Wahabi, a Grenfell survivor and bereaved family member, spoke about the Grenfell Curriculum Project, emphasising that it is grounded in community knowledge, memorialisation, and justice. She argued that Grenfell should not be understood only as a tragic event from the past, but as an ongoing matter of remembrance, accountability, and public responsibility. She stressed that the curriculum work has been shaped through close collaboration between educators, researchers, and community members, including a dedicated community education working group.

A central feature of the project is the development of a community-informed ‘education for disaster justice’ framework, and a teacher professional development programme. Hanan emphasised that teachers need both knowledge and pedagogical support if they are to approach Grenfell responsibly and sensitively. She also highlighted the importance of ensuring that community voices remain central, so that educational materials do not become detached from lived experience.

Teachers **Melissa Kiley** and **Lauren Baker** shared reflections on trialling the work in a North Kensington primary school located close to Grenfell Tower. They explained that the lesson was designed around remembrance and poetry, rather than traumatic detail, and drew on principles from the education for disaster justice framework. These included starting with humanity rather than horror, honouring lived experience, and supporting emotional safety and dialogue. Both teachers spoke positively about the experience and the quality of pupil engagement. Children were reported to be highly thoughtful, respectful, and keen to learn more.

Key themes emerging from the discussion

Several shared themes emerged across the different contributions.

First, testimony was central throughout the event. Whether in Holocaust education, Hillsborough, or Grenfell, testimony was seen as vital both educationally and ethically. It helps humanise events, preserves memory, and offers agency to survivors and bereaved families.

Secondly, there was a strong emphasis on the capacity of children and young people to engage with difficult issues. Speakers repeatedly noted that pupils, including those in primary schools, are capable of thoughtful and emotionally mature engagement when teaching is carefully designed.

Thirdly, teacher support and professional development were identified as essential. A recurring message was that sensitive and complex topics cannot simply be added to the curriculum without investing in teacher confidence, knowledge, and resources.

Fourthly, pedagogy matters. The event highlighted that the question is not only whether national tragedies are taught, but how. Sensitivity, accuracy, emotional safety, authenticity, and age-appropriate design were all seen as crucial.

Fifthly, local knowledge and community voices were repeatedly emphasised. Participants stressed that education about tragedy should not be imposed from outside without the involvement of affected communities. Community-informed work was presented as more legitimate, more accurate, and more ethically grounded.

Contributions from the floor

The open discussion broadened the conversation to include other national tragedies and sectors. Representatives from the infected blood community spoke powerfully about the long struggle for recognition and justice, and raised important questions about how such issues can be addressed educationally without creating fear or misunderstanding. University-based participants highlighted the role that higher education and professional education can play, including in fields such as medicine, law, architecture, and public policy.

Representatives from subject associations and educational bodies reflected on the relevance of themes such as justice, local community, ethics, disciplinary ways of knowing, misinformation, and professional development. There was also support for the idea that school leaders may need greater preparation to respond educationally to major incidents and tragedies when they occur.

Key messages

The event generated several clear messages for future work:

- National tragedies raise important educational questions about memory, justice, truth, and accountability.
- Curriculum inclusion, while important, is not enough on its own; successful implementation depends on teacher development, high-quality resources, and sustained institutional support.
- Community testimony and lived experience should be central to any educational work in this area.
- Children and young people should not be underestimated; they are capable of engaging thoughtfully with complex and sensitive issues.
- Local initiatives such as those developed around Hillsborough and Grenfell offer promising models for wider curriculum and professional development work.
- Cross-community collaboration is valuable and can strengthen both advocacy and educational design.

Possible next steps

A number of possible next steps were implied during the discussion:

- Sustain the cross-sector conversation between communities, educators, researchers, and policymakers.
- Build a stronger collective voice across affected communities and supporting organisations to advocate for curriculum recognition and reform.
- Develop and share pedagogical models for teaching national tragedies in age-appropriate and ethically grounded ways.
- Strengthen teacher professional development in this area, including support for school leaders.
- Explore progression across phases of education, including how sensitive issues might be approached differently in primary, secondary, higher, and professional education.
- Preserve testimony and documentation to support both educational and justice-oriented work.

Organising Team

Wonyong Park (University of Southampton), Ian Byrne MP (Liverpool West Derby), Nigel Fancourt (University of Oxford), John Schulz (University of Southampton), Callie Langley (University of Southampton), James Nolan (House of Commons), Maureen Delahunty (House of Commons)

Speakers

Lauren Baker (Thomas Jones Primary School), Jenni Hicks (Hillsborough community representative), Melissa Kiley (Thomas Jones Primary School), Bea Lewkowicz (Association of Jewish Refugees and Holocaust Testimony UK Portal), Joe Powell MP (Kensington and Bayswater), Maureen Ungi (St Teresa of Lisieux Catholic Primary School in West Derby), Hanan Wahabi (Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission)

Delegates

Jenny Barksfield (PSHE Association), Ella Cameron (London Borough of Newham), Mouna El Ogbani (Grenfell United), Adrian Fernandes (University of Oxford), Lauren Fernback (Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea), Richard Gorman (University of Sussex), Arzhia Habibi (University of Oxford), Susan Harris (Infected Blood Compensation Authority), Ella Kiley (London's Violence Reduction Unit), Rebecca Kitchen (Geographical Association), Sarah Lane Cawte (Religious Education Council), Ruth-Anne Lenga (UCL Institute of Education), Simon Lynch (Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea), Remy Mohamed (Greater London Authority), Mark Mon-Williams (University of Leeds; Department for Education Science Advisory Council), Fiona Moss (Culham St Gabriel's Trust), Clare Richards (The Grenfell Foundation), Mike Shoemsmith (Resilience in Unity), Alicia Taylor (Resilience in Unity), Howard Taylor (The Grenfell Foundation), Jonny Tridgell (University of Oxford), Clair Walton (Infected Blood Memorial Committee), Sean Whittle (St Mary's University London)

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