

CCEA Briefing Paper for Inquiry into the Strategic Review of Current SEN provision and Transformation Agenda

CCEA's Remit ([Our Remit | CCEA](#))

CCEA's principal products and services may best be described by reference to the [Education \(NI\) Order 1998](#).

- keep under review all aspects of the curriculum, examinations and assessment for grant aided schools and colleges of further education and to undertake statutory consultation on proposals relating to legislation;
- advise the DE on matters concerned with the curriculum, assessment, examinations and external qualifications and accredit and approve qualifications;
- conduct and moderate examinations and assessments, ensuring that standards are recognised as equivalent to standards of examinations and assessments conducted by other bodies or authorities exercising similar functions in the United Kingdom;
- publish and disseminate information relating to the curriculum, assessment and examinations;
- develop and produce teaching support materials for use in schools; and
- carry out research and development.

Under the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, it is required that CCEA should take into account the requirements of persons with special learning needs when carrying out its functions.

Background

Learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Northern Ireland are educated across a range of settings. Currently, 7,462 learners with SEN attend the 40 special schools, which operate within the Education Directorate of the Education Authority. A further 4,559 learners are placed in Specialist Provision in Mainstream (SPiMs), managed and supported by the Education Authority's Specialist Provision Service. This provision has recently been extended to include pre-school aged learners.

The majority of learners with SEN, 58,192 (approximately 89%), are educated in mainstream classrooms. Responsibility for mainstream SEN provision sits within the Children and Young People's Services (CYPS) of the Education Authority.

Curriculum & Assessment

CCEA have limited allocated staffing resource of one Education Manager with responsibility for SEN in Curriculum and Assessment, reporting to a Programme Manager with a broader remit. Despite this, ambitious objectives are set and achieved annually.

Partnership with key stakeholders is essential to ensure clarity of roles, avoid duplication of effort, ensure effective communication, and secure shared understanding and support for ongoing development work. CCEA engage with the Department of Education, Education Authority and the Education and Training Inspectorate in the delivery of provision for learners with SEN and continue to develop this collaboration. CCEA continues to engage with practitioners across all sectors to identify and address their needs and priorities in supporting, teaching, and assessing learners with SEN. This engagement ensures that CCEA advice is informed, and evidence based.

The TransformED NI Strategy and Delivery Plan highlight the need for an evidence-based approach to improvement across the education system focused on the core areas of curriculum, assessment, qualifications, school improvement and tackling disadvantage, underpinned by investment in high quality teacher professional development. The needs of SEN must be considered across all the TransformED NI key priorities. In addition, the TransformED NI sits alongside the SEN Reform Agenda and five-year Delivery Plan published in February 2025.

CCEA continues to deliver its annual programme of work to support the effective delivery of the current Northern Ireland Curriculum and assessment for children and young people with SEN.

CCEA's guidance, resources, and advice on SEN continue to be well received by special schools, Specialist Provision in Mainstream (SPiMs), and mainstream schools.

Assessment

Q Skills Assessment Framework

The *Prerequisite Skills* assessment framework, more commonly referred to as *Q Skills*, was first published by CCEA in 2007, and provides a non-statutory framework for assessing the cross-curricular skills of learners who are working below Level 1 of the Levels of Progression. It provides a broad, inclusive framework for assessing pupils with mild, moderate, severe, or profound learning difficulties. Q Skills considers age, cognitive ability, learning challenges, and other significant, complex needs. Pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties, or those with more complex needs within the severe learning difficulties range, are better supported through CCEA *Quest for Learning* framework.

The frameworks are currently used by 171 schools across Northern Ireland and there has been a steady increase in interest from mainstream primary and post-primary schools. CCEA has been working with colleagues in the Education Authority to encourage the use of the Q Skills Assessment Framework within learning support units attached to mainstream schools.

The current figures for learners recorded on the CCEA Quest and Q Skills Recording Software are shown below:

	Registered Learners	Learners With Assessment Records	Special	SPiM	Mainstream
Quest	910	294	245	17	2
Q Skills	4808	1552	1419	219	9
Total	5718	1846	1664	236	11

The English medium versions of *Using Mathematics*, *Communication*, and *Using ICT* frameworks have all been reviewed and refined in response to feedback from teachers and school leaders. The Quest and Q Skills recording software has been updated to reflect these improvements and to add additional functionality to improve the experience for pupils, parents, teachers and school leaders. An online course for teachers was also created to support the use of Q Skills and in general the use of assessment in special settings. These changes were based on a [review of Quest and Q Skills](#) carried out in Spring 2020.

In addition, the *Assessment Guidance for Special Schools* has been published and has received positive and sometimes emotive feedback from schools.

A proposal on the way forward for Q Skills has been considered including recommendations around further Irish Medium provision, however, the proposal will need to be updated to reflect the Curriculum Reform and outcomes of the Independent Review of Assessment.

Computer Adaptive Assessment

Computer Adaptive Assessment is used by a number of special schools. The test can support the assessment of some learners with Moderate Learning Difficulties and feedback from schools has been very positive. In the current pilot, five special schools are registered to participate. In addition to this, some pupils with SEN in mainstream including within Specialist Provision in Mainstream units (SPiMs) are part of the pilot. A specific SEN entry-point can be requested when pupils are being registered for the assessment and the ability of the assessment to give a standardised score which can go below 69 are two key strengths of the assessment that support schools in assessing and tracking learning for learners with Special Educational Needs.

PEER Awards

Learners working below Entry Level 1 currently have no external recognition of their attainment at the end of their school education. School leaders and teachers in special schools have requested that CCEA provide a method to acknowledge the achievements of these young people. In response, CCEA is currently piloting the PEER (Pre-Entry Level Experience and Recognition) Awards with seven special schools and will expand this to include all special schools in Northern Ireland from January 2026. The PEER Awards are based on the Northern Ireland Curriculum and existing CCEA resources. CCEA will continue to engage with schools to ensure that the Awards meet their needs.

Directory of Resources

CCEA is developing an online directory of resources to support teachers working with learners with SEN. The directory brings together a wide range of high-quality materials. Some of these resources are also available in Irish, ensuring accessibility and relevance for all settings. The completed directory will be fully searchable and designed to make it easy for teachers to find, use, and share resources.

It is intended that users will be able to rate each resource that will support decisions around making improvements. Teachers will also have the option to submit new resources using an online form. Submissions will be reviewed by CCEA before being added to the directory, ensuring that all materials meet appropriate standards and continue to reflect best practice in SEN teaching and learning.

Stakeholder Engagement

Collaborative working with stakeholders is essential to ensure CCEA projects are targeted to meet identified need. CCEA regularly meet with education partners. On-going dialogue with teachers and principals from special schools, SPiMs and mainstream schools allows CCEA to share information, raise awareness of our resources, and monitor curricular needs. CCEA support the Education Authority as required, for example providing information for events and for the Specialist Provisions Team.

In the context of Fair Start, CCEA held SEN curriculum monitoring events in Spring 2025 to hear the views of practitioners on how the current statutory curriculum and assessment arrangements meet the needs of their learners. The information gathered supported SEN

specific engagement with the Independent Review of Curriculum and Independent Review of Assessment. Further information collected at these events is provided in Appendix 1.

Until the launch of the SEN Reform Delivery Plan, the Education Authority and Department of Education led a SEND Transformation Programme, which was governed by a cross-agency Programme Board. CCEA had representation at senior level on the Programme Board and chaired one of the Project Boards. This has now been replaced by the cross-agency SEN Operational Implementation Oversight Group and includes senior CCEA representation.

As well as engagement with education partners CCEA meet with other stakeholders as required, such as BBC, Mencap, Disability Sports NI, Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) and National Association for Special Educational Needs (NASEN).

A targeted Communication Strategy is currently being implemented, which includes a termly SEN newsletter and on-going social media posts, mainly targeted at teachers and school leaders, with an aim to ensure maximum awareness and use of CCEA resources for SEN.

System Level Reform

Looking ahead, CCEA’s focus will be on supporting system-wide reform across the SEN landscape through active contribution to a series of significant education reviews and reform programmes. Most of the current reforms are expected to conclude within approximately 18 months, while the SEN Reform Agenda will continue over a five-year period.

SEN Reform Agenda

The SEN Reform Agenda and five-year Delivery Plan, published in February 2025, provides key actions required to bring about meaningful transformation in SEN provision across Northern Ireland under the theme *Right Support, from the Right People, at the Right Time and in the Right Place*. It is intended to facilitate *a systematic approach leading to better outcomes for our children and young people with SEN, creating inclusive learning environments, offering sustainable, high-quality education with effective interventions and support, all while delivering greater value for money and return on investment*.

The Reform aligns with the Programme for Government 2024-2027 priorities to ‘*Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs*.’ The Reform Agenda and Delivery Plan is aligned to the various other reviews and delivery plans taking place within Department of Education including those on School Improvement, Curriculum, Assessment, Workforce, the Early Learning and Childcare Strategy and the RAISE programme.

In addition to the role in the oversight group the following actions from the Delivery Plan name CCEA as a partner:

Child Centred Graduated Response Framework	Publication and Implementation of a child-centred Graduated Response Framework Publication of a child-centred Graduated Response Framework Design of accompanying support resources	DE/EA/CCEA/ DoH/PHA /CnaG ¹
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¹ Department of Education (DE); Education Authority (EA); Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA); Department of Health (DoH); Public Heath Authority (PHA); Comhairle Na Gaelscolaiochta (CnaG)

	Professional Development Programme (Staff, Resources, Quality Assurance) Roll out of Framework and supporting materials	
Curriculum	Supporting access to the Northern Ireland Curriculum for children with SEN • Appropriate review of curriculum design & delivery for learners with SEN informed by Curriculum Review • Utilise expertise from support organisations to produce a series of frameworks for accessing the curriculum including but not exclusive to for visually impaired children, deaf children, neurodivergent and neurodiverse children • Roll out of Implementation of curriculum review recommendations specific to children with SEN • Trial and roll out a framework of pilots for Alternative Learning Methods	DE/CCEA/ETI/ RNIB/Middletown/ RNID ²

Curriculum Reform

The Independent Review of the Curriculum has now been completed, with CCEA making a significant contribution in relation to Special Educational Needs. CCEA provided detailed evidence, analysis, and professional insight on how the Northern Ireland Curriculum supports learners with SEN, highlighting areas where greater flexibility, accessibility, and personalisation are needed. CCEA will play a key role in ensuring that SEN needs are integral to the design and implementation of the reformed curriculum.

Review of Assessment

CCEA continue to contribute information and expertise on SEN to inform the broader review of assessment. The aim is to ensure that future assessment approaches are inclusive, practical, and reflective of the full range of learners' abilities and achievements, including those in Irish Medium Education with SEN.

Review of Qualifications

CCEA is providing targeted input to ensure that the needs and experiences of learners with SEN are fully considered within the review of qualifications. This work focuses on promoting equitable access, suitable progression routes, and appropriate recognition of achievement for all learners.

SEND Transformation Programme

An ongoing action from the SEND Transformation Programme is the development of a new approach to recording and providing support for learners with SEN. Following successful trials, the programme is now in its first full rollout year.

² Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI); Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB); Middletown Centre for Autism; Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID)

Qualifications Delivery

Compliance

CCEA strives to minimise the impact of any issue that may affect a candidate entered for our qualifications and there are specific arrangements under JCQ regulations in place to support all awarding bodies with this.

These are pre-examination adjustments that allow students with special educational needs, disabilities, or temporary injuries to take exams and demonstrate their attainment fairly. They are a form of reasonable adjustment under discrimination legislation and are intended to level the playing field, not provide an unfair advantage.

The definition of disability is set out in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (as amended).

The provisions that make discrimination in the arrangements for awarding general qualifications by awarding bodies unlawful are contained in Part 3, Chapter 3 of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 (SENDO 2005).

Current qualifications covered by SENDO 2005 are set out in the Schedule to The Special Educational Needs and Disability (General Qualifications Bodies) (Relevant Qualifications, Reasonable Steps and Physical Features) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 ('the 2008 Regulations'). These are as follows:

- Certificate of Personal Effectiveness (CoPE)
- Entry Level qualifications
- Essential Skills qualifications
- General Certificate of Education (Advanced and Advanced Subsidiary levels)
- General Certificate of Secondary Education
- Vocational Technical Qualifications.

Guidance issued by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (Draft Guide to Disability Discrimination Law that relates to General Qualifications Bodies) describes the duties placed on general qualification bodies that offer qualifications in Northern Ireland.

Access Arrangements

Access arrangements are designed to acknowledge longer term conditions and are agreed before an assessment. They allow candidates with specific needs, such as special educational needs, disabilities or temporary injuries to access the assessment and show what they know and can do without changing the demands of the assessment. There is a regulatory requirement that all awarding organisations have in place *Arrangements for Reasonable Adjustments* (Condition G7). The corresponding JCQ document that gives effect to this is [Access Arrangements and Reasonable Adjustments](#).

The intention behind an access arrangement is to meet the needs of an individual candidate without affecting the integrity of the assessment. Access arrangements are the principal way in which awarding bodies comply with their duty under disability discrimination legislation to make 'reasonable adjustments'. Whether an adjustment will be considered reasonable will depend on several factors which will include, but are not limited to:

- the needs of the disabled candidate;
- the effectiveness of the adjustment;
- the cost of the adjustment; and

- the likely impact of the adjustment upon the candidate and other candidates.

A centre (a school or college) must make decisions on appropriate access arrangements for their candidates based on evidence of need. Although professionals from other organisations may give advice, they cannot make the decision for the centre. They will not have a working knowledge of an individual candidate's needs and how their difficulties impact in the classroom and/or in timed assessments. It is the responsibility of the SENCo or equivalent member of staff to make appropriate and informed decisions based on the JCQ regulations. They must also ensure that the proposed access arrangement/reasonable adjustment does not unfairly disadvantage or advantage the candidate.

Access arrangements can be divided into two main categories: those that can be approved by the exam centre (school or college) and those that require prior approval from the awarding body.

Centre-delegated arrangements

These can be approved directly by the school's or college's Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) and include:

- **Supervised rest breaks:** Pauses during the exam, with the clock stopped, to assist with fatigue, anxiety, or medical needs.
- **Word processor:** Using a computer or laptop for typing.
- **Separate rooming:** Sitting in a smaller room to reduce distractions.
- **Coloured overlays or papers:** Using coloured paper or transparent sheets to help with reading.
- **Assistive software:** Using computer programs like a screen reader or voice recognition.

Awarding body-approved arrangements

These arrangements require a formal online application to the awarding body via the JCQ Access Arrangements Online system:

- **Extra time:** An additional percentage of time, typically 25%, to complete the exam. In rare cases, more time can be approved for candidates who meet specific, demanding criteria.
- **Reader or computer reader:** A human or computer reader to read the questions and/or text for students with reading difficulties.
- **Scribe:** A person who writes down answers dictated by the student.
- **Modified papers:** Exams available in alternative formats, such as Braille, large print, or coloured paper.

Question Paper Production - Modified Papers

- CCEA Question Paper Production (QPP) team carry out a range of modifications to examination papers and associated material to suit candidates and learners that have special educational needs, for example, visual impairment and/or hearing impairment and where other adjustments available to them are unsuitable.

- QPP follows the *Joint Council for Qualifications* (JCQ) process detailed within ***Adjustments for candidates with disabilities and learning difficulties: Access Arrangements and Reasonable Adjustments*** when managing and processing these requests. These papers are typeset, printed and distributed by CCEA.
- QPP engage the services of organisations such as *BATOD* (British Association of Teachers of the Deaf) and *Jordanstown School* – the Northern Ireland Centre of Excellence for Children who are deaf or visually impaired, to review examination material and make recommendations to suit candidates' needs. More recently we have also engaged with *The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists* on the accessibility of our papers for candidates with neurodevelopmental conditions such as Developmental Language Disorder (DLD).

Details on the most recent modifications can be found in Appendix 2.

Regulation

CCEA Regulation acts on behalf of the Department of Education as the regulator for qualifications in Northern Ireland. It sets and enforces the regulatory requirements that qualification awarding organisations must meet in order to maintain recognition to operate within the Northern Ireland qualifications market.

These requirements are outlined in the General Conditions of Recognition (GCoR). Details of this may be seen in Appendix 3. Several of the conditions relate specifically to ensuring access and fairness for all candidates, including those with learning disabilities. Awarding organisations are required to comply with equalities legislation and to take all reasonable steps to remove unjustifiable barriers to assessment for learners with particular characteristics. This includes providing appropriate reasonable adjustments and access arrangements to ensure fair assessment opportunities for all candidates.

On an annual basis CCEA Regulation undertakes a range of assurance activities to ascertain the extent of awarding organisations' compliance with CCEA Regulation's GCoR. In relation to equality and access to qualifications specifically we undertake the following:

- Collection of data from the awarding organisations operating in NI that award GCSEs, AS and A levels about reasonable adjustments made for those assessments. Awarding organisations submit this data as part of their access arrangements data, which includes both data on reasonable adjustments and some types of special consideration.
- Ongoing work with fellow qualifications regulators Ofqual and Qualifications Wales, awarding organisations and representative organisations through the Access Consultation Forum (ACF). The forum discusses issues that affect the accessibility of qualifications and assessments that we regulate. The focus is primarily, but not exclusively, on the accessibility of general qualifications for students with a disability.

CCEA Regulation provides advice and guidance to the Department of Education (DE) on the suitability of qualifications for use in schools in Northern Ireland. We make recommendations on a wide range of qualifications, from Entry Level to Level 3, including many designed for learners with special educational needs (SEN). All approved qualifications are listed in the NIEFQAN file, which we maintain on behalf of the Department of Education.

Appendix 1

Further Information from CCEA SEN Information Gathering Events

1.0 Introduction and Methodology

In early 2025, the CCEA conducted a series of in-person meetings with teaching practitioners working with children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) across Northern Ireland. These engagements were designed to monitor and explore the implementation of the Northern Ireland Curriculum within a variety of SEN educational settings. The work forms part of the response to the 2021 *A Fair Start* report, which addressed educational underachievement and set out key actions to support improved outcomes for all learners, including those with SEN.

The specific objectives of these engagements were to:

- Determine the extent to which the aims and objectives of the Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC) align with the needs of SEN learners.
- Identify barriers hindering the effective implementation of the NIC in SEN settings.
- Evaluate the suitability of current learning and assessment arrangements within the NIC for SEN learners.
- Understand the types of resources currently utilised in SEN settings and gather feedback on their effectiveness.
- Ascertain what changes, if any, SEN teaching professionals would like to see to the aims and operational aspects of the NIC for SEN settings.

A total of six events were held, two dedicated events for each of the following SEN settings: Special Schools, SEN in Irish Medium Education (IME), and Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools (SPiMs).

A total of 66 teaching practitioners attended the events.

The information below details the findings from discussions held with participating teaching practitioners, organised according to the areas of interest outlined previously. Where specific discussion points are relevant to a particular type of SEN setting, this will be explicitly indicated. Many of the matters raised are not within the remit of CCEA to resolve. The findings were used to inform CCEA contributions to subsequent reviews of the curriculum and assessment.

2.0 The Aims, Objectives and Detail of the NIC

This section considers participants' views on the aims and objectives of the NIC with regard to their applicability and relevance to learners with SEN.

Diversity of Pupil Profile

There was strong agreement among participants that effective SEN curriculum design must begin with a full appreciation for the wide range and depth of learner needs. This requires understanding that SEN includes a broad spectrum of conditions, presenting different challenges for learners, teachers, and parents.

A recurring theme among participants was the curriculum's insufficient attention to learners' social and emotional needs. Participants strongly recommended prioritising social-emotional wellbeing and functional life skills over purely academic content for SEN learners.

Mindful of this, participants consistently asserted that the current aims and objectives of the NIC do not adequately reflect the range of individualised needs of SEN learners. Participants broadly attributed this disconnect to the curriculum's design being centred on mainstream pupils, which means its aims and objectives are often irrelevant or unrealistic for SEN learners.

Relevance of Aims and Objectives

Participants observed that the aims of the NIC are often not relevant to SEN learners in that many have learning needs that either precede the curriculum or are not reflected within its content. Furthermore, the requirements of the NIC are sometimes unrealistic inasmuch as where the learning needs are reflective of those of the learner, the desired outcomes can exceed what is possible.

Participants made some comments regarding the particular aims of the NIC. For instance, with respect to the second aim, to allow individuals to become a 'contributor to society', participants noted that SEN learners often face challenges developing life skills that are not necessarily encountered by their mainstream counterparts.

The third aim of the NIC, to permit pupils to become 'a contributor to the economy', was also viewed as problematic by some participants. Comments were made that due to organisational barriers and lack of resources, many SEN schools cannot facilitate individualised community-based work experience, making the idea of contribution to the economy difficult. Moreover, some SEN pupils who attend special schools are highly unlikely to ever have the capacity to undertake tasks that might count as 'work'. Equally, participants keenly stressed that it was important SEN learners' contribution to the economy is not downplayed or disregarded, rather that it be clarified in the realistic terms.

Applicable Aims and Objectives for SEN

Many participants felt that to more accurately reflect the needs of SEN learners, the aims and objectives of the NIC require suitable modifications – including, for example, the incorporation of more inclusive, neurodiverse-friendly language. Current terminology used in the NIC, such as 'reach potential' or 'successful life', may not be relevant to SEN learners. Participants were not sure how these kinds of outcomes (e.g., fulfilling potential) were necessarily identifiable or measurable for their pupils, many of whom face continual barriers in accessing various aspects of the current curriculum. To become more inclusive, the curriculum could embrace terms that better reflect the holistic experience of learning, including for those with SEN.

Flexibility of the NIC

Participants were generally appreciative of the flexibility offered by the NIC.

In the main, participants felt that the flexibility afforded by the NIC was necessary to enable them to mould their teaching and lesson-planning to better suit the individualised needs of their pupils. However, some participants mentioned that the flexibility of the NIC also posed challenges, with claims that additional direction in some areas would be beneficial in helping to clarify the curriculum's specific demands.

There was also a general feeling from special schools and SPiMs that flexibility can only go so far and that there reaches a point where an entirely different curriculum is being taught.

3.0 Barriers to the Implementation of the NIC for SEN Learners

This section presents a number of barriers to curriculum implementation noted by participants as preventing them from effectively delivering the NIC.

Readiness to learn

One of the major barriers to curriculum implementation highlighted by focus group participants centred on readiness to learn. It was strongly believed that readiness to learn should be embedded within the curriculum for SEN children, as this is becoming paramount in today's learners. Many children are coming to school with extreme emotional dysregulation and are not ready to be taught the curriculum, which has a knock-on effect on how teachers can deliver it. There is a need for this to be addressed in a future curriculum tailored to the needs of SEN learners. Some schools are addressing this with nurture rooms where children can go for emotional support. Many felt that nurture rooms are essential in all SEN settings and that dedicated resource for this should be prioritised.

Findings indicate participants advocate for modifying the SEN curriculum to better address learners' diverse emotional needs through enhanced nurturing principles. Participants strongly recommended prioritising social-emotional wellbeing and functional life skills. Furthermore, Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) was identified as highly relevant, warranting significantly greater curricular emphasis for these learners.

Waiting lists

A key concern for teaching professionals was that the waiting list for support agencies and therapies are too long and in the interim, teachers are having to manage extreme emotional and behavioural issues. This was echoed among Irish Medium practitioners, who have the additional challenge of very few support services available in Irish. These issues with accessing support agencies have a direct impact on how the curriculum can be delivered and are posing a real challenge for teachers in delivering the statutory minimum entitlement.

Post-19

In certain SEN settings there is a focus on preparing pupils for leaving school through developing functional life skills, however, many comments were made surrounding the lack of post-19 provision and questioned whether the curriculum objectives are truly being met for these learners if there is no ongoing support, or 'lifelong learning' as outlined in the NIC. If there is no support post-19 the aims of the curriculum are not being met as these learners do not have enough opportunity to develop as an individual, or as a contributor to society or the economy. These learners need to be given more opportunities to access their local community, both while in the education system and beyond it, and increased funding and resources are essential to achieve this.

Physical space

A major issue which is having a direct impact on the ability to deliver the curriculum surrounds the lack of space within SEN settings. In addition, as stated above, many schools are lacking the space for a nurture room which virtually all participants believed is essential in a SEN setting to allow learners to have the opportunity to regulate their emotions in a safe space.

Staffing

The lack of qualified classroom assistants was highlighted as a major issue and hinderance in how teachers can deliver the curriculum.³ This issue encompasses the lack of classroom

³ See [A profile of Classroom Assistants in Northern Ireland - Ulster University](#)

assistants as well as their availability. Participants also pointed to instances where curriculum activities were difficult to access due to a lack of staffing and other resources, such as swimming lessons for SEN learners.

There were also comments regarding pay rates and training for classroom assistants which sometimes need to be accessed in their personal time.

Teacher Professional Learning (TPL)

Across all three groups of participants, the lack and nature of specialist training was highlighted as a hinderance in delivering the curriculum in a SEN setting, as well as working in a SEN environment overall.

Clustering

Another form of professional development participants felt they would benefit from is clustering and shared resources. This is where schools come together to share resource and expertise with the aim of improving educational quality and efficiency. Participants felt this could be invaluable to them and encourage an increased level of consistency in terms of learning and assessment of SEN children.

Specialist Provision in Mainstream (SPiM)

It is important to note that only a small number of Specialist Settings in Mainstream (SPiMs) were able to attend the consultation, largely due to limited capacity.

Among the SPiMs represented, some reported extreme diversity of need within individual classes. Teachers described classes where variations in age, ability, and behaviour made delivering the curriculum challenging.

SPiMs are trying to recreate the ethos of Special Schools.

Some teachers often feel like mainstream colleagues view them as the experts in all aspects of SEN, which can lead to extra pressure and stress.

Irish Medium

While all participants noted several barriers to effective curriculum implementation, the Irish Medium Education cohort face specific additional barriers. The most prevalent barrier surrounds the lack of resources for learners with SEN available in Irish language. This lack of resource encompasses both learning and assessment tools available in Irish language, which participants also noted as having a direct impact on how they can optimise the flexibility within the NIC.

Teachers are spending copious additional hours in their own time translating materials. This group feel that this is an unnecessary additional burden and hindrance to effective curriculum implementation and need more Irish learning and assessment materials. There was a strong desire for assessment resources to be made available in Irish, as teachers are currently having to use assessments from the Republic of Ireland due to the lack of assessment tools in Irish available.

In addition, as mentioned previously, the fact that there are no Irish speaking educational psychologists or occupational therapists in Northern Ireland is proving a real issue among this group. Participants noted that children requiring this support are losing true immersion due to having access to only English-speaking support therapies, in addition to the lengthy wait times. As a result, IME practitioners often feel like they have to adopt the additional role of a speech and language therapist, for example, when they are not equipped to do so. This is adding further pressure on an already stressful situation within the IME SEN sector.

When considering the issues for this sector it is important to also read the [Major Research Report on Special Educational Needs](#) in Irish-medium Education by Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta.

4.0 Learning and Assessment

This section outlines points of discussion raised by participants regarding the suitability of the existing learning and assessment frameworks within the NIC for SEN learners.

Non-Linear Learning

Participants highlighted that traditional assessment models, which assume linear learning progression, often fail to reflect the reality of SEN learning. Instead, children, especially those with SEN, frequently exhibit non-linear or lateral learning, developing skills across various domains, and may experience learning regressions. Such non-linear learning, participants noted, is often missed by current assessment methods, and can therefore lead to misunderstandings regarding children's abilities.

Furthermore, participants expressed concerns about parental expectations for SEN learners to complete mainstream examinations. The important consideration here is the diversity within SEN. For instance, participants observed that most learners in special schools will not complete GCSEs or A levels, but some will. Another group will also be able to complete entry level qualifications and non-general qualifications that assess young people who may be working below Level 1 and 2 or who can demonstrate their knowledge and skills through a different type of assessment. This was raised in relation to the limited range of English and Maths qualifications. The majority though will not be capable of sitting any qualifications at all. It was argued that, in such cases, there should be an acknowledgement of these pupils' learning through an award such as the PEER Awards, such as has been recently piloted by CCEA.

Key Stage Structuring and "Progression"

Reflecting the understanding that SEN children frequently learn in a non-linear fashion, focus group participants expressed significant concerns about the suitability of the Key Stage structure and the very term "progression" itself. They argued that these concepts, which imply a steady, upward trajectory, often fail to accurately represent the learning experiences of SEN learners.

This mismatch can cause significant emotional distress for learners, teachers, and parents. For instance, informing a parent that their 15-year-old child is performing at a Key Stage 1 level can be profoundly upsetting.

Moreover, participants felt that the term "progression" is often unhelpful, and potentially harmful, within the context of SEN education. They emphasised that current Key Stage structuring can fail to capture the unique patterns of learning and development exhibited by SEN children, and that this crucial aspect of their education needs a structure that better acknowledges non-linear learning.

Progress Test in English and Progress Test in Mathematics

Progress Test in English (PTE) and Progress Test in Mathematics (PTM) are among the mostly commonly used commercial standardised tests used in schools locally. But several participants raised the question: are Progress Test in English (PTE) and Progress Test in Mathematics (PTM) genuinely beneficial for SEN learners, or are they too high level to be consistently useful assessment methods for SEN? There are no suitable alternatives available for learners with SEN which leaves a gap in provision.

Q Skills and Quest for learning

Participants suggested that the Q Skills assessment framework, while valuable, could be enhanced by further incrementalism of its levels. This would allow for the identification and documentation of smaller, more subtle progressions that, while seemingly minor, represent substantial achievements for individual SEN children. By acknowledging these individualised achievements, teachers can foster a more supportive and inclusive learning environment for SEN children, promoting their self-esteem and encouraging continued growth.

Wide range of available assessment resources and methods

Participants described the current state of SEN assessment as somewhat fragmented, with schools drawing from a wide range of resources. While certain tools, such as Q Skills, were identified as prominent and frequently used, participants emphasised the reliance on a diverse array of assessment methods, encompassing both diagnostic and skills-based approaches. They acknowledged that this variety is essential to accurately capture the diverse achievements of SEN pupils. However, they also highlighted that this lack of standardisation creates significant challenges, particularly, in terms of a potential lack of consistency in use across settings and a lack of overarching quality control.

Participants also pointed out that, with the exception of Quest for learning and Q Skills, many assessment resources employed in SEN settings are not designed with the NIC in mind. Consequently, they may not accurately reflect the NIC's aims and objectives.

Cost of resources

As mentioned, participants identified a significant lack of uniformity in assessment practices across the SEN sector. This disparity is exacerbated by resource inequalities, with some schools able to afford expensive standardised assessment tools while others are forced to create their own, relying heavily on teacher judgement. This lack of resource equality is particularly problematic for Irish Medium (IME) schools.

IME schools require diagnostic assessments in Irish, which are largely unavailable. As a result, teachers are compelled to develop their own assessments and rely on their professional judgment. This situation underscores the urgent need for greater uniformity and equitable access to assessment resources across the SEN sector, especially for IME schools requiring assessments in Irish.

Observational Skills

One critical issue raised during participant discussions was the importance of high standard observational skills and, problematically, the inconsistency in how teachers conduct and document observational assessments. This variability in interpretation and recording can lead to unreliable data and hinder accurate progress tracking. To address this, participants claimed that there is a clear need for enhanced quality assurance measures, ensuring teachers are consistently applying assessment criteria and interpreting information. Crucially, improved training in observational skills is paramount.

The Future of Assessment in SEN

Participants advocated for a system that effectively reflects small progressions with a low level of prescription. This could involve small tariff assessments for basic skills, coupled with open comment sections to elaborate on individual achievements and nuances. Furthermore, they emphasised the importance of assessing personal, social, and emotional skills alongside traditional academic measures like literacy and numeracy.

Regarding recognition and rewards, participants requested the development of similar systems to the PEER awards for special school learners.

5.0 Resources

This section includes points of discussion raised by participants regarding the purchase, provision and use of SEN educational resources, supplied by both CCEA and external providers.

CCEA Resources: Q Skills and Quest for learning

Participants generally expressed appreciation for the assessment resources provided by CCEA, namely Q Skills and Quest for learning. All participants were familiar with the Q Skills levels framework, and the majority reported using it extensively within their classrooms. As previously mentioned, some participants suggested that the Q Skills levels could benefit from even greater granularity to reflect more incremental learning.

Wide range of resources used

Participants observed accessing and using a remarkably extensive array of SEN educational resources. The wide availability of these resources was viewed by participants as having both advantages and disadvantages. A key benefit was that, due to the vast majority of resources existing online, accessing resources was generally straightforward, even if costs were often involved. Conversely, the downside of this broad availability was the perceived lack of quality control. Participants indicated that the sheer volume of resources often made it challenging to discern their quality and effectiveness. They suggested that a mechanism to guide them towards the most suitable resources (e.g., a forum or a hub) would significantly reduce the time and effort spent individually searching.

Another drawback raised regarding the broad availability of resources was the potential for inconsistent application, leading to disparities both within and across schools. Furthermore, some participants observed that SEN resources provided by external suppliers do not always align with the requirements of the NIC – and that this is a particularly critical issue in the case of assessment materials.

To address the challenges associated with the wide availability of resources, participants suggested greater coordination both across schools and at a systemic level. They questioned why, given the common usage of certain resources, more effort could not be directed towards prioritising these resources and ensuring their consistently effective implementation within SEN classrooms.

Cost

Participants highlighted the considerable expenditure by schools on resources sourced from external providers.

Time

Participants consistently reported dedicating a significant amount of time to creating or adapting teaching resources to better accommodate the diverse learning needs within SEN classrooms. They noted that commercially available resources frequently require substantial modification to be effective for specific SEN learners, a level of adaptation often underestimated by external stakeholders who may assume resources are readily usable. Participants suggested that these additional time demands need greater recognition at a system-level to understand that increased resource provision, often considered a straightforward solution, is not simply the case.

Irish Medium

It is accepted that there are challenges in the provision of suitable learning and assessment resources for SEN available in the Irish language. Consequently, many teachers are required to either develop their own materials or translate existing English resources into Irish. Both of these approaches place an additional burden on teachers, contributing to increased stress and potential burnout.

In addition to the lack of resources for IM teachers, there is also a critical shortage of specialised diagnostic tests. While this issue is outside CCEA's remit, this deficiency impedes the timely identification and support of specific learning difficulties among learners in IM settings.

Appendix 2

The range of modifications offered across all exam series for 2024-2025 includes:

- **Modified Visual 18pt bold (A4)**
- **Modified Visual 24pt bold (A4)**
- **Modified Enlarged Print (MEP) 24pt bold (A3)**
- **Modified Enlarged Print (MEP) 36pt bold (A3)**
- **Tactile diagrams**
- **Braille Papers**
- **Modified Language (where necessary)**
- **Transcripts of listening examination/moving image arts examination**
- **Non-Interactive electronic PDF of question paper:** *(a digital PDF version of our standard paper or modified paper, made available to centres for download via CCEA's Secure Portal 60 minutes before scheduled exam – for use with candidates who, for example, prefer or need to view a PDF version of the paper onscreen or who may require the standard paper printed onto a particular colour of paper)*

In the Summer **2025** exam series, CCEA received **4506*** individual candidate requests (via the JCQ portal) for a modified examination paper. A total of **95** were cancelled after processing. Detailed breakdown as follows:

Summer 2025 Series	Number of examination components provided	Number of Candidate Entries
Modified Visual A4 18pt	207	787
Modified Visual A4 24pt	155	269
Modified Visual A3 24pt and 36pt (MEP)	127	206
Modified Language (ML)	159 components requested. 3/159 provided based on BATOD advice/recommendation.	575 requested a ML paper. 7/575 provided with ML based on BATOD advice/recommendation.
Non-Interactive PDF (of a standard paper)	250 <i>tbc</i>	2497
MV/ML	15	21
MV/IM	23	52
Braille	16	20
Transcript	12	27

Correct as of 12/11/2025

*The total number of individual modified requests has increased from **1814** in **2019** to **4506** in **2025** which is an overall **increase of 148.4%**.

Centres submit their requests by a specified deadline to enable these question papers to be produced on time for the scheduled examination.

Appendix 3

Below are the specific Conditions in the GCoR which relate to access and inclusion:

Condition D2: Accessibility of qualifications

- D2.1** An awarding organisation must ensure that it complies with the requirements of Equalities Law in relation to each of the qualifications which it makes available.
- D2.2** An awarding organisation must monitor qualifications which it makes available for any feature which could disadvantage a group of Learners who share a particular Characteristic.
- D2.3** Where an awarding organisation has identified such a feature, it must –
 - (a) remove any disadvantage which is unjustifiable, and
 - (b) maintain a record of any disadvantage which it believes to be justifiable, setting out the reasons why in its opinion the disadvantage is justifiable.

Condition E4 Ensuring an assessment is fit for purpose and can be delivered

- E4.2** In designing such an assessment, an awarding organisation must in addition ensure that the assessment –
 - (d) permits Reasonable Adjustments to be made, while minimising the need for them.

Condition G2 Language of the assessment

- G2.1** An awarding organisation must ensure that all Learners taking its qualifications are assessed in English in England, and English or Irish in Northern Ireland, except to the extent that the use of another language is permitted by this Condition.
- G2.2** A Learner taking a qualification may be assessed in British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language where it is permitted by an awarding organisation for the purpose of Reasonable Adjustment.
- G2.3** A Learner taking a qualification may be assessed in any other language where it is one of the primary objectives of the qualification –
 - (a) for the Learner to gain knowledge of, skills in, and understanding of that language, or
 - (b) to support a role in the workplace, providing that proficiency in English or Irish is not required for the role supported by the qualification.
- G2.4** Where an awarding organisation makes available a qualification in more than one language, the awarding organisation must take all reasonable steps to ensure that assessments in different languages ensure a consistent Level of Demand for Learners.

Condition G3 Use of language and Stimulus Materials

- G3.4** An awarding organisation must take all reasonable steps to ensure that no assessment for a qualification which it makes available contains language or Stimulus Materials which could lead a group of Learners who share a common attribute or circumstance to experience – because of that attribute or circumstance – an unreasonable disadvantage in the level of attainment that they are able to demonstrate in the assessment.

Condition G6: Arrangements for Reasonable Adjustments

- G6.1** An awarding organisation must, in accordance with Equalities Law, have in place clear arrangements for making Reasonable Adjustments in relation to qualifications which it makes available.
- G6.2** An awarding organisation must publish details of its arrangements for making Reasonable Adjustments, which must include details as to –
- (a) how a Learner qualifies for a Reasonable Adjustment, and
 - (b) what Reasonable Adjustment will be made.

Condition G9 Delivering the Assessment

- G9.2** An awarding organisation must ensure that, on delivery of every assessment for a qualification that it makes available, the assessment – permits Reasonable Adjustments to be made, while minimising the need for them.

Condition I1 Appeals process

- I1.1** An awarding organisation must establish, maintain and comply with an appeals process in relation to all qualifications which it makes available, which must provide for the appeal of decisions regarding Reasonable Adjustments and Special Consideration.