

## **NICIE Response to NI Assembly Education Committee SEN Reform Agenda**

### **Introduction**

The SEN reform agenda as laid out in the Delivery Plan 2025-2030, is, overall, a very positive and commendable document. The vision to make SEN 'Truly Equal, Valuably Different' is something that educational professionals have been seeking for some considerable time. Our focus within SEN has always been to improve support for all our young people, regardless of their age, gender or ability, particularly given the increasing complexity of presenting needs of our young people. The Executive's (draft) priority ('Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs'), clearly lays out a long term and strategic approach to fulfilling this aim, starting at early years and ensuring continuance of supports through to the end of a young person's educational career. It is pleasing to note the need for a more collaborative approach with a variety of departments who are tasked with supporting families and young people, as this is something educational professionals have been recommending for some considerable time. There can be no 'one-size fits all' approach to this work and a considerable number of inputs are urgently needed, some of which we have noted in the accompanying response. The two most important factors in ensuring delivery of this reform are time and finance – time to carefully plan and monitor any changes through perhaps a more specific 'piloted programme'; and ensuring adequate finances are in place in advance of any changes. In preparing this response NICIE has consulted with several school leaders as well as utilising our own experience of supporting the wider SEN inclusion agenda.

### **Integrated School Context**

There are currently 76 Integrated Schools (5 Nursery, 50 Primary and 21 Post-Primary) educating 28,699 pupils, including those with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Table 1 below outlines the SEN pupil profile (for pupils Stages 1-3 on the SEN Code of Practice) across phases for Integrated, non-Integrated and all schools in NI.

**Table 1: Numbers and percentages (rounded to 1 decimal place) of SEN children educated in Integrated schools and comparison to SEN pupils in non-Integrated schools, and all schools (2024/25 DE school census data).**

| School Phase                                                  | Total No. Integrated schools | Total No. Pupils across all management types | Total No. Pupils in Integrated schools               | Total No. SEN Pupils in Integrated schools (%Stage 1-3)<br>1         | Total No. SEN Pupils in non-Integrated schools (%Stage 1-3)<br>1          | Total No. SEN Pupils in <u>all</u> schools (%Stage 1-3)<br>1                |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Nursery Schools</b>                                        | 5 *                          | <b>5,714</b><br>(100%)                       | <b>397</b><br>(6.9% of total nursery pupils)         | <b>49</b><br>(12.3% of pupils in Integrated nursery schools)         | <b>872</b><br>(15.5% of pupils in non-Integrated nursery schools)         | <b>894</b><br>(15.6% of pupils in all nursery schools)                      |
| <b>Primary Schools and Primary Schools with Nursery Units</b> | 50                           | <b>177,543</b><br>(100%)                     | <b>12,904</b><br>(7.3% of total primary pupils)      | <b>2,525</b><br>(19.6% of pupils in Integrated primary schools)      | <b>32,172</b><br>(19.5% of pupils in non-Integrated primary schools)      | <b>34,697</b><br>(19.5% of pupils in all primary schools and nursery units) |
| <b>Post Primary Schools</b>                                   | 21                           | <b>156,889</b><br>(100%)                     | <b>15,398</b><br>(9.8% of total post-primary pupils) | <b>3,708</b><br>(24.1% of pupils in Integrated post-primary schools) | <b>22,770</b><br>(16.1% of pupils in non-Integrated post-primary schools) | <b>26,478</b><br>(16.9% of pupils in all post primary schools)              |
| <b>All Phases</b>                                             | 76 *                         | <b>340,173</b>                               | <b>28,699</b><br>(8.4% of total pupils)              | <b>6,282</b><br>(21.9% of pupils in Integrated schools)              | <b>55,787</b><br>(17.9% of pupils in non-Integrated schools)              | <b>62,069</b><br>(18.2% of pupils in all schools)                           |

**Notes:** Data is inclusive of pupils in Specialist Provision Classes (SPiMs). This data does not include pupils in Special Schools.

\* includes 3 Nursery schools which transformed to Controlled Integrated status from September 2025.

1. Data in DE school census is redacted where cases are less than 5 or under rules of disclosure. As a result, these figures are approximate and lower than the actual numbers of SEN students within schools in NI.

- It is significant that 18.2% of all pupils in all schools in NI are Stages 1-3 on the SEN Code of Practice.
- It is notable that 21.9% of pupils in Integrated Schools are Stages 1-3 on the SEN Code of Practice, compared to 17.9% of pupils in non-Integrated Schools.
- It is also notable that 24.1% of post-primary pupils in Integrated Schools are Stages 1-3 on the SEN Code of Practice, compared to 16.1% of pupils in non-Integrated Schools.

Within this data, there are 8% of pupils educated in Integrated Schools across all phases who are Stage 3 on the SEN Code of Practice, compared to 6% of pupils educated in non-Integrated schools. This rises to 10% for pupils who are Stage 3 in Integrated Post-Primary Schools, compared to 6% of pupils in non-Integrated Post-Primary schools.

In consultation with Integrated Schools, NICIE are aware that the data above does not give the full picture of what schools are experiencing in terms of supporting children and young people with additional needs. Although there are pupils with a statement, there are many who have not yet received a statement, and many more who are not yet on a waiting list to be assessed. This is particularly prevalent in early years settings where children are entering formal education for the first time. These children and young people without formalised statements still require high levels of day-to-day support, putting additional pressure on an already overstretched workforce.

### **Early and Priority One Actions**

- Useful to see recognition around the **urgency of reform** in these areas and that there is clarity regarding the need for **sustained funding**.
- The targets defined as immediate are all key areas for consideration and reform. Several of these are in progress – e.g. digitisation, graduated response framework- regular timely **feedback should be sought from practitioners** to ensure the models proposed are fit for purpose, before they embed.
- Implementation of **local IMPACT teams** appears to be a positive strategy – however it remains vital that practitioners should be at the heart of these groups and their remit clear and concise.
- The **role of school leaders** in this reform agenda is not immediately apparent – the SENCo/school principal will be the drivers and champions of this strategy if informed included and motivated to do so.
- **SUBJECT TO FUNDING** – the targets which have been allocated to this section are all inherently pivotal to the success of this strategy and it is a cause for concern that they are highlighted as 'subject to funding'.
- A **pilot for early childhood intervention** is essential in our view and would be a clear starting point for change – what happens if funding is not forthcoming?
- **Speech, language and communication** also should take priority as this area is such a huge area for all schools particularly after the Covid pandemic.
- **Wrap around service development** through play programmes and Nurture approach is also invaluable – profiling the value of the 'outside of school model' in supporting families and young people when they leave school – innovative if it can happen.

**Analysis of 'Right Support' Actions** – High quality, efficient and effective support that is evidenced based:

| Positive Elements                                                                                                                                    | Queries/Concerns                                                                                                                                               |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraged that '<b>Inclusion</b>' is at the heart of this plan – crucial in Integrated schools.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Inclusion and child centredness</b> are at the core of Integrated schools – <b>are opportunities to</b></li> </ul> |

- **'Enhanced in-school support and resources'** - useful as it builds on existing good practice.
- Child centred **'Graduated response framework'** offers useful structure and clarity. Supporting materials are essential.
- **Early Intervention** is a crucial area of focus – continuous cycle and multi professional approach potentially valuable.
- Early years will offer a valuable area of focus – **piloted projects** may be most manageable approach.
- Streamlining of **statutory assessment process and annual review** is very important.
- **Local Impact Teams** – very useful approach providing a multidisciplinary picture of child.
- **Curriculum Review for SEN** – important that **'all young people can access the curriculum'** – schools have many systems in place to ensure this – we feel it important that the agenda builds on these.
- **Whole of Community support** - interesting extension of school input to after school and holiday provision – **Post 16 services** crucial for all involved with these young people, especially families.

**share effective practice** fully embedded?

- How will **in school training** be delivered to **'enhance in school expertise'**?
- Generally positive feedback from schools – **training for all staff essential** and time allocated for this - not wholly dependent on the SENCo.
- Dependence on **'educational psychology sign off'** for all interventions is limiting – Educational Psychologist availability is essential and may not be in place at present.
- **'School hub'** model (whereby essential therapies/interventions are delivered by qualified professionals in school) for multidisciplinary outreach is important to pro-actively consider.
- How will **'increasing parental referrals'** fit in this process?
- Meaningful annual review requires **'all key professionals' availability**, this is currently very variable.
- **Do these teams exist as per 2025 target?** Who will be included in the team?
- To meet this target **resources are needed, and skills set widened.**
- Concern that main curriculum review moves from **skills to content base – we have a concern that these two policies conflict with each other.**

|  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|--|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the Voluntary sector to be included in <b>training programmes</b>?</li> <li>• How will current shortfall in services for <b>Post 16 SEN students</b> be addressed?</li> </ul> |
|--|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

**Analysis of 'Right People' Actions** - Having confident and highly skilled teaching and support staff who can access additional support to complement and enhance their practice.

| Positive Elements                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Queries/Concerns                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Investing in education workforce</b> – this is crucial to start with this commitment to investing in the workforce in our schools, especially front-line practitioners.</li> <li>• <b>Child centred Inclusive Integrated Workforce Planning Framework</b> – positive to see this, aiming to fulfilling the purpose of 'Truly Equal, Valuably Different'.</li> <li>• <b>Supporting inclusion</b> – build on the existing specialities and frameworks in schools. The 'train the trainers' programme is essential, coupled with a coaching/mentoring/inclusion approach.</li> <li>• <b>Health &amp; Education Training programme</b> – something school staff have been recommending for considerable time. This will help to marry the health and education areas to provide 'wrap-around' supports, this is urgently needed.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There will need to be considerable work undertaken in this area, with staff teams, universities, apprenticeships etc, <b>to ensure a suitable strategic training programme from pre-service onwards</b>, including Education Psychologists. How these relate to the terms of reference and framework for Middletown Review will be critical.</li> <li>• What is the progress regarding the <b>'Professional Advisor role'</b>? How will the <b>professional learning needs</b> of all (teachers, LSA/CRA's) be assessed and developed?</li> <li>• Regarding <b>research, design and trialling of inclusion methodologies</b> – perhaps a smaller scale <b>'pilot' programme</b>, would be more beneficial in the next few years targeting geographical areas across NI, thus providing necessary evaluation and sustainable development based on first-hand evidence.</li> <li>• Increasing <b>specialist outreach models</b> will allow for learning and sharing of best practice.</li> </ul> |

|  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|--|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>CRA/LSA's</b> urgently need their <b>employment status, remuneration and progression</b> pathways reviewed to support continuity for children and overall delivery. These practitioners are key to the success of any reform.</li> <li>• There is minimal reference throughout the document about the ever increasing and crucial role of <b>SENCO's</b>. There is an urgent need to develop more <b>area-based networks</b> with mainstream and Special schools SENCO's.</li> <li>• A <b>large-scale investment</b> is required to provide suitable and timely joint <b>education &amp; healthcare professionals training</b>. Careful planning is needed to adequately develop robust links to provide <b>multi-disciplinary child-centred supports</b>.</li> </ul> |
|--|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

**Analysis of 'Right Time' Actions** - Effective early identification of needs and early intervention to meet those needs.

| Positive Elements                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Queries/Concerns                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Focus on Early Years</b> – this is a crucial area of support for highest impact. <b>Very early engagement with parents</b> of SEN children is sensible. An equal playing field in relation to provision is important.</li> <li>• <b>Speech and Language and Communication</b> is a huge area. A toolkit format for speech and language programmes seems the most user-friendly model. <b>Early speech and language programmes</b> are most effective. The unification of Intervention programmes is welcomed, but appropriate training</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This approach requires <b>close collaboration with Health</b> - what mechanisms will make this happen efficiently? Agility at pre-school levels where needs are being identified is crucial - support responses may need to be accelerated as children are typically only in the setting for one school year. <b>Planned specialist primary placement</b> crucial well in advance.</li> <li>• Simple interventions of <b>specialist teams modelling good practice</b> in this area – visiting nurseries or even better as part of school health hubs.</li> </ul> |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>will be essential particularly if is expected that teachers will deliver.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early Intervention in a <b>Nurture Plus</b> approach seems worthwhile - <b>Transitional Support Programme</b> continuity is important so children and young people don't fall through cracks. <b>Interdepartmental co- operation</b> crucial here – <b>passport</b> may be a way to have continuity.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What/who is the focus of the <b>public messaging campaigns</b>?</li> <li>• <b>Co-ordinating therapeutic and educational services</b> may be challenging.</li> <li>• <b>Data sharing</b> is crucial between relevant departments and schools – historically this is not consistent. Support for school leavers will be more effective if there is a <b>consistent programme of intervention</b> from early years onwards.</li> </ul> |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

**Analysis of 'Right Place' Actions** – appropriate and timely placements that effectively meet the needs of the child and provide an appropriate learning environment.

| Positive Elements                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Queries/Concerns                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Role of Special Schools</b> – a very positive step forward, where adequate and focused training of staff will be provided. The inclusion of university/teacher training organisations is crucial in this aspect. District based outreach teams are a very welcome development.</li> <li>• <b>Timely confirmation of school placements</b> – formal data sharing processes, will provide much needed accurate data for all concerned so that the appropriate placement of students is foremost. The urgently needed review of specialist provision in mainstream schools, is very welcome.</li> <li>• <b>Area Planning and Capital Investment</b> – a strategic and proactive approach is much needed, to match the needs of ALL young people in the system and not just the 'lucky few'. Delighted to</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The existing <b>specific challenges with special school setting</b> (Places, Buildings, Expertise and Staffing), would hamper any progress in this area. While the notion of using Special schools as 'hubs' is excellent, the reality is that stretched staff, budget constraints, lack of time/trained staff, may presently be untenable.</li> <li>• Education authorities are aware of the actual numbers of SEN students in the system. It is crucial that a <b>timelier approach to school placements</b> offers is urgently addressed. For example, for move from Primary to Post Primary, this needs to be finalised before end of term 1 of pupils P7 year to allow for adequate planning. There is a <b>disconnect between parental preference/choice and school</b> ability to offer provisions. There needs to be more 'honest' and open discussions between parents</li> </ul> |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>see that the removal of the super-numerary aspect of SEN is being considered, so that schools are better placed to cater for the needs of all students. However, careful consideration should be given to how mainstream schools manage admissions and enrolment for children with SEN.</p> | <p>and education experts on placement suitability. NICIE has significant concerns, particularly at Post Primary, regarding the appropriateness and volume of children with SEN that schools are being asked to enrol. This includes where there is not the physical space and children have to 'sit out' of practical classes on a rotational basis in order meet health and safety regulations. Likewise, concern has been expressed where in the professional view of the school leadership they will not be able to fully meet the needs of the child, but the enrolment is progressed anyway by SARS.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More <b>in-depth area planning</b> is needed involving all schools (selective and non-selective). Education authorities should be projecting the needs far in advance of what happens at present and involving all stakeholders.</li> <li>• <b>Funding</b> is essential to make this strategy work. <b>School building estate and school build handbook</b> urgently needs reviewed based on the changing needs of pupils.</li> </ul> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that the current model of SEN provision has faced huge challenges in the past and most especially in recent years. The issues are many and complex and have been highlighted in this plan. This agenda of reform is huge and requires commitment and leadership from all involved. Particular consideration should be given to the following.

- **Timing crucial – graduated approach?** Given the widespread reform agenda across education, developing the whole scale changes required will need a phased approach. Start small and extend based on actual factual evaluations of targeted programmes across NI. This **must** start at early years and facilitating early identification. Use of pilot models at various stages of the education pathway will ensure the evidence base required for planning will exist.

- Too **many unanswered questions** regarding Year 1 enabling actions (page 5 of the SEN Reform Agenda Delivery Plan) - how can we have confidence in the approach and the agenda for reform, if the year one actions are unclear? Credibility will be key.
- **Urgent need to rebuild confidence** in the system (teachers, parents and pupils) - need to start right back at teacher training approaches. Further development of parental understanding of the process is also essential.
- **Use data from February 2025 report**
  - Page 7 section 4 'despite rising expenditure, outcomes for children and young people with SEN have not shown any marked improvement (£622m for 24-25).
  - Comparisons with England (Page 9 footnote – NI has 2.5% more statemented pupils than England); 29% increase in SEN over 2 decades; 134% increase in pupils with a Statement.
- The high level of aspiration in this plan is commendable, and it addresses many of the problem areas families and schools face – however the **funding is a crucial area** – schools will need ongoing meaningful support and commitment from DE.
- **Ask the professionals** at the 'coal face' what they need. We feel further engagement with schools is required.
- **Joined up Service Delivery** – Supporting children with SEN will require cross Departmental and cross-organisational collaboration. The current boundaries of service providers (e.g. EA Localities, HSCT areas etc) are not coterminous. This can lead to a disparity in services based on your geographic location. The systems must enable focus on meeting the needs of the child and not on administrative or service boundaries.

**Council for Integrated Education**  
**December 2025**