

Re: Submission to the Inquiry on Strategic Review of SEN Provision and the Department's SEN Reform Agenda

I am writing in response to the Committee's call for evidence as a parent carer of a child with Special Educational Needs, who has navigated the diagnostic and statementing process and engaged with educational, clinical, and therapeutic professionals across multiple agencies.

From the first time an ASD diagnosis was discussed we have been fortunate to meet, and be supported by, many professionals - teachers, therapists and charity advocates - who are dedicated to finding solutions for children and families, often going above and beyond, and I couldn't be more grateful for their support because it's not been an easy journey.

I would consider myself very capable of navigating and comprehending the documentation, appointing solicitors to challenge the Education Authority, ensuring we are a step ahead so we can prevent any interruptions in education, and becoming immersed in techniques and therapies to help and support my son... Nonetheless it has been immeasurably stressful, to the point of having a detrimental effect on my physical and mental health.

I can only imagine how it must be for others whose situations are more complicated or lack the means and skills to be able to fight for their child's needs to be met. It is understandable that there is suspicion that the Education Authority uses fatigue tactics to prevent challenges and avoid providing potentially costly support.

Through my own experience and engagement with other parent carers, it is clear that the current SEN system, administered under the Education Authority, is structurally incapable of delivering coordinated, child-centred support. It is a system designed around institutions rather than individuals, creating barriers to timely support and failing to recognise that learning is a holistic, lifelong process that extends beyond the classroom and beyond age 16.

The issues faced by families are systemic, not incidental:

- Fragmented support: Families must navigate separate educational, health, and social care services, often acting as intermediaries between professionals who do not communicate effectively.
- Lack of accountability: No single agency holds responsibility for ensuring that a child's needs are met in order for them to access and benefit from the education to which they are entitled - this goes beyond classroom support.
- Excessive bureaucracy: The administrative burden placed on families diverts focus away from outcomes and towards procedural compliance. Additionally, the expectation that parents will be able to meet the requirements is unreasonable, especially when taking into account that parents of children with neurodivergence may also experience difficulties with communication. This also has led to a 'them vs us' feeling between parents and the EA.
- Support cliff edges: Reduction in provision at age 16 leaves many young people without continuity of learning or developmental support at a critical stage in life.

- Limited recognition of alternative learning environments: Current provision is overly focused on what occurs within a school setting, despite evidence that many children with SEN achieve progress through home, community, and therapeutic learning. The growing problem of providing suitable educational environments for the 'SENbetweeners' and increasing school refusals, could be lessened with a coordinated approach from all services, inside and outside school.
- Masked difficulties: Many children with SEN mask or compensate for difficulties while in school, creating the appearance that they do not require additional support. These challenges often manifest outside the classroom - through meltdowns, anxiety, or difficulties completing tasks at home - affecting their ability to learn and thrive. Without holistic support spanning school, home, and community, children are at risk of emotional distress and learning gaps.

These challenges reflect structural shortcomings within the system, not a lack of dedication from individual practitioners who are often constrained by current frameworks.

While I'm aware that aspects of key worker models have been adopted - including the existing link officer and SENCO roles - they have proven to be insufficient, divisive and ineffective.

Pilot schemes, research and studies, both in the UK and internationally, with key worker or care coordination models have consistently demonstrated improved family experience, reduced duplication across agencies, and better outcomes for children.

However, these models were never fully embedded or scaled, not because the concept was ineffective, but because:

- Agencies operated within separate legal and funding structures with no shared accountability.
- Projects were short-term and dependent on limited funding cycles.
- No single department had overarching authority to drive and sustain the model.

The evidence clearly shows that when implemented, key worker approaches worked. The failure was systemic, not conceptual.

For meaningful transformation, Northern Ireland must move beyond reforming the existing structure and instead create a dedicated Department for Special Educational Needs, outside and independent of the Education Authority.

This department would have statutory authority to work across education, health, and social care, and each child with SEN would be allocated a key worker whose role would be to:

- Act as a single point of contact for the family and professionals.
- Coordinate timely assessments, interventions, and reviews.
- Ensure that agreed support is implemented in educational settings and beyond.
- Guide parents and carers on what support is realistically available from the Education Authority, NHS, and other services, helping manage expectations and reducing confusion or stress.
- Support parents and carers on how to continue development at home and within the community.
- Support the transition beyond compulsory schooling into adulthood, vocational training, employment, or supported living.
- Build trust between families, schools, and the EA, reducing adversarial “them and us” dynamics by creating clear, neutral communication channels.
- Support children who fall between mainstream and special school provision (“SENbetweeners”), coordinating flexible, blended learning options and targeted interventions to meet their individual needs.
- Establish joint responsibility for learning, ensuring that parents, schools, and agencies collaborate to address barriers such as anxiety, trauma, or other difficulties that impact attendance and engagement.

The establishment of a dedicated department with a statutory key worker model would lead to:

- Holistic, child-centred provision tailored to individual needs.
- Continuity of learning and support throughout the life course, not merely during school years.

- Improved outcomes through early intervention, preventing crises and reducing long-term costs.
- Enhanced relationships and trust between families, teachers, and the Education Authority, creating a collaborative rather than adversarial system.
- Resilient, efficient schools and workforce, where teachers and EA staff are supported and freed from acting as the sole coordinators of multi-agency support.
- Genuine partnership with families, recognising their expertise and role in their children's development.
- Integrated, not fragmented services, ensuring all agencies work towards shared goals and measurable outcomes.

We are at a pivotal moment. Incremental adjustments to the existing system will not resolve the fundamental challenges faced by children with Special Educational Needs. The Committee has the opportunity to recommend a bold, forward-looking approach - a dedicated SEN department with a statutory key worker model - that would transform outcomes for children, reduce systemic inefficiencies, strengthen relationships with families, support teachers and the EA in their roles, and ensure no child falls through the gaps between existing school provision.

Thank you for considering this submission. I would welcome the opportunity to provide further input or speak to the Committee in person.

Yours sincerely,

