



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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Education system in Northern Ireland

1 Introduction

Northern Ireland has a complex educational structure with a range of bodies involved in its management and administration. This briefing paper provides an overview of the education system from pre-school to post-primary education, including its structure, governance arrangements, school phases, management types and sectoral bodies.

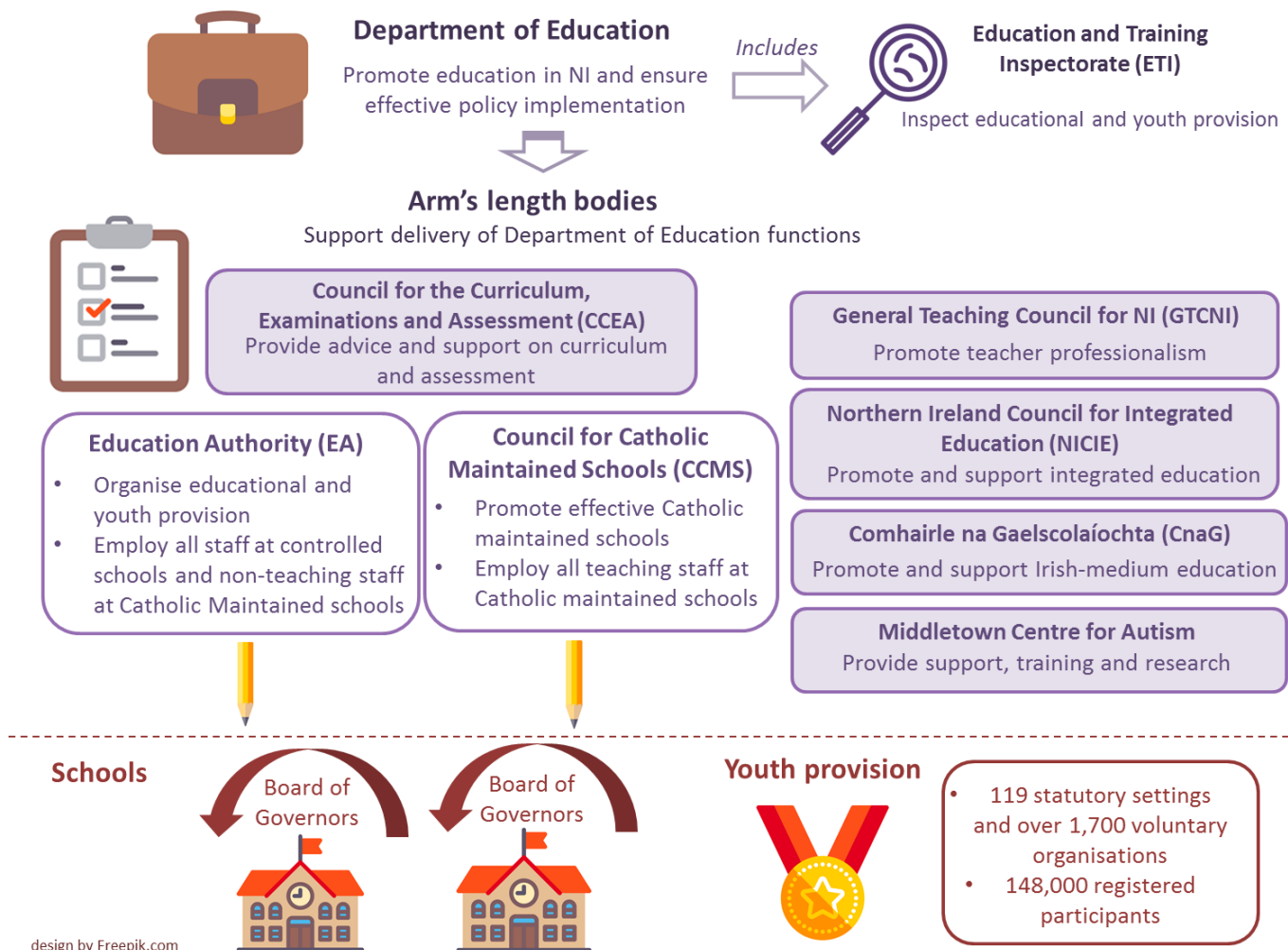
2 Structure of the education system

The Department of Education (the Department), accountable to the Assembly, has overall responsibility for the education of the people of Northern Ireland and for effectively implementing educational policy. A number of arm's length bodies, each accountable to the Department, support it in delivering its functions.

At the individual establishment level, a Board of Governors governs each school, whose composition varies according to the school type. In the youth sector, the Education Authority (EA) is responsible for managing statutory provision, and for supporting voluntary provision.

Figure 1 overleaf provides an overview of the main bodies involved in the organisation of education in Northern Ireland, and their responsibilities. The subsequent paragraphs consider their roles in more detail.

Figure 1: Overview of the education system: key bodies and responsibilities¹



Department of Education

The Department's main statutory duty is to promote education in Northern Ireland and implement education policy. Its main areas of responsibility are:

- Educational provision for children up to the age of four;
- Primary; post-primary and special education; and
- The youth service.²

¹ Sources are highlighted in the remainder of Section 2. Sources for youth provision: Perry, C. (2015) *Education other than at School and youth work* Belfast: NI Assembly and Department of Education *Youth Service* [online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/youth-service>. Two further NDPBs are not included in Figure 1 (see p.7-8)

² Department of Education *About the Department of Education* [online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/about-department-education>

Through the Minister for Education, the Department is accountable to the Assembly for fulfilling its statutory duties and using its public funds effectively.³

The Fresh Start Agreement provided for restructuring of government departments. As a result, on the 9th May 2016 the Department gained a number of additional responsibilities from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMdFM). These are highlighted in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Additional responsibilities transferred from OFMdFM to the Department of Education from May 2016⁴

Area	Location within DE	Key responsibilities and strategies
Children and Young People's Strategy Team	Children and Young People Services Division	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing the new Executive Strategy for Children and Young People Promoting implementation of the Children's Services Cooperation Act 2015 Developing the Signature Programme on Play and Leisure Reporting on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Developing the Child Rights Indicators Project Considering the Children's Budgeting Programme
Childcare Strategy Team	Youth, Early Years and Childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finalising the draft Childcare Strategy for Executive approval and launch Liaising with HMRC on the introduction of the new Tax Free Childcare initiative Managing and evaluating the Bright Start School Age Childcare Grant Scheme

Inspection arrangements

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) inspects a range of providers, including pre-schools; primary and post-primary schools; the youth service; institutes of further and higher education; and educational provision within the prison service. It is part of the Department of Education.⁵

Arm's length bodies

The Department has nine Arm's Length Bodies⁶, or non-departmental public bodies, each accountable to the Department, to support the delivery of its functions. The

³ Department of Education *About the Department of Education* [online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/about-department-education>

⁴ Information provided by the Department of Education, July 2016

⁵ Perry, C (2012) *School Inspection* Belfast: Northern Ireland Assembly

⁶ Please note: DE also has a Tribunal non-departmental public body: the Exceptional Circumstances Body. The Youth Council Northern Ireland remains in place until repealed by legislation. See pages 7-8 for further information

Department's Accounting Officer is responsible for safeguarding the public funds given to these bodies, supported by the Chief Executive and Accounting Officer of each body.⁷ The non-departmental public bodies, each considered in the following paragraphs, are the:

- Education Authority;
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools;
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment;
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education;
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta;
- General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland;
- Middletown Centre for Autism;
- Youth Council for Northern Ireland; and
- Exceptional Circumstances Body.

Education Authority (EA)

The Education (Northern Ireland) Act 2014⁸ provided for the establishment of the Education Authority. The EA took over the existing duties of the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs) and continues to manage and deliver services in accordance with the geographic areas previously defined as ELBs.⁹ The EA's duties include:¹⁰

- **Ensuring sufficient primary and post-primary provision** for Northern Ireland, including for children with special educational needs (SEN);
- **Securing provision for youth services;**
- **Acting as the employing authority** for all staff in controlled schools and for non-teaching staff in Catholic maintained schools; and
- **Funding grant maintained integrated and voluntary grammar schools.** The Department currently carries out this function on behalf of the EA, although the administrative arrangements of the funding authority function are expected to transfer to the EA on the 1st April 2017.¹¹

⁷ Department of Education (2015) Corporate Governance Framework Bangor: DE

⁸ Legislation.gov.uk *The Education (Northern Ireland) Act 2014* [online] Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2014/12/contents>

⁹ Education Authority *Organisational structure* [online] Available at: <http://www.eani.org.uk/about-us/organisational-structure/>

¹⁰ Legislation.gov.uk *The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986* [online] Available at: <http://origin-www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1986/594/part/III/crossheading/powers-and-duties-of-boards-in-relation-to-primary-and-secondary-education>

¹¹ Information provided by the Department of Education, August 2016

The 2014 Act created additional duties for the EA to encourage, facilitate and promote shared education and the community use of school premises. It also enabled the Department to fund a sectoral body for controlled or for any other grant-aided schools.

In December 2015 the Minister of Education and the Minister for Justice announced that responsibility for educational provision for young people in custody would transfer from the Department of Justice to the Education Authority. As such, educational provision at Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre will operate as an education other than at school (EOTAS) centre, with the transfer process expected to conclude in the autumn of 2016.¹²

Council for Catholic Maintained Schools

The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 established the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). Its key duties include:¹³

- **Employing all teachers at Catholic maintained schools;**
- **Advising the Department** on Catholic maintained schools;
- **Promoting the effective planning, management and control** of Catholic maintained schools; and
- **Providing advice and information** to the trustees, Boards of Governors, principals and staff of Catholic maintained schools.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment

The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1993¹⁴ established the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). Its activities include:¹⁵

- **Delivering assessment arrangements** for primary and post-primary schools;
- **Providing GCSEs, A levels and other courses** to schools and colleges;
- **Acting as a qualifications regulator**, accrediting qualifications on behalf of the Department;
- **Advising the Department** on curriculum and assessment and conducting research and development; and
- **Supporting teachers** in delivering the curriculum through resources.

¹² Information provided by the Department of Education, July 2016

¹³ Legislation.gov.uk *The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989* [online] Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1989/2406/part/IX>

¹⁴ Legislation.gov.uk *The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1993* [online] Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1993/2810>

¹⁵ Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (2015) *CCEA Annual Report 2014/15* Belfast: CCEA

Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education

The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989¹⁶ requires the Department to encourage and facilitate integrated education, defined as the education together at school of Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils. It also allowed the Department to pay grants to any body aiming to promote or encourage integrated education.

The activities of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) include:¹⁷

- **Coordinating efforts** to develop integrated education;
- **Supporting parents** through the process of opening new schools; and
- **Influencing and informing** the public.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta

The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998¹⁸ required the Department to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education, and allowed it to pay grants to any body aiming to encourage or promote Irish-medium education.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) aims to promote, facilitate and encourage all aspects of Irish-medium education by:¹⁹

- **Providing assistance and advice** in the establishment of schools;
- **Promoting good practice standards** in schools and promoting the interests of the schools; and
- **Representing the views of other bodies** with a view to developing Irish-medium education.

The governance and organisation structures of CnaG were reviewed in 2014, resulting in the introduction of special measures to strengthen its governance framework. The Department advises that it is working with the organisation to ensure implementation of the review recommendations.²⁰

¹⁶ Legislation.gov.uk *The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989* [online] Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1989/2406>

¹⁷ Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education *A coordinating body* [online] Available at: <http://www.nicie.org/about-us/role-of-nicie/a-co-ordinating-body/>

¹⁸ Legislation.gov.uk *The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998* [online] Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1998/1759>

¹⁹ Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (2014) *Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2014* Belfast: CnaG

²⁰ Information provided by the Department of Education, August 2016

General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland

The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998²¹ established the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI). It aims to promote teacher professionalism, and its key responsibilities include:²²

- **Registering** all teachers in grant-aided schools;
- **Approving qualifications** for the purposes of registration; and
- **Providing advice** to the Department and employing authorities on all matters relating to teaching.

The Department agreed a range of special measures in December 2015 aiming to strengthen the GTCNI's governance framework and to resolve "*management issues*". The Department advises that it continues to work with the organisation to ensure that it addresses the recommendations.²³

Middletown Centre for Autism

In April 2002 the North South Ministerial Council endorsed an agreement between the Department of Education and the Department of Education and Skills²⁴ to establish an all-island centre for children with autism spectrum disorders in Middletown, Armagh.²⁵

The Centre receives joint funding from the Department of Education and the Department of Education and Skills. It began offering services to children and young people with autism, their parents and education professionals in 2007. Its remit is to:²⁶

- **Offer specialist autism support services** throughout Northern Ireland, including school- and home-based support;
- **Provide an extensive training programme** for parents and school staff in both jurisdictions; and
- **Carry out and disseminate studies** on educational developments in autism.

Youth Council for Northern Ireland (functions transferred to the EA)

The Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1989²⁷ established the Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNI). Its functions were to:

²¹ Legislation.gov.uk *The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998* [online] Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1998/1759>

²² General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (2016) *Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2015* Belfast: GTCNI

²³ Information provided by the Department of Education, August 2016

²⁴ Then known as the Department of Education and Science

²⁵ Centre for Autism, Middletown *About us* [online] Available at: <https://www.middletownautism.com/about-us/>

²⁶ Centre for Autism, Middletown (2015) *Annual Report and Financial Statements for the Year Ended 31 March 2015* Centre for Autism, Middletown

²⁷ Legislation.gov.uk *The Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1989* [online] Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1989/2413/contents>

- Advise the Department, EA and others on the development of the youth service;
- Encourage youth service cross-community activity;
- Encourage the provision of facilities for the youth services; and
- Encourage and assist coordination and efficient use of resources.

Following public consultation, in December 2015 the Minister for Education announced that the EA would instead deliver YCNI's activities.²⁸ Funding and support responsibilities for youth services transferred to the EA on the 1st April 2016.²⁹ Legislation is required to repeal the 1989 Order to dissolve the YCNI.

Exceptional Circumstances Body

The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997³⁰ and the School Admissions (Exceptional Circumstances) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010³¹ provide for the Exceptional Circumstances Body (ECB). The ECB considers applications from parents stating that, due to exceptional circumstances, a child who has been unsuccessful in gaining admission to a specific post-primary school, must attend that school.³²

3 Schools and pupils by phase

Figure 2 below illustrates the number of schools and pupils by school phase in 2015/16. Subsequently, Section 4 provides a breakdown of school sectors.

²⁸ *Written statement to the Assembly by John O'Dowd MLA – Thursday 10 December 2015 – Outcome of consultation on proposals for the future of the youth council and the way forward*

²⁹ Information provided by the Department of Education, August 2016


³⁰ Legislation.gov.uk *The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997* [online] Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1997/866/article/16A>

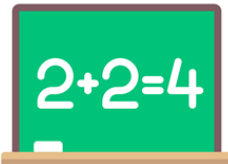
³¹ Legislation.gov.uk *The School Admissions (Exceptional Circumstances) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010* [online] Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2010/19/contents/made>


³² Department of Education (2016) *Re-appointment of members to the Exceptional Circumstances Body* [online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/re-appointment-members-exceptional-circumstances-body>

Figure 2: Number of schools and enrolments by phase, 2015/16³³

Special		Establishments	Pupils
		39	5,173

Pre-school		Setting type	Establishments	Pupils
		Schools with nursery classes	235	9,312
		Voluntary and private	405	8,716
		Nursery schools	96	5,904
		Schools with reception classes	67	241
		Total	803	24,173

Primary		Establishments	Pupils
		827	168,669

Post-primary		Setting type	Establishments	Pupils
		Non-grammar	135	77,753
		Grammar	67	63,359
		Total	202	141,112

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4 School sectors

Northern Ireland has a range of school sectors; each with different characteristics. The independent sector is small, comprising just 14 independent schools and 658 pupils in 2015/16.³⁴ Table 2 highlights the main grant-aided school management types in Northern Ireland.

³³ Data source: Department of Education (2016) *School enrolments – school level data 2015/16* [online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-school-level-data-201516>

³⁴ Department of Education (2016) *School enrolments – school level data 2015/16* [online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-school-level-data-201516>

Table 2: School management types in Northern Ireland (grant-aided)³⁵³⁶

Sector	% of pupils	Phase	Overview
Controlled	39%	Nursery, primary, secondary, grammar and special	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided and managed by the EA through Boards of Governors • Primary and secondary Boards include transferor members (Protestant churches) • Some controlled integrated schools (further 2% of pupils)
Catholic maintained (voluntary maintained)	36%	Nursery, primary, secondary and special	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roman Catholic ethos • Boards of Governors include trustees appointed by CCMS
Voluntary non-maintained	15%	Grammar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voluntary grammars • Self-governing: higher levels of autonomy • Boards include trustee/foundation governors
Grant-maintained integrated	5%	Nursery, primary and secondary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrated ethos • Self-governing • DE has a duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education
'Other' maintained (voluntary maintained)	1%	Nursery, primary, secondary and special	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly Irish-medium schools • DE has a duty to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium education

Parental choice

Legislation underpins the right of parents to express a preference for their child to attend a certain school. However, this is not an absolute right and is restricted by the approved admissions and enrolment numbers within which schools must operate.³⁷

Where a school receives more applications than it has places available, it must select between applicants on the basis of the school's published admissions criteria. The

³⁵ Department of Education (2016) *School enrolments – school level data 2015/16* [online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-school-level-data-201516> and OECD (2013) *Country background report for Northern Ireland* Bangor: Department of Education and Department of Education (2015) *Corporate Governance Handbook for Irish Medium Schools* Bangor: Department of Education and Perry, C (2012) *Models of school ownership and management* Belfast: Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service

Please note: the remaining pupils attended voluntary and private pre-schools and non-grant-aided (independent) schools

³⁶ Note: While most 'other maintained' schools are Irish medium, there are three additional schools owned by the Church of Ireland

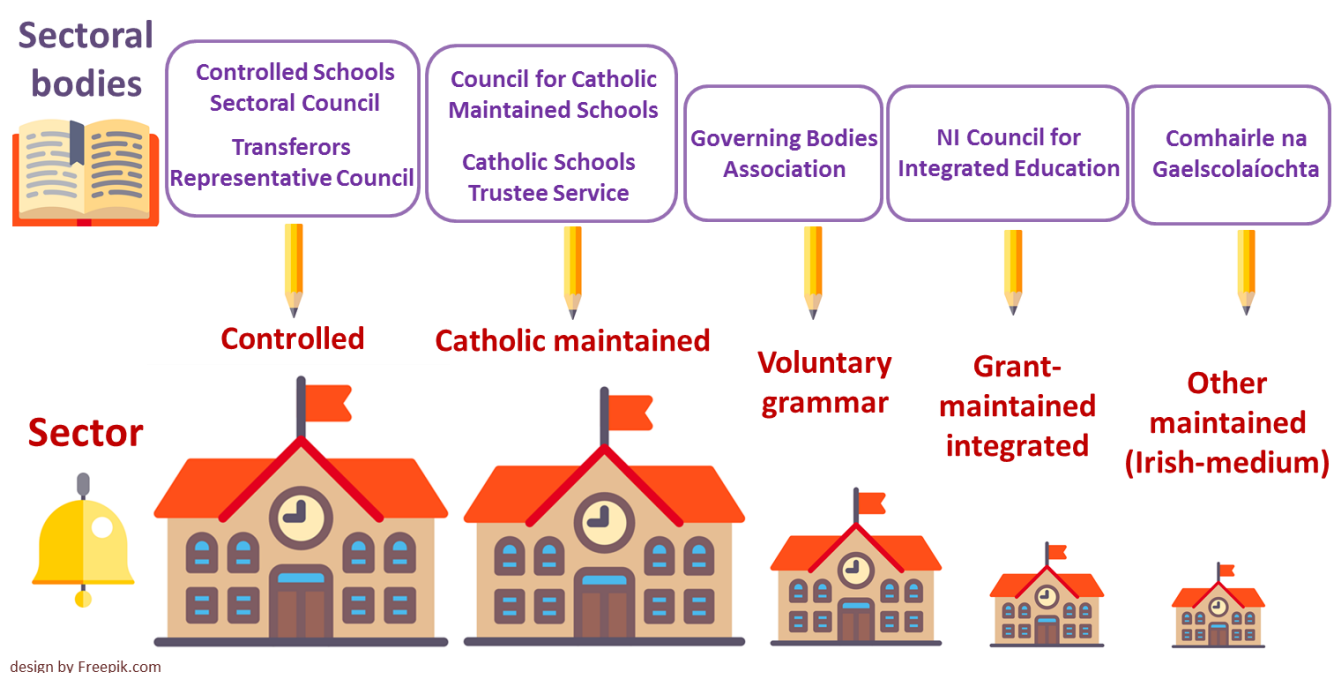
³⁷ Education (NI) Order 1997

criteria must be capable of selecting between pupils down to and including the last available place.

5 Sectoral bodies

A number of sectoral bodies support school sectors, representing their interests and often providing support and advice. These include CCMS, NICIE and CnaG, which are non-departmental public bodies (see section 2 of this paper), as well as a number of other bodies. Figure 3 illustrates the main sectoral bodies and the following paragraphs consider those that are not arms-length bodies.

Figure 3: Main sectoral bodies in Northern Ireland



Controlled Schools Sectoral Council

The Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 provided for the Department to pay grants to any body representing the interests of controlled schools, or of any other grant-aided schools.³⁸

The Controlled Schools Sectoral Council (CSSC) is currently classed as a Third Party Organisation, although the Department of Finance is considering its status. It is a company limited by guarantee and is seeking charitable status.³⁹

The CSSC will be established formally on the 1st September 2016 and the Minister for Education has allocated funding of up to around £1m annually.⁴⁰

³⁸ Legislation.gov.uk *The Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2014* [online] Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2014/12/crossheading/funding-of-sectoral-bodies>

³⁹ Information provided by the Department of Education, August 2016

⁴⁰ Information provided by the Department of Education, August 2016

Transferor Representative's Council

A non-statutory body, the Transferor Representative's Council (TRC) comprises the three Protestant churches that owned schools before their transfer to public ownership: Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist. The TRC receives no departmental funding, and instead relies on volunteer members.⁴¹ It has a representative role for controlled schools (including representatives at the EA).⁴²

Catholic Schools Trustee Service

The Department understands that the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education (NICCE) will be rebranded as the Catholic Schools' Trustee Service. Its role will involve providing professional support and advice to the Catholic Trustees on area-based planning for the Catholic school sector. It will also assist Trustees fulfil their commitment to develop the role of Catholic schools in shared education.⁴³

NICCE is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity. Departmental funding is subject to business case approval.⁴⁴

Governing Bodies Association

The Governing Bodies Association (GBA) represents voluntary grammar schools in Northern Ireland. Its role includes supplying policy information, advice and support to members and representing their views. It is a company limited by guarantee.⁴⁵

Other sector-related bodies

Other bodies play a role in supporting school sectors, including:

- **The Integrated Education Fund:** a registered charity, it aims to bridge the financial gap between integrated schools starting and securing full departmental funding;⁴⁶ and
- **Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta:** this body aims to act as a Trust Fund for Irish-medium education.⁴⁷

6 Area planning

In September 2011 the then Minister for Education announced a need for strategic planning of schools on an area basis and commissioned a viability audit of schools,

⁴¹ Information provided by the Department of Education, August 2016

⁴² NI Assembly Official Report (2015) Shared Education Bill: Transferor Representatives' Council

⁴³ Information provided by the Department of Education, August 2016 (Note: any other functions will not be eligible for DE funding)

⁴⁴ Information provided by the Department of Education, August 2016

⁴⁵ Governing Bodies Association NI *About* [online] Available at: <http://www.gbani.org/about/>

⁴⁶ Integrated Education Fund *About Us* [online] Available at: <https://www.ief.org.uk/about-us/>

⁴⁷ Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta *Eolas faoi InaG/ About InaG* [online] Available at: <http://www.iontaobhasnag.com/about-inag/>

following by the publishing of area plans. In May 2015 the Committee for Education released a position paper on area planning, with findings including that:

- Area planning appeared to have had limited impact on the schools estate;
- The Department had failed to adequately resource arms-length bodies to conduct area planning; and
- Measures of sustainability and planning for the supply of school places needed to improve.