

Education Committee Briefing Paper

PAC Report on Impact Review of Special Education Needs 2021

Progress Update

24 September 2025

Background

1. In February 2021, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) delivered a report on an Impact Review of Special Education Needs. This report made seven recommendations to improve SEN delivery, with actions allocated to both the Department of Education (DE) and the Education Authority (EA).
2. All seven recommendations were accepted by DE in the Memorandum of Reply which was presented before the Assembly by the Minister of Finance on 20 April 2021.
3. Officials last appeared at the PAC Committee on this issue on 10 March 2022, where an update was provided on progress. Since then, there has been significant progress on the implementation of the seven recommendations.
4. The Minister of Education and his Executive colleagues have been clear that Special Education Needs (SEN) and transformation of the existing system is a key priority.
5. In February 2025, the Minister published the SEN Reform Agenda and five-year Delivery Plan, an ambitious programme of reform of services and provision. Successful delivery of the SEN Reform Agenda will by large, address the outstanding recommendations made in the PAC Report.

PAC Report Recommendations

6. The 2021 Report made seven recommendations to be implemented. Details of these recommendations and their current status are outlined below.
7. **Recommendation 1:** *In view of the fact that the EA is in sixth year, PAC recommends DE should commission an independent review of the EA to assess its effectiveness.*

This recommendation is **complete**. This was achieved in September 2022 following the completion of the EA Landscape Review. The review made a number

of recommendations for improving EA processes; the majority of these actions have been completed, with any outstanding actions being carried out by the EA under business as usual.

8. **Recommendation 2:** *PAC recommends that there should be an immediate independent, external review of the SEN service provision and processes. The review must be completed promptly and should include:*

- *An evaluation of all types of SEN support provided by developing benchmarks and collating data to demonstrate the progress made by children;*
- *An assessment of the impact of adult assistance on children's outcomes, for both primary and post-primary school pupils, to determine when it is the best form of support;*
- *Obtaining an understanding as to why there is a higher proportion of children with SEN and specifically children with a statement of SEN in Northern Ireland compared to England;*
- *Benchmarking SEN services with other jurisdictions to learn from their experiences;*
- *Consideration of the funding of SEN services including the delegation of budgets; and*
- *Assessing the impact of the new Framework coming from the revised Regulations and Code of Practice.*

This recommendation is **partially complete**. The Independent Review of SEN, which was published in March 2023, addressed the majority of the above bullet points. In response to the review, the department in partnership with the EA initiated the End-to-End Review of SEN, which ultimately informed the development the SEN Reform Agenda and Delivery Plan.

The outstanding item relates to the new SEN Framework, which has not yet been completed. The Framework will be implemented once the new SEN Regulations and Code of Practice are finalised. It is anticipated that this objective will be achieved by the end of the current mandate.

9. **Recommendation 3:** *PAC expects DE to implement a rigorous performance monitoring process with greater focus on the EA's performance against the statutory timeframe for assessment and statementing.*

This recommendation is **complete**. The EA has made a number of improvements to its monitoring processes, such as:

- All staff within the Statutory Assessment and Review Service (SARS) receive a weekly report on open cases.
- Performance data is processed and reviewed for action at the fortnightly SEND Statutory Services Senior Management Team.
- A quarterly report is presented to the EA Board for internal scrutiny; and
- Monthly reports are also provided to DE.

10. **Recommendation 4:** *PAC recommends that the Board must satisfy itself as to the quality and relevance of the information provided to it. The Committee considers that a Board is failing in its role if it does not challenge performance for key areas such as SEN and where there is a significant operational problem the Committee expects the Board to drill into it.*

This recommendation is **complete**. The 2022 Landscape Review recommended a number of changes to the EA Board. At the time, the department was content that an external review was not required, but that these recommendations would be considered as part of any future EA Board Effectiveness Review.

11. **Recommendation 5:** *PAC therefore recommends that deficiencies in the management information held by the EA are addressed urgently and that clear performance frameworks are put in place which should include targets for accessing school based SEN support services. In addition, the EA should collate data on the number of children that schools have identified as needing SEN support and are waiting to be referred to the Educational Psychology Service.*

This recommendation is **on track for achievement**. The EA will be collating performance information for SEN support services, which will include the number

of children waiting for assessment, the time taken for assessment, and the development of performance improvement targets. This will help ensure access to school-based SEN support services, where needed, in a timelier way.

Following the Educational Psychology Service Review, a new consultation model has been developed, in line with the SEN Reform Agenda 2025, which supports earlier intervention and prevention, taking a child-centred approach, and helps improve targeting and equity of support. Each school will be assigned a Local IMPACT (LIT) Team and a LIT key contact. The named Educational Psychologist and LIT key contact will be touch with each school in Term 1 to arrange an initial consultation meeting.

12. Recommendation 6: *PAC recommends that the effectiveness of funding allocated to all stages of the SEN process is reviewed to ensure that every pound is well spent, in meeting the needs of all children, with or without a statement of SEN.*

This recommendation is **on track for achievement**. Work is underway in the department to engage with other jurisdictions to benchmark their SEN service capacity and demand to ensure that the new models being developed can sustain the improved outcomes for our children and young people and ensure best value for money.

13. Recommendation 7: *PAC expects decisions made by the EA to be robust and able to withstand challenge. As a matter of urgency the issues leading to the increase in the number of appeals, and the reasoning as to why the EA concede so many, needs to be understood.*

This recommendation is **complete**. To ensure that its decisions are able to withstand challenge, the EA has implemented a number of actions including the review of decisions by Heads of Service and monthly data reports in respect of SENDIST, which are presented for scrutiny to the EA Board Performance and Engagement Committee on a quarterly basis.

Next steps

14. The SEN Reform Agenda and five-year Delivery Plan places a priority on:

- Effective allocation of SEN funding
- Cost effective, sustainable service delivery
- Collaboration across Departments and Delivery Partners
- Robust data collection and improved data sharing across Departments to inform planning
- Governance and Accountability Mechanisms
- Outcomes Framework
- Improved communication and transparency with stakeholders

15. All of the above priorities recognise the crucial importance of addressing the weaknesses identified by the PAC report and others in the form and function of both the department and the EA. Moving forward the department and the EA are committed to working in partnership to deliver meaningful change which will provide all children with SEN with the Right Support, from the Right People, at the Right Time and in the Right Place.