

Education Committee Briefing Paper

SEN Reform Agenda & Delivery Plan: Enabling and Early Actions

December 2025

Background

1. On 4 February 2025, the Minister of Education Paul Givan MLA published his [Special Educational Needs \(SEN\) Reform Agenda and associated Delivery Plan](#).
2. This briefing paper provides the Committee with an update on the enabling actions (Tab A) and early actions (Tab B) contained within the SEN Reform Delivery Plan to be progressed.
3. The early actions which were 'subject to funding' at the date of publication are being progressed with funding secured from the Public Sector Transformation Board (PSTB), which was subsequently confirmed in March 2025. These will be covered in the oral briefings planned for early 2026. A separate written briefing will be provided in advance of those meetings.
4. A high-level timeline of progress since the publication of SEN Reform Agenda and Delivery Plan is provided below:

4 February 2025	Publication of SEN Reform Agenda and Delivery Plan
3 March 2025	Establishment of SEN Reform Delivery Unit
4 March 2025	Confirmation of PSTB funding of £27.5m
March– September 2025	Engagement with delivery partners and stakeholders on design, development and implementation planning for the PSTB funded projects.
30 June 2025	Publication of SEN Reform Outcomes Framework
14 August 2025	SEN Reform Governance Framework agreed
28 August 2025	Publication of SEN Policy Statement
29 August 2025	Business case for £27.5 PSTB funding approved
2 October 2025	Central Strategic Committee inaugural meeting
7 October 2025	Operational Implementation Oversight Group inaugural meeting
20 October 2025	Correspondence to schools providing update and list of PSTB funded projects to be stood up in 2025/26
13 November 2025	Letter to schools/pre-schools seeking expressions of interest in participating in projects
27 November 2025	Pre-school Inclusion Fund 2025/26 launched
December 2025	School selection process to be completed
January/February 2026	PSTB funded projects to commence

ENABLING ACTIONS – UPDATE

ACTION	CURRENT POSITION – December 2025
Policy Statement Publication and application of a SEN Policy Statement	The SEN Policy Statement was published on 28 August 2025 setting out clearly the department's current policy and legislative position, in line with the commitment in the SEN Reform Agenda. The policy statement was issued to a wide range of stakeholders including schools, managing authorities and Health via DE circular 2025/08 .
Relationships, Trust & Confidence	
• Appoint a SEN Champion	Not yet progressed due to prioritisation of PSTB projects. It is intended that the appointment of a SEN Champion will be progressed in 2026.
• Set up a Ministerial Expert Advisory Panel	The SEN Reform Governance Framework includes the establishment of an Expert Advisory Forum. It is expected that this group will be established in January. In addition to this, there are a number of other advisory panels across the Department of Education (DE) and consideration is being given to introducing SEN expertise to these to ensure alignment with the SEN Reform Agenda.
Establish Lived Experience Forums: Children/Parents/Workforce & Community	An open call for participation in the SEN Reform Lived Experience Forum is expected to launch in December. This will provide a platform for targeted engagement with children and young people, parents, education and health professionals and the community & voluntary sector, maintaining clear and transparent lines of communication and an opportunity for stakeholders to contribute to the development and implementation of SEN Reform actions as they progress.

ACTION	CURRENT POSITION – December 2025
Establish an Enhanced Advocacy Service and a one-stop website for parents.	The action to establish an Enhanced Advocacy Service is under consideration. It is intended that development of the service will be progressed in 2026, subject to funding. Initial scoping work to develop a 'one-stop' website has been carried out. It became apparent that there were a number of existing websites for parents, including Family Support NI, Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership and a number of voluntary/community sector websites. None of these offered a 'one-stop' for parents of children with SEN and it was important that the development of such a website links to these but does not duplicate them. Further research and development work on the functionality of this approach was undertaken and it was determined that the most efficient and effective solution would be to host a dedicated landing page within the DE website entitled 'The SEN Reform Hub'. It will serve as a central hub of information on the Reform Agenda featuring all published documentation, the latest news, such as newsletters and press releases, printable resources for stakeholders, pilot project information and an opportunity to register interest in the Lived Experience Forum.
Outcomes Framework • Development of indicators in partnership with stakeholders • Production and publication of Outcomes Framework • Design of performance measures for actions and interventions	The SEN Reform Outcomes Framework, was published in June 2025 following engagement with a wide range of stakeholders. It contains a range of population-level indicators to measure the direction of travel towards the outcomes identified. For each action within the Delivery Plan a performance monitoring 'report card' will be (or has been) developed as actions are commenced, which will measure and monitor the quantity and quality of activity and effect of each.

EARLY ACTIONS – UPDATE

Action	Current position (December 2025)
Task and finish group to examine nomenclature around SEN.	Since the publication of the SEN Reform Agenda and Delivery Plan in February 2025, the department has prioritised other enabling actions including the publication of the SEN Outcomes Framework and SEN Policy Statement in addition to standing up 14 projects, 13 of which have been funded under the PSTB. Therefore, the action to establish a formal task and finish group to examine the nomenclature around SEN, one of the early actions within the SEN Reform Delivery Plan, has not yet begun. The department remains committed to advancing this work at a later stage. The Lived Experience Forum, on advice from the expert advisory forum, may provide an appropriate vehicle to take this forward.
Digitisation of the statutory assessment and review process and Streamlining of statutory assessment and review processes to meet statutory timeframes which will facilitate ensuring timely confirmation of school placements	This forms part of the wider EA Connect project. Roll-out of the digitised statutory assessment and review process commences March 2026 with full implementation in September 2026. Digitisation is expected to enhance efficiency, effectiveness and transparency by enabling better prioritisation of referrals, ensuring rigorous application of the annual review process, improving data capture and sharing, and facilitating better communication with parents.

Action	Current position (December 2025)
Strategic Area Planning for special education provision across the continuum of provision, based on projected need, ensuring full pathways across all key stages and a SEN-first approach to operational plans (OP) – OP 2024-26 has been published with a SEN-first approach	The EA's Operational Plan 2 (OP2) 2024-26 was published in January 2025 with a clear emphasis on SEN and strategically planning to meet the future needs of children with SEN and based on projected need. This was in direct response to the increasing need for special education provision. Implementation is ongoing. EA has the statutory responsibility for area planning including for special education provision. The Department is represented on the Area Planning Strategic Group and the Area Planning Working Group. The EA published its Plans of Actions for Special Schools in September 2025 which provides comprehensive and forward-looking plans to expand the special school estate. As indicated by the Minister in his oral statement on 16 September, significant additional capital investment is required to deliver on these plans.
Resource pre-school education settings to support children undergoing statutory assessment	The pilot 'Pre-school Education Inclusion Support Fund' (PSEISF) was initially launched in November 2024 with investment of £1.1m secured from the Executive ring-fenced Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) budget. 213 pre-school settings were supported in the 2024/25 academic year. Following a review of the administration of the Fund, the Minister launched the re-named Pre-school Inclusion Fund on 27 November 2025. The Fund has been expanded with investment of £4.5m in 2025/26 and has been offered to all DE-funded pre-school settings and the criteria linked to children undergoing statutory assessment has been removed, in recognition of the increasing number of children with SEN in the early years. Settings will receive funding in December 2025. Continuation of this Fund is subject to confirmation of funding beyond March 2026. An evaluation of the impact of the Fund in 2024/25 is underway and will be completed by December 2025.

Action	Current position (December 2025)
Publication and implementation of a child-centred Graduated Response Framework.	The Graduated Response Framework was published by the EA in March 2025. A programme of training on the Graduated Response Framework is ongoing. The actions funded under the PSTF are designed to complement and support implementation of the GRF – in particular the In-school Support Model, professional learning for teachers and classroom assistants, Inclusive Play and Inclusion Capacity-building Programme.
Implementation of child-centred Local IMPACT Teams (LITs)	The EA's Local Impact Teams (LITs) went live in September 2026. EA provided an update to Committee during the oral briefing session on 26 November 2025.
Review of quality and appropriateness of specialist provision in mainstream schools including evaluation of Specialist Provision Early Years Foundation classes	A system-level evaluation of the provision in new and recently established specialist provisions was commissioned by the department. The Specialist Provisions in Mainstream evaluation (Part 1) was published in November 2024 with largely positive findings. A number of challenges were identified which related to the late notification of placement, issues with recruitment and retention of suitably qualified and experienced staff and supporting children with multiple needs in classes. Part 2 of the ETI's specialist provision evaluation is complete and a dissemination of findings event will take place on 10 December, after which the report will be published.
Transform the support model for children with a statement of SEN*	Preparatory work is underway. Roll-out expected to commence in 2026.

Action	Current position (December 2025)
Establish and deliver a pilot early childhood intervention programme*	This is a suite of five actions: • establishment of a parental support programme; • programme for 2-3 year olds with additional needs; • five Early Years Intervention Hubs; • In-school support model aimed at children in pre-school/Foundation at stage 1 of the SEN Code of Practice; • SEN assistant training in pre-school / Foundation Stage. Some commenced in Term 1 2025/26. The school selection process is underway for the remainder which are planned to commence in early 2026. This suite of actions will be covered in the oral briefing session proposed for 25 February and separate written briefing will be provided in advance.
Trial and implementation of Speech, Language & Communication Programme including the introduction of Toolkits (with IT & AI interventions)*	Planned to commence January 2026. EA proposal is under consideration. Other complementary options targeting children in the early years are also being considered.
Trial and implementation of an Inclusive Play Programme approach to provide wrap-around services including enhanced therapeutic services*	School selection process is underway. Planned to commence early 2026.

Action	Current position (December 2025)
Trial and implementation of an 'Enhanced Nurture Programme' (previously referred to as Nurture Plus) to provide wrap-around services including enhanced therapeutic services*	This project is currently 'on hold' pending consideration of position on Nurture Group provision.
Design and trial a 'Resource Hub' model which harnesses the expertise within Special Schools and develops their role to support inclusion across the wider school system*	School selection process is underway. Planned to commence early 2026.
Research, design and trial of Inclusion methodologies to promote equitable inclusive learning experiences*	An Inclusion Capacity Building Programme is being developed and is planned to commence in 2026 involving an Inclusion symposium and digital inclusion academy.

**These actions have been funded by the PSTB.*