

**From the Office of the Permanent Secretary
IAN SNOWDEN**



Department for the
Economy

An Roinn

Geilleagair

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Dear Mr McCrossan

MEMORANDUM OF REPLY: DEVELOPING THE SKILLS FOR NORTHERN IRELANDS FUTURE

Thank you for your letter of 4 November in response to my Memorandum of Reply (MoR). I am happy to provide further clarification to assist the Committee with its work in this important policy area.

1. Data Sharing (Recommendation 6)

I can assure the Committee that there is no reluctance from any of the Departments involved in this work to take appropriate action to put an agreement in place. However, it is not possible to commit to an exact timeframe or subsequent actions without a thorough analysis of the scale of the work and associated resource commitments. It may assist the Committee if I provide some further explanation of the complexities which we are seeking to resolve.

Various levels or categories of information are required by different parts of the system at different times, often for very distinct reasons.

- Departments need population level data to monitor progress and to understand growth trends, projections, changing profiles of need and so on to help inform future planning and resourcing requirements.
- Our Arms-Length Bodies - the Education Authority, the Health and Social Care Trusts, the Further Education Colleges - need a more granular level of detail to help them plan for and make operational provision at sub regional level, taking

account of more detailed issues around capacity, accommodation, transport, geographical considerations and so on.

- A person-specific level of information exchange is then required in relation to individuals and their unique needs to enable a smooth transition as they move from one provision (school) to another (College, Training Provider, Day Opportunities provider, or others).

The multi-layered nature of these requirements mean that a single agreement is unlikely to be able to meet the needs of all parties, nor is it likely to be able to satisfy the requirement in the legislation that data is only shared for a “specified, explicit and legitimate purpose”. Rather, it is likely that multiple agreements are required and that these will each involve different organisations within the overall ecosystem. The requirements of the legislation mean that we need to understand and fully unpack the issues carefully.

There are existing data sharing agreements in place between, amongst others, the Education Authority and the Health Trusts, and between the Education Authority and the Careers Service. We hear anecdotal feedback that the existing arrangements are not as effective as they could be. Understanding these issues is key and we need a detailed cross-departmental assessment of the issues and how best to address them.

We will scope the work that needs to be undertaken through a working group under the Department for Education’s SEN Delivery Plan Operational Implementation Oversight Group. The organisations that we are likely to need involved in this work include:

Department	Policy area
Department of Education	SEN Reform Officials 16-18 Policy Officials Analytical Services
Department of Health	Learning Disability Policy Officials, Strategic Policy and Performance Group, Analytical Services
Department for the Economy	Post-School SEN Policy Officials Analytical Services Careers Service
Department of Finance	NISRA

Department	Policy area
Education Authority Health and Social Care Trusts	
Further Education Colleges	

The type of issues we need to understand are:

- What information is currently used and shared? What is that quality of the information?
- How is the information currently used? Is it fit for purpose?
- Who is it shared with, when and how often?
- How is it shared?
- What are the legislative powers relied on to enable the data sharing?
- Is it shared between the right parties or are there parties without access to information?
- Are there gaps in the information shared?
- Are these gaps because there are deficiencies in what is gathered, or because there are barriers preventing disclosure?
- If there are barriers (legislative or otherwise) to the timely sharing of information, how can these be overcome?
- What related data sharing initiatives exist?
- What related legislative or technical developments can aid relevant data sharing?
- What resource is needed for efficient data sharing?
- What models of data sharing exist that we could learn from?

We aim to have the working group in place, with an agreed Terms of Reference and Membership by end January 2026. We will ask them to complete their initial scoping by the end of June 2026. We will update the PAC on the position and anticipated next steps once this has been completed.

2. Timelines and Delivery Detail

Publication of the fully costed Skills Action Plan

The Skills Action Plan was launched on 16th October. The plan sets out the key agreed actions that the Department for the Economy will focus on, to ensure that everyone has a pathway to enhance their existing skills and contribute to the Economic Vision.

The Skills Action Plan covers three themes:

- collaborating with industry and education partners to develop new ways of working;
- improving the skills systems by building on the success of our institutions, interventions and programmes; and
- creating an inclusive, forward-looking skills ecosystem that empowers individuals and supports economic transformation.

As outlined on page seven of the Skills Action Plan, the Department has set out a range of commitments aimed at addressing skills needs across the economy. These commitments span multiple financial years, covering both the current Assembly mandate and the next. Costing such a multi-year programme requires certainty on its baseline budgets and options to use additional allocations that may be made available through Monitoring Rounds.

As the Committee will be aware, the Executive intends to produce a multi-year budget which will cover the three year period from April 2026. Until that budget is agreed by the Executive, the Department will not have certainty on its baseline budget allocations. As delivery will be subject to the sufficient funding being available to the Department, the Department is not in a position to produce a fully costed plan until the Executive agrees the Budget. However, this does not mean that no action is being taken. The Department has begun to deliver the actions using the funding that is available to it in the current year. We are also actively exploring alternative sources of funding to support implementation such as the Enhanced Investment Zones, and the Shared Island Fund.

Business Engagement (Recommendation 8)

As we indicated in our previous reply, we have engaged with the Strategic Investment Board to begin scoping the business engagement evaluation exercise, with the aim of delivering earlier than the current May 2027 schedule.

An implementation schedule has been developed in line with the Strategic Investment Board evaluation proposal, setting out key milestones for the business engagement evaluation, running from the last quarter of 2025 to the second quarter of 2026. The

evaluation will analyse current and planned skills interventions, assess alignment with economic priorities, and report findings to inform future skills planning.

Progress will be monitored and reported through the Skills Action Plan governance structures, ensuring transparency and supporting continuous improvement throughout delivery. The Department will be happy to share the business engagement evaluation report with the Committee once it has been completed.

I trust this additional information addresses the Committee's request for further clarity. The Department remains committed to working constructively with the Committee to deliver meaningful progress on skills for Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ian Snowden". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

IAN SNOWDEN
Permanent Secretary