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Your Ref: GM-0120-2026

Dear Aoibhinn

Thank you for your letter of 24 February requesting a written briefing on the evidence base regarding inclusivity best practice in other jurisdictions.

Please find attached the written briefing. I trust that this information will assist the Committee in its consideration of this matter.



George Platt
Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer

Annex B



Evidence briefing
paper for Education C

Enhanced Support Model: Evidence Briefing Paper

Introduction

1. A substantial body of evidence collated from independent reviews, academic studies, and international research has unveiled persistent and significant weaknesses in Northern Ireland's current model of Classroom Assistant (CA) deployment. The current model, which sees heavy reliance on near universal one to one CA support for pupils with a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in mainstream education, is widely acknowledged by professionals, practitioners, researchers and other jurisdictions to be ineffective in meeting the diverse needs of learners, and out of step with the modern principles of inclusive education. Moreover, despite the best intentions of schools and staff, this model has also become increasingly unsustainable, due to the lack of available, capable and qualified CA's and the rapid rise in costs as a direct result of the increasing number of Statements.
2. There is broad support for a more flexible, school-led model of support that empowers leadership teams to respond to the specific needs of pupils in their setting. There is also a strong call for enhanced training and professionalisation of the CA workforce, ensuring that they are supported, valued, and equipped to contribute confidently to supporting the increasing diversity and complexity of need of our children and young people with SEN.
3. The evidence outlined in this paper provides a clear opportunity for Northern Ireland to move toward a system that is more effective, more equitable, and more aligned with best practice.

Overall Evidence

Department of Education End to End Review of SEN (2024)

4. The department, in partnership with the Education Authority (EA), initiated an End to End (E2E) Review of Special Educational Needs in February 2023. This review sought to obtain a greater understanding of the changing needs of our children and young people with SEN, provide a comprehensive response to the range of scrutiny report recommendations and design an eco-system that can make a real difference by improving outcomes in a more efficient and cost-effective manner.
5. The key points the review identified are:
 - Significant concerns regarding the sustainability and effectiveness of the current support model in mainstream schools, which is heavily reliant on almost universal one-to-one assistance.
 - Both parents and schools emphasised that support must be flexible and capable of adjusting as pupils' needs evolve, with provision remaining seamless throughout a child's school journey.
6. The review also found broad consensus among schools that decisions about support should be informed by the professional judgement of teachers, and many expressed a strong desire for greater autonomy in determining how support is deployed within their classrooms.

NIAO report on Special Educational Needs (2017)

7. This report highlighted concerns regarding the current approach to resourcing SEN, particularly the reliance on one-to-one classroom assistants. The authors consider this model financially unsustainable, as current demand continues to exceed available funding.
8. The report emphasises that there is currently no systematic evaluation of effectiveness of the support provided by classroom assistants. Effective support

can be provided without a statement, and that assistants should not be the assumed “gateway” to help.

9. The report refers to research (from England) showing that pupils who received the most classroom assistant support sometimes made less progress than similar pupils who received less.
10. This is linked to a "separation effect" where:
 - Children with the highest SEN needs spend less time with the teacher.
 - They have reduced opportunities for peer interaction.
11. The report describes a pilot in which a school replaced assistant hours with a full time teacher who provided targeted literacy, numeracy, and emotional support. Early results from this pilot suggested positive impact, although formal evaluation was pending. The EA noted this approach has been used for years in many post primary schools but again, no evaluation exists for its effectiveness.
12. The subsequent [NIAO report](#) in 2020 emphasised the need for a fundamental review of how support is allocated.

Public Accounts Committee (PAC) Report on Impact Review of Special Educational Needs (2020)

13. The “Impact Review on Special Educational Needs” raised concerns about the effectiveness of adult assistance, particularly in post-primary settings, noting that it may not always represent the most appropriate or beneficial form of support for pupils. The Committee emphasised the need for robust evaluation of how adult assistance influences children’s outcomes, and in particular, highlighted a gap in understanding the true impact of current deployment practices on pupils.
14. Main areas of concern included:

Lack of Evidence on Impact

- The report states that neither the Department of Education (DE) nor the Education Authority (EA) has evaluated the impact of adult assistance on children's outcomes.
- Despite £95 million being spent on adult assistance in 2019/20, there is no evidence base demonstrating that one-to-one classroom assistant support consistently improves progress for children.

Concerns from Parents and Classroom Assistants

- The PAC reported that parents and classroom assistants themselves have raised concerns about the effectiveness of adult assistance.
- At post-primary level, the model may be less suited to promoting independence and subject-specific learning.

Risk of Creating Dependence

- Although not explicitly stated as a term in the report, the underlying theme suggests the current model may over-rely on one-to-one support, potentially leading to:
 - reduced independence,
 - limited peer interaction,
 - narrowing of the child's learning experience.

15. The PAC specifically notes that one-to-one adult assistance **“may not always be the best form of support.”**
16. The report proposes a system wide call for evaluation, redesign, and diversification of SEN support models is required to deliver better outcomes for children and young people. The PAC emphasised the need to build a robust evidence base to determine which interventions work best, and for whom.

Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) “Too Little, Too Late” Report (2020)

17. The NICCY Too Little, Too Late (2020) report highlighted widespread concern among all stakeholders regarding the current use of CAs. The review found that long-term one-to-one support can unintentionally foster dependency, limiting children's ability to navigate challenges independently and develop essential problem-solving skills.
18. Schools also frequently relied on CAs as an additional teaching resource, a practice that some parents and carers perceived as misuse of the role.
19. Educational Psychologists advised that assigning CAs to support a classroom, rather than individual pupils may more beneficial.
20. The report further identified significant concerns about the level and consistency of training provided to CAs, underscoring the need for clearer role expectations and improved professional development.

Ipsos Independent Review of SEN services and processes (2023)

21. The Ipsos Independent Review of SEN Services (2023) reported the need for a more agile and professionally driven approach to providing support within the classroom.
22. The report highlighted a significant body of UK-wide evidence that current patterns of CA deployment can negatively impact the educational outcomes of children with SEN.
23. There was strong agreement across stakeholders that the CA role should be professionalised to include higher qualification requirements, improved training and skills development, clearer career pathways and better pay.
24. The review further confirmed that one-to-one deployment is generally not an efficient model of support, with the exception being where a child has a physical or medical need, as it does not promote independence and is not the most effective way to help pupils achieve their learning goals.

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)

Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools: Evidence Review

Cullen, M.A., Lindsay, G., Hastings, R., Denne, L. and Stanford, C., 2020.

25. This review highlights several risks when Teaching Assistants (TAs) are placed constantly with one child including:

- **Reduced teacher interaction** - Pupils supported constantly by TA spend less time with qualified teachers, resulting in a lower quality of instruction.
- **Untrained adults delivering instruction** - If TAs deliver teaching without sufficient training or supervision, outcomes suffer. Studies show TAs “rarely receive adequate training and supervision”.
- **Creation of dependency** - Constant one to one adult presence can reduce independence and resilience, making pupils overly reliant on adult assistance.
- **Social separation** - Pupils with a permanent TA may become socially isolated, missing out on peer interaction.
- **Inconsistent impact on learning** - General classroom support, without structure or training, does not reliably raise academic outcomes for pupils with SEND.

26. Research summarised in EEF’s [Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants](#) report stipulates that using TAs as the primary instructional resource for low attaining pupils is not effective, and “the status quo is no longer an option.”

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) guidance (2025) - Deployment of Teaching Assistants (TA)

27. This report provides guidance on the best approach to the deployment of TAs. The guidance emphasises that long term one-to-one deployment (except where

part of a specialist intervention) unintentionally hinder pupils' access to high quality teaching, limiting the overall effectiveness of support.

- **TAs must supplement, not replace, the teacher** - The strongest evidence shows that pupils with SEN make the best progress when the teacher remains the primary educator. TAs are most effective when used to support the teacher to work with those in need of more expert instruction.
- **Scaffolding – the most effective classroom support method** - The evidence highlights that TA support works when focused on scaffolding, not doing the work for pupils.
- **Structured interventions delivered by TAs can be highly effective** - Independent trials demonstrate that well designed, structured interventions delivered by trained TAs can produce strong gains in reading, maths, and wider outcomes. Interventions must supplement classroom learning, not pull pupils away from essential teaching unnecessarily.
- **Role clarity, training, and preparation are essential** - The evidence consistently shows that TA impact increases when:
 - Teachers and TAs have shared clarity on roles;
 - Teachers retain responsibility for all pupils, including SEN;
 - TAs receive professional development in scaffolding, behaviour support, feedback, and specific intervention approaches; and
 - Time for briefing, reflection, and coordination should be intentionally built into school systems and timetables.
- **Implementation matters -whole school, strategic, and evidence informed** - Effective TA deployment is strategic, grounded in:
 - A whole school culture of high-quality teaching and inclusion.
 - Senior leadership oversight.
 - Engagement of all staff, including TAs, teachers, SENCo, and parents.
 - Clear line management and avoidance of “role creep”.

Department for Education (England)

Use of teaching assistants (TA) in schools-September 2024 (CFE Research)

28. Concerns on the one-to-one deployment of TAs are provided below:

- **Reduced Teacher–Pupil Interaction**

Large scale observational studies (DISS project and related research) show that when pupils, particularly those with SEND, work predominantly with a TA rather than a teacher, their contact with the teacher decreases significantly.

Blatchford *et al.* (2009) found that although TAs increased individual attention, their presence reduced pupils' interactions with the teacher, especially in secondary settings.

This unintended separation from qualified teacher instruction weakens access to high quality teaching, the factor most strongly associated with improved academic attainment.

- **Limited Impact on Attainment When Used for Informal 1:1 Support**

Multiple government commissioned studies and EEF reviews conclude that informal, unstructured one to one TA support does not reliably improve pupil learning outcomes, and in some cases may have neutral or modest effects.

Additional studies reviewed by the DfE suggests that while TAs fulfil many roles, their impact on learning is limited when support lack's structure, training, and teacher oversight.

- **Risk of Creating Dependency Rather Than Independence**

When TAs work exclusively one-to-one, pupils may develop over reliance on adult support, reducing opportunities for independent learning.

EEF guidance stresses the importance of TAs scaffolding learning in ways that promote independence, not unintentionally replacing teacher instruction.

- **Inconsistent Training and Role Clarity**

Qualitative research shows that TAs deployed in one-to-one roles often receive insufficient training and have unclear expectations, leading to inconsistent practice.

Studies report TAs being “left to deliver support with little training,” relying on second hand information. TAs also frequently describe feeling poorly integrated in school systems, which impairs the effectiveness of individualised support.

- **Emotional Burden and Role Strain**

Working repeatedly and intensively one-to-one can create emotional strain for TAs, which impacts role sustainability and quality of support. Research into one-to-one work shows emotional load, blurred boundaries, and stress associated with the intense nature of ongoing one to one provision.

29. The report provided a number of evidence-based recommendations for best use and deployment of TAs:

- **Ensure Pupils Access High-Quality Teacher Instruction** - The consensus across EEF and DfE reports is that TAs must supplement, not replace, teacher input. Pupils who struggle most should spend at least as much time with their teacher as other pupils. Schools should therefore avoid assigning TAs permanently to individual pupils, as it reduces teacher engagement.
- **Use TAs to Scaffold Learning and Develop Independence** - Effective deployment positions TAs as facilitators of learning, not alternative instructors. EEF recommends strategies like structured scaffolding, cueing, and prompting to build independence. TAs can support peer-learning, pre-teaching vocabulary, and reinforcing concepts/ activities that prepare pupils for whole-class teaching.
- **Prioritise Joint Planning, Communication, and Role Clarity** - Both teachers and TAs stress the need for shared planning time and clear expectations. Research finds that dialogue between teachers and TAs is critical for successful

intervention and adaptation. School leaders must ensure that TAs receive timely information about lesson content and strategies.

- **Provide Comprehensive Training and Professional Development** - Reports show gaps in training are a key barrier to effective deployment.

Effective support requires TAs to be trained in:

- Scaffolding methods
 - Managing small-group interventions
 - Supporting SEND pupils appropriately
 - Understanding the curriculum and teacher expectations
- **Leadership-Led, Whole-School Deployment Strategy** - The EEF emphasises that TA deployment works best when coordinated at the leadership level. Effective deployment is “first and foremost a strategic issue,” requiring alignment with teaching and learning priorities. It also states that clear structures, accountability, and quality assurance help ensure consistency across classrooms.

Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) in Schools (Results from Strand 2, Wave 2)

Blatchford, P., Bassett, P., Brown, P., Koutsoubou, M., Martin, C., Russell, A., and Webster, R. with Rubie-Davies, C., 2009

Summary of Evidence Supporting a Move Away from One-to-One Classroom Assistant Deployment

30. The DISS project provides one of the most comprehensive analyses ever conducted on the impact of teaching assistants (TAs). Across Waves 1 and 2, using large-scale quantitative data and in-depth observations, the evidence consistently shows that a reliance on one-to-one or close TA support, as commonly deployed in schools, can unintentionally limit pupil progress.

The key findings are summarised below:

- **One-to-one TA support is associated with lower academic progress**

Across year groups (Years 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9 and 10) and subjects (English, maths, science), the study found a consistent negative relationship between the amount of TA support received and pupil academic progress, even after robust controls.

- Pupils receiving the most TA support made less progress than similar pupils receiving little or no support.
- This effect held even after controlling for:
 - Prior attainment
 - SEN status
 - Gender
 - Free school meals
 - Ethnicity
 - EAL
 - Income deprivation
 - Age
- Additional analyses showed the negative effect was not explained by:
 - Lower-progress pupils being given more support
 - Missing data bias

The more one-to-one support pupils receive, the less academic progress they typically make.

- **One-to-one support reduces teacher-pupil interaction and increases separation**

The report highlights that TAs overwhelmingly work with the lowest-attaining/SEN pupils, which inadvertently results in:

- Reduced interaction with the teacher, who is the most skilled professional in the room;
- Physical and pedagogical separation from the mainstream curriculum and peers; and,

- High levels of withdrawal for interventions delivered by TAs rather than teachers.

In 82% of relevant cases, TA deployment led to pupils being cut off from the teacher, curriculum, or peers.

- **One-to-one TA support often fosters dependency rather than independence**

The report repeatedly describes patterns where pupils:

- Become over-reliant on TAs
- Seek constant reassurance
- Avoid working independently
- Learn to depend on TA cues instead of developing autonomy

This reinforces the potential negative impacts of one-to-one support and proposes the unintended creation of a learned helplessness cycle, which contradicts the goals of inclusive mainstream education.

- **Quality of support is often reactive, unplanned, and less instructional**

The study shows that TAs frequently have:

- Very limited joint planning time with teachers (liaison ad hoc in 44% of cases).
- Minimal or no lesson preparation or briefing.
- Educational decisions made “on the hoof”.
- Insufficient subject or pedagogical knowledge (predominantly experiential).

As a result, one-to-one support often:

- Focuses on completing tasks, not learning.
- Uses inaccurate or confusing explanations.
- Simplifies work to a level that reduces cognitive challenge.
- Inadvertently narrows the curriculum offer.

This means the quality of instructional input pupils receive during one-to-one support is commonly lower than that of qualified teachers, with predictable consequences for learning.

- **One-to-one support can negatively affect unsupported pupils too**

The DISS study examined whether TA support for some pupils freed teachers to help others. In Year 9, pupils **without** TA support made **less progress** in classes where **more** pupils received TA support. This dispels the common belief that TA support benefits the wider class by “freeing up the teacher”.

- **One-to-one TA support rarely involves high-quality differentiation**

Observations show that:

- In-class, **90%+** of low-attaining/SEN pupils worked on **non-differentiated** tasks identical to peers.
- When differentiation *did* occur, it was usually **outside** the classroom, leading to segregation.

This means pupils receiving one-to-one support may simultaneously:

- Miss out on the main lesson.
- Receive less cognitively rich learning.
- Experience fragmented, disconnected instruction.

These factors contribute directly to reduced progress.

- **Behaviour and social outcomes are also affected**

Although teachers perceive TAs as helpful for behaviour, the evidence shows:

- Pupils often behave **worse** for TAs than for teachers.
- TAs lack the same authority and subject knowledge.
- One-to-one support can lead to stigma, isolation, and social exclusion.

- **Alternative models are more effective**

While everyday one-to-one deployment is ineffective, the study notes that targeted, evidence-based interventions delivered by well-prepared TAs under teacher direction *can* be effective. The problem is not TAs themselves, but **how they are deployed**.

Inclusive Teaching: Securing Strong Educational Experiences and Outcomes for All Students

McCrea, Barker & Goodrich (2025)

31. The discussion report provides strong evidence that an over reliance on one-to-one support is problematic, unsustainable, and pedagogically less effective than strengthening whole class instruction and accessible design.
32. The authors emphasise that teachers should be empowered to apply their professional judgement to implement temporary supports and scaffolds within the main classroom environment, reflecting a graduated response.
33. They also caution against premature separation into alternative learning tracks, stipulating that doing so can leave children feeling disconnected from their peers and limit their access to high-quality, inclusive teaching.
34. The paper supports keeping students in the classroom, accessing the same content with minimal, well targeted adaptations, which inherently reduces reliance on separate TA provision. This is also encouraged by moving towards teacher led, high quality and universal instruction. Within this TAs still have a role but not as the primary mechanism for inclusion and do not substitute strong instruction.

Scoping Review of the Role of Special Needs Assistants/Teaching Assistants/Paraprofessionals

Travers, J., et al 2025

35. This review outlines extensive international and Irish evidence which details how sustained one-to-one Special Needs Assistant (SNA)/TA support often produces unintended negative consequences, and that more flexible, inclusive models result in better academic, social, and independence outcomes for students.

- **One-to-one proximity creates dependency and hinders independence**

One of the strongest and most consistent findings across reviews is that constant adult proximity fosters dependency:

- Students develop prompt dependence, struggle to initiate tasks, and rely on adult cues rather than independent thinking.
- Irish observational evidence shows SNAs often provide excessive verbal prompting, inadvertently preventing pupils from developing self-regulation skills.

- **One-to-one models reduce peer interaction and can socially isolate students**

High SNA visibility affects peer relationships and social development:

- Students report embarrassment and stigma when constantly accompanied by an adult. Autistic students, in particular, reported the visibility of support as socially limiting.
- Research demonstrates that SNA proximity reduces natural peer engagement, making friendships harder to form.
- Irish studies show that students supported one-to-one often participate less in whole-class activities, reinforcing separation.

- **One-to-one allocation often leads to role drift and inappropriate pedagogical responsibilities**

- Because the assistant is “assigned” to a pupil, teachers frequently shift instructional responsibility.

- International reviews show assistants begin making pedagogical decisions without oversight, leading to inconsistent or lower-quality instruction.
 - In Ireland, SNAs often end up teaching content or managing learning tasks due to role ambiguity.
 - This drift is problematic because the role was never designed to be instructional, and SNAs themselves report a lack of training for such duties.
- **Students themselves report negative experiences with one-to-one support**

Student voice studies consistently highlight concerns:

- Students prefer support that is unobtrusive and empowers independence, not adult shadowing.
 - Some report feeling “different” or “watched,” limiting autonomy and confidence.
 - Young people advocate for more choice and involvement in deciding how support is deployed.
- **One-to-one support is rarely aligned with inclusive principles**

Irish and international policy emphasises independence, participation, and access to high-quality teaching. NCSE (2018) describes the one-to-one allocation model as a “**blunt instrument**” that does not reflect student needs dynamically.

36. In conclusion, the report proposes that in evaluating evidence across Ireland, UK, Europe, and internationally, one-to-one classroom assistant support should not be the default model as it:
- reduces teacher engagement
 - fosters dependency
 - isolates students socially
 - increases stigma
 - dilutes instructional quality

- contradicts inclusive education principles
- is misaligned with policy goals of independence

37. Better outcomes arise from flexible, team based, teacher led, and peer inclusive models, with gradual fading of support and the incorporation of strong professional development for assistants.

Ulster University and Centre for Effective Services “A Profile of Classroom Assistants in Northern Ireland”

O'Connor, U., Courtney, C., Montgomery, A., & Curran, C. (2024).

38. The Ulster University and Centre for Effective Services report further reinforces that the current model of relying heavily on one-to-one CA support is no longer sustainable or effective.

39. A shift away from this approach is recommended for several key reasons:

- **Ineffective use of resources** - multiple reviews (NIAO, Ipsos) question whether this model represents the most effective use of resources, given rising financial costs and a lack of evidence that one-to-one support improves pupil outcomes.
- **Inappropriate deployment** - the model has a tendency to blur job boundaries and leads to inappropriate deployment. Because one-to-one support places CAs so close to the core teaching process, many report being asked to take on teaching responsibilities, manage behaviour alone, or even lead classes during staff absence. This blurring of roles is unsafe for staff, unfairly exploitative, and outside their qualification remit.
- **Recruitment issues** - the urgency to fill one-to-one roles has led to ad hoc hiring practices, including recruiting unqualified assistants, which de-skills the profession, lowers standards, and demoralises qualified CAs. Moving away from one-to-one support would allow a more strategic, skills-based workforce model.

- **Classroom assistant opinion** - CAs report the current model is unsustainable. CAs describe:
 - escalating complexities of need,
 - increasing levels of challenging behaviour,
 - physical and emotional burnout,
 - lack of recognition for the specialised nature of the work.
- **Alternative models demonstrate better outcomes** - the report points to models in other systems where:
 - assistants work in teams,
 - support is needs-driven rather than child-assigned,
 - teachers retain primary responsibility for SEN provision,
 - assistants deliver structured interventions rather than general one-to-one “velcro-style” support.

40. These arrangements lead to stronger inclusion, better learning, and clearer professional boundaries. The report also provides valuable insight into the issues within the current classroom assistant workforce including:

- Job titles and job descriptions are inconsistent, unclear, and often outdated.
- CAs frequently undertake duties beyond their remit, including teaching, without recognition or appropriate pay.
- Ambiguous job descriptions leave room for misinterpretation and inappropriate deployment, undermining professional identity.

41. The authors called for:

- Full review and redesign of job descriptions.
- Establish minimum qualification requirements for the role.

- Ensure consistent deployment aligned with teacher responsibility.
- Develop a standardised CPD framework for Cas.
- Mandatory induction and annual appraisal.
- Better utilisation of CAs' existing skills and qualifications.

42. The Department welcomes this report and through a dedicated workstream as part of the Enhanced Support Model will consider the following:

- Standard job descriptions.
- Consistent contracts.
- Induction and appraisal requirements.
- Minimum qualifications.
- Ensure reforms are transparent and designed with stakeholder input.
- A structured pathway created, providing tiers/levels, accredited training linked to progression and banded pay scales reflecting responsibility.

Evidence from other Jurisdictions

Denmark & Sweden

43. The approach taken in both Denmark and Sweden to meet the needs of their children and young people with SEN is remarkably similar. The approach they take focuses on:

- Needs-based identification of support
- School-led decision making, supported by national standards
- Access to multidisciplinary expertise (teachers, pedagogues, psychologists, therapists)
- Professionalisation and clear role development for support staff

- Reduced reliance on segregated provision through strengthened mainstream capability

Finland

44. The approach taken in Finland to meet the needs of children and young people with SEN is grounded in a strongly inclusive philosophy and a tiered model of support. The approach they take focuses on:

- Early, needs-based identification, delivered through a three-tiered system of general, intensified, and special support.
- School-led planning, using Individualised Learning Plans and flexible curriculum adaptation to tailor support.
- Access to multidisciplinary expertise, including special education teachers, psychologists, and other specialists working alongside classroom teachers.
- Highly trained staff, supported by a national commitment to teacher professionalism and continuous development.
- Reduced reliance on segregation, with an emphasis on maintaining pupils in mainstream groups wherever possible through in-class differentiated support.

New Brunswick (Canada)

45. The approach taken in New Brunswick to meet the needs of children and young people with SEN is founded on a long-established, system-wide commitment to full inclusion. The approach they take focuses on:

- Needs-based planning within mainstream settings, aligned with the province's rights-driven inclusion legislation (Policy 322).
- School-led implementation, supported by a coherent provincial framework for inclusive education.
- Strong multidisciplinary collaboration, delivered through school-based support teams and specialist input.

- Capacity building for educators, emphasising professional learning and leadership for inclusion.
- Minimisation of segregated provision, with the expectation that pupils learn in age-appropriate local classes, supported as needed.

Australia

46. The approach taken in Australia to support children and young people with SEN is structured around multi-tiered systems of support that strengthen mainstream capability. The approach they take focuses on:

- Needs-based, data-driven identification, through universal screening and ongoing progress monitoring embedded in RTI/MTSS frameworks.
- School-led decision-making, with teachers adapting evidence-based instruction and moving pupils through tiers based on response to intervention.
- Access to multidisciplinary and specialist expertise, supporting targeted interventions (e.g., literacy and numeracy specialists).
- Professionalisation and capability building, emphasising high-quality Tier 1 teaching and staff coaching to improve inclusive practice.
- Reduced reliance on segregated pathways, by strengthening universal and targeted supports so fewer pupils require intensive or specialist placements.

Summary

47. Each of these models share several key characteristics. They are rooted in the needs the child requiring support and ensure that support is tailored to individual requirements. Decision-making is led by schools, guided by national or provincial frameworks, allowing flexibility and responsiveness at the local level.

48. Access to multidisciplinary expertise including teachers, psychologists, therapists, and other specialists is a cornerstone of provision, enabling holistic support. Staff professionalism and ongoing development are highly prioritised, strengthening inclusive practice across mainstream settings. Finally, there is a clear emphasis on minimising segregated provision, with a commitment to maintaining pupils in mainstream classes wherever possible, supported by differentiated and adaptive teaching.
49. Collectively, these themes demonstrate a shift towards inclusive, flexible, and collaborative approaches that prioritise the rights and well-being of children and young people with SEN.

Lessons from Northern Ireland Schools

50. In January 2026, EA conducted a survey of 100 schools across Northern Ireland that have implemented alternative support approaches. 67 schools responded to this survey, providing valuable insights into the drivers behind these changes and the challenges faced within the current system. The most common type of alternative approaches included CA hours to teacher hours, and implementing specialised CA. Other methods of provision used by schools included assistant and staffing models, inclusive and adaptive provision, and intervention and SEN teaching.

Conclusion

51. Overall, both the Department of Education and the Education Authority agree that CAs play a key role in supporting the needs of children and young people with SEN. Many have developed specialist knowledge and skills that contribute to reducing teacher workload and improving their wellbeing. However, the research is clear: the default model of assigning CAs to individual pupils is educationally ineffective and can have negative implications for pupils such as lower academic progress, reduced teacher contact and increased dependency.

52. It is evident through the studies considered in this briefing paper that a strategic move away from the default one-to-one CA deployment is necessary to ensure specialist provision and CA assistance that provides evidence based support for children and young people with SEN that achieves the best outcomes.
53. However, it is essential that support is based on the needs of the individual child. For some children and young people with a statement of SEN, a one-to-one classroom assistant will continue to be the most appropriate means to meeting their needs.