

EDUCATION COMMITTEE BRIEFING PAPER – 22 APRIL 2026

Special Educational Needs (SEN) Reform Agenda and Delivery Plan Public Sector Transformation Board Funded Projects

Background

1. Department of Education (DE) officials are scheduled to attend an evidence session with the Committee on Wednesday 22 April 2026 regarding the following projects:
 - Early childhood intervention
 - Parental Support Programme
 - 2-3 Year Old Programme
 - Early Intervention and Assessment Centre
 - SEN Learning Support Trial (In-School Support Model)
 - Early Years Assistants SEN Training
 - Speech Language and Communication Project
 - Special Schools as Resource Hubs
 - Inclusive Play Programme
 - Inclusion Capacity Building Programme
2. This is one of a series of oral briefings with departmental officials to inform the Committee's inquiry into SEN, the schedule for which was agreed with the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Committee.

Context

3. On 4 February 2025, the Minister of Education Paul Givan MLA published his [Special Educational Needs \(SEN\) Reform Agenda and associated Delivery Plan](#).

4. The department successfully secured funding of £27.5m over four years from the Public Sector Transformation Board (PSTB) in March 2025. Business case approval was secured in August 2025.
5. The funding secured under the Public Sector Transformation bid was for the delivery of 14 projects, drawn from the emerging actions within the SEN Reform Agenda & Delivery Plan. The key priorities of early intervention, transforming the support model for children with a statement of SEN, professional development for teachers and classroom assistants and creating a more inclusive education system were identified.

Stocktake review

6. In Autumn 2025, a number of issues emerged in relation to delivery of the PSTB-funded SEN Reform projects, particularly regarding ensuring alignment of some of the planned projects with the emerging Enhanced Support Model and the Local IMPACT Teams (LITs), and the capacity of the Health sector to support all of the SEN Reform projects with immediate effect given the significant pressures in the Health system and requirement to provide health professional input to the mainstream (business as usual) SEN support system
7. In response, the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) for SEN Reform delivery made a decision to do a brief stocktake review before projects would commence to ensure complete alignment and complementarity across all of them and confirm key stakeholder commitment
8. That stocktake review was completed in March 2026 and considered the position from Department of Education officials, the Education Authority and Department of Health, and with support from DE's Economic Advisory Unit and Internal Audit.
9. Following the stocktake review, a recalibration of the funded projects has been completed, taking account of the EA and DoH positions. The Minister of Education has been briefed and is content with the revised approach. The SEN Reform Central Strategic Committee, which is represented by DE, EA, DoH,

DfE and ETI has also agreed the revised approach. A paper outlining the revised approach has been submitted to the Public Sector Transformation Board seeking their approval and DE and EA will present to the Board on 20 April.

Proposed revised programme

10. As a result of the stocktake, it is proposed that some projects will continue, some will be re-shaped/ scaled back and some will cease.
11. The proposed changes are summarised as follows:
 - The following projects would **continue largely as planned but with a greater focus on ensuring overall coherence and alignment with the Enhanced Support Model which is now the central plank of the planned reforms:**
 - **Enhanced Support Model** for children with a statement of SEN – this is the cornerstone of SEN reform. EA has developed a new Enhanced Support Model (ESM) which issued for public consultation on 24 March 2026 with a view to commence phased implementation from September 2026. All other projects will be aligned to support it;
 - **Transforming the Statementing Process** – this is in essence a transformation and the digitisation of the statutory assessment and review process. This is not funded from the PSTB, but is part of the EA Connect programme and roll-out commenced in January 2026;
 - **Investment in Classroom Assistants:** A dedicated workstream within the ESM project will develop employment models for classroom assistants, including criteria for roles and career progression. A classroom assistant has been seconded into the Special Education Review Team (SERT) to assist with this project.
 - **Early childhood parental support programme:** this programme will comprise of two elements: delivery of a parental support programme to

parents of children age 3-7 with SEN; and development of a bespoke SEN element to the existing EA Getting Ready to Learn programme which is delivered in pre-school settings.

- **SEN Learning Support Trial for Pre-school and Foundation Stage (previously named In-school Support Model):** Supporting schools to provide early support and intervention at the point of need, and where children are, is another key cornerstone of SEN Reform. We currently do not provide any additional funding to schools to support children at stage 1 of the SEN Code of Practice (CoP), which is where schools deliver special education provision via reasonable adjustments and strategies to meet the child's needs.

This project will test whether introducing resource directly into schools to support children at stage 1 of the SEN Code of Practice (CoP) reduces referrals for statutory assessment, empowering and resourcing schools to support children in-house. This resource will include a Learning Support Teacher supporting one primary school and one pre-school setting, which would allow for some small group or one-to-one teaching where required, and resources for the purchase of therapeutic interventions, equipment or resources.

The introduction of this Learning Support model ensures complementary reform across all three stages of the CoP. It focuses on stage 1, whilst LITs support children at stage 2 and the ESM at stage 3. There is scope for ESM to evolve into a model which supports all children with SEN (stages 1-3), and testing the stage 1 support over two years in a small number of schools will provide an evidence base to inform any future expansion of ESM.

It is proposed to enhance this project by expanding the number of participating education settings from 22 to 28 which will ensure more proportionate representation across all sectors. Subject to PSTB

approval, selected schools will be notified and preparatory work commenced in April with planning in term 3 and a new 'go-live' date of September 2026.

- **Transforming Inclusive Play Environments:** This project has commenced and is being delivered by Playboard. Schools have been selected and letters of offer accepted, therefore no change is proposed. 48 schools will participate in the Inclusive Play programme over three years.
- **Special Schools as Resource Hubs:** The establishment of Special Schools as hubs of expertise supporting mainstream schools is a key cornerstone of SEN Reform to provide expert support for children at stage 3 of the CoP and fully complements the proposed Enhanced Support Model, LITs and the Learning Support Model.

It is considered prudent to test this model before rolling out wholesale. The test and trial period can happen in tandem with the implementation of the ESM project and inform decisions on enhancing the ESM post-2028.

There has been significant engagement with the special school sector on this project which commenced in May 2025 and they are keen to proceed.

It is proposed that preparatory work, with lead-in funding, commences in term 3 2026 in preparation for 'go live' in September 2026 and that this model is tested in seven special schools over two academic years from September 2026 to June 2028.

- **Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) Programme:** It is proposed that this project continues as planned. SEN Teacher Professional Learning

will be fully embedded within the wider Teacher Professional Learning Strategy currently being developed as part of TransformED.

- **Inclusion Capacity Building Programme:** It is proposed that this project continues as planned. Planning has commenced for an Inclusion Symposium in Autumn 2026, with Middletown Centre for Autism leading on delivery working with EA colleagues. Resources and training material on inclusive practice will be developed for inclusion on the online TPL platform being developed under TransformEd. Consideration is also being given to a proposal for inclusive practice across the Strule site, led by Arvalee special school. Additionally, should capital funding be made available for Sensory Pods, this may also form part of this programme.
- The following projects would be **re-shaped / scaled back**;
 - **Programme for 2-3 year-olds with SEN:** This was to be a 'test and learn' project with robust evaluation at the end of the trial period, with a view to scaling up provision with longer term funding via the Early Learning and Childcare Strategy (objective 1.3, category 2 action). The budget position now means that scaling this action may not be possible. In addition, there is potential duplication with Sure Start provision and projects funded under the expanded Pathway Fund. For these reasons, it is proposed not to progress this project further at this point with the exception of continuation of the Belfast Wide Early Years (BWEY) project for three years which has commenced. This project will provide place-based early education with input from AHPs for 180 2-3 year olds with additional needs over three years. The outcomes for children will be robustly evaluated to determine the impact of this intervention, value for money and scalability.
 - **Early Years SEN Assistants training (Pre-school and Foundation Stage):** This project commenced in January 2026 with 120 places offered to assistants to attend accredited training in FE Colleges in 2025/26. 114 participants undertook the training in this cohort. This training will provide assistants with SEN-specific training and therefore provides a good basis

for all assistants which would be complementary to any additional specialist training emerging from the EA's new Enhanced Support Model. There will be a minimum of 360 training places offered over three years.

- **Speech, Language & Communication intervention:** A revised proposal and implementation timeline has been developed by the Education Authority in collaboration with Help Kids Talk and Speech & Language Therapists from all five Health Trust areas. Funding is being retained in the budget line to provide a tailored project specific to the Irish Medium Education (IME) sector (proposals currently under consideration).
- The following projects would **cease**:
 - **Early Intervention and Assessment Hubs:** This project cannot proceed within the funding timeframe. It sought to test a new model of school placement for 3-6 year olds with SEN in five 'hubs' with intense intervention from AHPs to determine their educational pathway. It is proposed not to proceed with this project.
 - **Enhanced Nurture Programme:** This project relied on building on the existing Nurture Groups, however given the existing challenges in relation to the financial sustainability of Nurture Groups, it is not feasible to deliver this project without first stabilising the existing funding position for NGs. While options for future funding of Nurture have been prepared, implementation will depend on funding allocations over the next few years, therefore this project is not deliverable within the timescale of the funding envelope.

12. A summary of the suite of projects proposed to be taken forward following the stocktake review is attached at Tab A.

13. The diagram below shows how all of the PSTB projects as well as the EA's SEND transformation projects fit together. Research evidence has shown that large scale transformation using multiple projects is highly risky, but that small scale test and trial, in this case alongside two large scale transformation projects,

is a more effective reform model. The cornerstones of SEN transformation led by the Education Authority are for Stage 2 services (LITs) and Stage 3 services (Enhanced Support Model - specifically looking at Stage 3 and Classroom Assistants), with the test and trial projects wrapping around the large-scale actions.

STAGE 1 (and pre-code)	STAGE 2	STAGE 3
Graduated Response Framework		
In-school support model (<u>pre school</u> and foundation stage)	Local IMPACT Teams (LITs)	Enhanced Support Model (ESM)
		Review and digitisation of statutory assessment process
		Special schools resource hubs (7 hubs with 10 mainstream school 'spokes')
Parental support programme (<u>pre-school</u> / foundation stage)		
SEN assistant training (<u>pre school</u> and foundation stage)		
Speech Language and Communication toolkit – system wide		
Inclusive Play (<u>pre-school</u> , primary, special) – parents / teachers		
Inclusive capacity building programme – system wide		
Teacher and classroom assistant professional learning – system wide		

Impact on expenditure profile

14. The decision to complete a stocktake review has meant that the projects have been paused from December 2025 to April 2026. Some of these were expected to commence in early 2026. In addition, the EA has been developing its ESM and this is now expected to commence in September 2026,.

15. As a result, there has been an underspend on the 2025/26 budget allocation. The chair of the Public Sector Transformation Board is aware of the underspend and has been supportive of us taking time to complete a stocktake review. A request for reprofiling of the £27.5m has been made to the PSTB.

TAB A
SEN REFORM PSTB-FUNDED PROJECTS
(POST-STOCKTAKE)

THEME	Project	Project Summary
EARLY INTERVENTION	1. Parental Support Programme	This programme consists of two elements: • Delivery of a parental support programme to parents of early years children in special schools. It is proposed to collaborate with a voluntary & community sector partner to design and deliver a programme engaging with parents of children in special schools, reaching over 1,000 families over two years. The programme would demonstrate practical parenting strategies for communication, behaviour, and learning, Visual Supports, response interactions, home-based learning strategies and play-based development. It would also focus on parental wellbeing looking at stress management, peer support and access to services. Resource packs and follow-up support would also be available with on-going access to materials and optional check-ins. • Development of a bespoke SEN element to the existing Education Authority's (EA) 'Getting Ready to Learn programme' which is delivered to parents by pre-school education settings. The EA proposes to develop a bespoke SEN element to the 'Getting Ready to Learn programme' for implementation in special schools, specialist provisions and mainstream pre-school settings. Preparatory work to be undertaken in term 3.

	2. 2-3 Year Old Programme	The project builds upon learning from the Belfast Wide Early Years programme. This project will provide place-based early education with input from AHPs for 180 2-3-year-olds with additional needs across three years. The programme will ensure that each child (in a group of 6), will access 3 child development sessions per week x 2 hrs in each academic year and will facilitate 10 parental workshops or engagements across the year in four settings: SOLAS, Kids Together Belfast, Glenbrook Sure Start and East Belfast Sure Start. Delivery partners will engage with AHPs, supporting regular visits and implementation of individual development plans. This test and learn project will assess the impact of place-based support for 2-3 year olds with emerging additional needs, the outcomes for children, their education pathway, value for money and scalability.
	3. SEN Learning Support Trial (In-School Support Model for Pre-School and Foundation Stage)	The SEN Learning Support Trial will test a range of in-house support mechanisms for early intervention in pre-school and foundation stage, including an on-site learning support teacher (LST) in 14 schools for children who are pre-code and Stage 1 of the SEN Code of Practice (CoP). The LST will also provide support to one identified local pre-school setting – 28 settings in total. The trial will also include flexible funding for learning support resources and funding for creative, assistive and therapeutic approaches to learning support. Schools and settings will use their professional expertise to spend the funding on what is needed to support their children who are pre-code and Stage 1 of the SEN Code of Practice (CoP). The LST will also have access to a training programme which will support them in their new role.

		It is proposed that school selection will be confirmed in April and preparatory work with settings to establish guidance and implementation will take place in term 3 2025/26. Implementation in 28 settings would commence in September 2026.
	4. Early Years Assistants SEN Training (SEN Assistants Training Pilot (Pre-School and Foundation Stage))	This project will test the impact of providing a range of high-quality training to nursery assistants and classroom assistants supporting children at pre-school and foundation stage. The training offer will include at least one accredited SEN-specific qualification. Cohort one was delivered by five FE colleges and ran January-March 2026 delivering three courses across six classes offered to 120 participants (114 attended, achievement/ completion rate yet to be confirmed). The courses were: • OCN NI Level 3 Award in Working with Children and Young People with Special Needs • NCFE CACHE Level 3 Award in supporting children and young people's speech, language and communication • OCN NI Level 2 Award in Learning Disability and Positive Support in Early Years Cohort two will run April - June 2026 for one class of 20 participants: • OCN NI Level 3 Award in Working with Children and Young People with Special Needs Proposals for cohort three are being invited and considered for September 2026. The overall target is 360 participants over 3 years receiving an accredited SEN-specific course. Subject to funding, there may be scope to enhance this project following review of proposals.

	5. Speech, Language and Communication The Speech Language and Communication project will seek to intervene much earlier through the delivery of a number of training and intervention modules including training & resources for parents and the application of language screeners and toolkits. Through a joint collaborative approach, EA and the five HSC Trusts will identify, review and prioritise Language and Communication resources (to include professional resources, screeners and parent/carers materials) to support early identification and maximise appropriate support across early years, primary and post primary education.
TRANSFORMING THE SUPPORT MODEL FOR CHILDREN WITH A STATEMENT OF SEN	6. Enhanced Support Model (for children with a statement of SEN) The Enhanced Support Model for children with a statement of SEN – this is the cornerstone of SEN reform and of the DE draft five-year Education Budget Strategy. EA has developed a new Enhanced Support Model (ESM) which was published for public consultation on 24 March 2026. Phased implementation planned to commence from September 2026.
	7. Special Schools as Resource Hubs of Expertise The establishment of seven Special Schools as Resource Hubs each supporting 10 mainstream schools is a key cornerstone of SEN Reform to provide expert support for children at Stage 3 of the CoP and fully complements the EA’s proposed Enhanced Support Model (ESM), Local Impact Teams (LITs) and the Learning Support Model. This trial will test Special Schools as resource centres of expertise using a ‘hub and spoke’ model, to support teachers, SENCOs and adult assistants to provide focused support to learners with statements of SEN in selected local mainstream schools and pre-school settings. The project will commence with a ‘needs analysis’ across the mainstream schools to allow the ‘hub coordinator’ to develop a bespoke suite of training that each school will identify it needs to meet the learning needs of its pupils.

		Training will be delivered to schools via 'clusters' or if very specific, directly to individual schools. The hub coordinator will work with teachers to model best-practice in the classroom and will be assisted by another teacher and adult assistant who will provide rolling sub-cover, and additional support to allow teachers time to engage with on-site modelling and 1:1 withdrawal if so required. The hub coordinator will also be a first-contact for schools if children are in immediate crisis. The amount of contact time with schools required will be ascertained during the needs analysis. It is considered prudent to test this model of support before considering any potential to roll out wholesale. It is proposed that preparatory work with lead-in funding commences in term 3 2026 in preparation for 'go live' in September 2026 and that this model is tested from September 2026 to June 2028. The test and trial period will happen in tandem with the implementation of the ESM project and inform decisions on enhancing the ESM.
BUILDING A SKILLED EDUCATION WORKFORCE, CONFIDENT IN MEETING THE NEEDS OF ALL CHILDREN	8. Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) Programme	SEN Teacher Professional Learning will be fully embedded within the wider Teacher Professional Learning Strategy currently being developed as part of TransformED. We are working closely with colleagues in the EA to commence roll-out of training in the new academic year.
	9. Investing in Classroom Assistants	A dedicated workstream within the ESM project will develop employment models for classroom assistants, including criteria for roles and career progression. A classroom assistant has been seconded into DE to assist with this project.
CREATING AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEM	10. Design & Trial of an Inclusion Capacity Building Programme	The Inclusion Capacity Building Programme is a whole-system initiative that aims to ensure every child and young person in Northern Ireland experiences equitable, high-quality education.

		It will comprise resources, professional development in inclusive teaching methodologies and design of inclusive school environments. Planning has commenced for an 'Inclusion Symposium' in Autumn 2026. Officials are working with Middletown Centre for Autism to deliver the symposium. Resources and training material on inclusive practice will be developed for inclusion on the EA's online Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) platform being developed under the umbrella of TransformEd. Consideration is also being given to a proposal for inclusive practice across the Strule site, led by Arvalee special school.
	11. Transforming Inclusive Play Environments	This project has commenced and is being delivered by Playboard. Schools have been selected and letters of offer accepted. A total of 48 schools will participate in the Inclusive Play programme over three years. The Inclusive Play programme will provide a whole school intervention, that will embed understanding of inclusive play alongside play-based approaches across the school environment in terms of pedagogy, pupil relations, spaces, policy and connections into families. It aims to ensure that play actively supports inclusion, integration, wellbeing, learning and participation for all pupils, including children with SEN. The programme will also deliver parental training sessions to strengthen understanding and build confidence in supporting play for children with SEN within the home environment.