



Northern Ireland Education Committee: Inquiry into Strategic Review of Current SEN Provision & Transformation Agenda

Written evidence submitted by the Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP)

Executive summary

- Educational psychologists (EPs) are a highly skilled and essential element of the nation's specialist workforce
- In Northern Ireland the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) provides psychological information, advice, training and guidance for families, carers and school staff, and works with schools, special schools and specialist classes to help identify any barriers to learning which a child or young person may be experiencing
- To contribute to the delivery of this plan, the Department of Education must include EPs in the SEN Delivery reform unit (through seconded posts and on steering groups)
- We welcome the pilot for an enhanced model of educational psychology focused on early intervention and **believe it is vital that EPs are involved in its development.**
- The advisory committee to the Curriculum Taskforce does not include an educational psychologist, and we believe that this is a missed opportunity. EPs will be fundamental to both the delivery of the TransformEd policy agenda and the SEN Reform agenda and so **they must also be involved in discussions about how these strategies are implemented.**
- For those children and young people with a statement, there should be **greater clarity on how objectives and provision will be measured, monitored and reviewed** by schools and the Education Authority
- The Department of Education's plan for a workforce strategy is positive but **should be preceded by a simple mapping exercise** to determine the current SEN workforce and what the future SEN workforce should look like
- Schools, parents and those at all levels of partner organisations and community groups involved with SEN need **more clarity on the Code of Practice** and the graduated response
- EPs play a key role in deciding the type of provision required for children undergoing statutory assessment and where a special school placement is required, this process should be as timely and smooth as possible.



Introduction and background

The Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP) is the professional association and trade union for over 4,000 educational psychologists (EPs) across the UK. Our members are a highly skilled and essential element of the nation's specialist workforce, working collaboratively with many other professionals to provide expertise across the education sector as well as offering a psychological understanding of education and child development in other sectors, such as health, social care and youth justice.

In Northern Ireland most educational psychologists are employed by the Education Authority Northern Ireland (EANI) and work for the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) providing psychological expertise to schools, children and young people and their families, at home in the classroom and within the community. The EPS provides information, advice, training and guidance for families, carers and school staff, and works with schools and settings, special schools and specialist classes to help identify any barriers to learning which a child or young person may be experiencing.

The EPS supports schools with:

- Staff development and professional learning
- Emotional wellbeing of children
- Strong family partnerships
- Systemic improvement aligned with school development plans and SEND Action Plans

The EPS is made up of a Head of Service, 104 full time equivalent (FTE) EPs, three Principal Educational Psychologists (PEPs) and 12 Senior EPs. In addition, there are 36 Assistant EPs who work alongside and support qualified EPs.

Challenges facing SEN support systems

We have organised this section of our response under the **four pillars** of the Department for Education's Special Educational Needs Reform Agenda Delivery Plan 2025-2030, assessing the challenges for our profession, as well as the extent to which they are being addressed.

1. Right Support (high quality, efficient and effective support that is evidence-based)

EPs are trained to Doctorate level and have expertise in all areas of the SEN Code of Practice which sets out the statutory framework for identifying, assessing, and providing for children with special needs. We are pleased that the SEN Reform Agenda Delivery Plan recognises the role of EPs in early intervention and outlines a pilot for an enhanced model of educational psychology focused on early intervention. We know that our profession can have a significant impact in this area and the AEP would like to work closely with the Department to help inform the model's development.



Within the area of statutory assessments, we feel that there should be greater monitoring of the impact on children and young people with a statement through a more robust annual review process. The Delivery Plan outlines that the input from EPs will be applied in a more timely way which is to be welcomed. However, it is not clear how objectives and provision will be measured, monitored and reviewed by schools and the Education Authority. The Delivery Plan references 'efficient data capture and insight' but we would welcome further detail on this and for EPs to be involved in discussions about how children and young people's outcomes and progress can be benchmarked and recorded.

Within the Delivery Plan there is a commitment to digitisation of the statutory assessment and review process. This has already begun within the EPS, whole system at stage 3 goes live not a pilot but subject to continuous review project focusing on developing a rights-driven, transparent system for managing statutory SEN processes. Benefits include clear visibility of timelines for children and families, accurate forecasting of demand for specialist provision by the Education Authority and the promotion of early intervention by EPs. Whilst the new system remains at an early stage there has been some positive initial feedback and it is hoped that a phased rollout will begin for all preschool children with complex SEN after April 2026.

The Delivery Plan rightly acknowledges the importance of implementing the recommendations of the curriculum review for children with SEN. Following the strategic review of the Northern Ireland curriculum, the Curriculum Taskforce was established to take forward the recommended review of the curriculum. The advisory committee to the taskforce does not include an educational psychologist, and we believe that this is a missed opportunity. EPs will be fundamental to the delivery of the TransformEd policy agenda, and so they must also be involved in discussions about how the strategy is implemented.

The Delivery Plan references publication and implementation of an Inclusive System Development plan and guidance for the creation of SEN-friendly environments. We note that the EA are not included as delivery partners, which is a missed opportunity. The EPS is well placed to contribute to this area, for example sharing evidence-based interventions.

2. Right People (having confident and highly skilled teaching and support staff who can access additional support to complement and enhance their practice)

Educational psychologists provide five core functions as defined by the Currie Matrix, (**Consultation, Assessment, Intervention, Training and Research**¹). EPs work at several levels: **Child and Family, Schools and Setting, Local and National level**. They model and implement effective interventions and change programmes to support students' learning and wellbeing. They suggest types of support that help children and young people with SEN and so are a crucial resource for schools to access.

However, one of the biggest challenges facing our profession is a lack of capacity. There simply aren't enough EPs to ensure that children and young people get the support they need. Across the EPS there are 104 FTE educational psychologists supporting over 1116 schools and settings.² We are encouraged that the SEN Delivery Plan commits to the publication and

¹ https://www.napep.info/files/ugd/6b4f08_d7a5c1123d3644df93271fbb6d72e2b7.pdf

² <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-northern-ireland-summary-data>



implementation of a workforce strategy, including an increase in the educational psychology workforce.

The AEP is keen to work with the Department of Education in supporting the development of the workforce strategy, and as a first step we believe a simple mapping exercise should be carried out to determine the current SEN workforce and what the future SEN workforce should look like. This would determine what is needed as a baseline across all professions before exploring how it might be developed and taken forward in the future.

From an EP perspective we are keen to work with the Department to ensure that the planned increase in numbers delivers what is required and does so in a timeframe that is achievable. The AEP recently commissioned the University of Manchester to quantify what future EP capacity is required in England. The results highlighted that the workforce needs to be doubled as a minimum, and we are using this evidence to support our call for an increase in EPs in the forthcoming Schools White Paper for England. In Northern Ireland we hope to replicate this research in 2026 and strongly recommend it should be used to support the development of the planned workforce strategy. We would welcome early discussions with the Department on how this can be taken forward.

3. *Right Time (effective early identification of needs and early intervention to meet those needs)*

The Delivery Plan rightly prioritises early intervention and a focus on the early years. EPs are specialists and highly trained in child development and the application of psychology for children and young people, so we are keen to work preventatively at the early intervention stage. EPs have the skills to deliver training and can work across settings to help enhance their universal support, which can allow issues to be identified and addressed at a much earlier stage and before needs become significant.

One barrier to delivering early intervention support and training is the lack of capacity described above. In addition, we believe that schools, parents and those at all levels of partner organisations and community groups involved with SEN need more clarity and guidance on the Code of Practice and the graduated response, where increasing levels of support are provided according to need.

Table 1 shows the number of closed cases recorded from Stage 1-3 of the Code of Practice during the academic year 2024-2025. EPs support schools across all three stages of the Code of Practice:

- **Stage 1:** school-based consultation, assessment/ intervention,
- **Stage 2:** monitoring and reviewing, contributing psychological advice to statutory assessments
- **Stage 3:** Statutory review and consultation.

Table 1 (Breakdown of 14099 closed cases)

School based Consultation	Stage 2 Assessment	Stage 2 Review	Statutory Assessment	Statutory Advice	Statutory Reviews
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				Parental	
4576	2726	264	3681	1013	1839

For those children and young people with the most complex needs, some level of statutory support will be necessary. However, it is important to ensure that the education system is flexible and inclusive enough so that statements are only needed for a small number of children and young people with the most complex needs.

4. Right Place (appropriate and timely placements that effectively meet the needs of the child and provide an appropriate learning environment)

EPs play a key role in deciding the type of provision required for children undergoing statutory assessment and have open and honest conversations with parents, schools and the Statutory Assessment and Review Service (SARS) in this process. Where possible, mainstream schooling should be the first option for all children, and where a special school/specialist placement is required, we support the approach set out in the Delivery Plan to make this process as timely and smooth as possible. Delays to allocating places have a detrimental effect on the child or young person's learning and their wellbeing as well as resulting in additional stress for parents.

Examples where the input from educational psychologists is having an impact

Below are some brief, best practice examples where educational psychologists are already making an impact. We are willing to speak to the committee directly to give further evidence and stories of our best work.

Table 2: Examples of best practice and planned projects

Project	Aims	Impact
Collaborative working with Local IMPACT Teams (LITs)	Early discussions regarding the benefits of joined-up working, where psychological expertise is used to inform evidence-based practice. This integrated approach will reduce duplication, enhance consistency, and strengthen the overall offer to schools and other educational settings. By embedding EPS within multi-agency planning and delivery, the service hopes to contribute	<i>The Specialist Projects team was only set up in September 2025, so they are in the process of gathering evidence and data to report on the impact.</i>

	to more coherent support pathways.	
EA Connect Digital Case Management	Introduce a rights-driven, transparent system for managing statutory SEN processes	Digitisation of all statutory casework Improved tracking and accountability Enhanced communication with parents and professionals
Early Years Early Intervention	EPS to lead on the development of solution focused hubs as part of our early intervention offer	Through regular consultation surgeries, drop-ins, and early years solution-focused hubs led by EPs, emerging needs are identified early and addressed collaboratively with practitioners.
Early Notification of SEN via HSCTS Initial focus: Children with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD)	The EA, in collaboration with Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs), is progressing work to ensure timely identification and planning for children with complex SEN. This initiative responds to the changing profile of need and increasing demand for specialist provision. Objective: Enable EA to plan capacity and resources effectively by receiving early information on children with complex needs.	Pilot Project: to launch: January 2026 Expansion: All preschool children with complex SEN, including Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD) and multi-faceted needs following completion of pilot. HSCTs will notify EA of children identified through health pathways, supporting area planning and reducing delays in statutory assessment. Complete pilot evaluation by April 2026. Develop phased rollouts for all preschool children with complex SEN.

Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA)	EPs use consultation to empower schools and families to co-develop reintegration plans, reducing reliance on formal assessment	The EPS has delivered training and interventions to schools and individual pupils (at home and in school)
Joined up working LIT teams, Other EA services such as Education Welfare, Social Care, Health such as Community Paediatricians, Occupational Health, Speech and Language Therapists	The EPS continues to strengthen joined up working. These partnerships enable the sharing of expertise, alignment of evidence-informed practices, and development of consistent approaches to emerging challenges.	<i>The Specialist Projects team was only set up in September 2025, so they are in the process of gathering evidence and data to report on the impact.</i>
Neuro-affirmative practice	The Educational Psychology Service is leading on the development and implementation of neuro-affirmative practice, underpinned by a strengths-based approach that recognises and values neurodiversity. This work promotes inclusive, person-centred support and ensures that psychological input reflects current best practice. EPS is committed to embedding a consistent approach across children and young people's services.	Training has been rolled out and is informing design and implementation of intervention programmes. EPS reports and psychological advice are neuro-affirmative
School staff wellbeing project	To promote the emotional health & wellbeing of school communities by supporting staff in creating a culture that emphasises the importance of staff wellbeing, to support school staff in developing a	In 2024-25 54 participants from 46 schools attended a series of webinars and follow up cluster group meetings. School Wellbeing Leads were positive about support received with creating a

	comprehensive, user-friendly staff wellbeing policy as a component of the school development plan and to develop a peer support network for staff wellbeing facilitated through the termly cluster groups across NI	school wellbeing policy and discussions with other schools on what had worked for them
Strategic Development Workstream	The EPS are gathering themes from consultations to inform area-wide planning and policy (e.g. mental health strategy, SEND priorities), with strategic workstreams enabling targeted systemic change.	<i>The Specialist Projects team was only set up in September 2025, so they are in the process of gathering evidence and data to report on the impact.</i>
Special Schools	Use of consultation to foster reflective practice and problem-solving among Special school staff, including systemic sessions that promote inclusive strategies and strengthen professional confidence. This has been at a time the profile of need has been changing in these settings.	All Special Schools have a link EP and a link EP as part of the Specialist Project team
Training & Intervention Two of our core functions are to offer and deliver training to EPS, schools, settings and parents	To promote and deliver training and interventions as part of a graduated response to the Code of Practice	Examples of training and interventions delivered in schools/settings and homes where children are unable to attend school Lego based therapy (40 + schools) Precision teaching (40+ schools) Restorative Practice Appreciative Inquiry (EPS and schools as part of pilot) Cognitive Behaviour Therapy Selective Mute Managing Distressed Behaviours (Special schools)



Conclusion

The SEN Reform Agenda Delivery Plan is an ambitious plan to offer better support for children and young people with SEN. The EPS has actioned and are on track to achieve some of the early actions such as digitisation and streamlining of the statutory assessment and review process. Educational psychologists are a central part of the education workforce, and the AEP is keen to provide support to the committee's inquiry wherever possible. We are also ready to work with the Department of Education to support implementation of (and refining) the Delivery Plan over the next five years to ensure it has a long-lasting impact on the educational attainment of all children and young people.