

**ACTING PERMANENT SECRETARY
RONNIE ARMOUR**

Daniel McCrossan
Chairperson
Public Accounts Committee
Northern Ireland Assembly
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
BELFAST BT4 3XX



Rathgael House
43 Balloo Road
Rathgill
BANGOR
BT19 7PR
Tel: 028 91 279524
Email: ronnie.armour@education-ni.gov.uk

Email: committee.publicaccounts@niassembly.gov.uk

9 December 2025

Dear Daniel

**MEMORANDUM OF REPLY: DEVELOPING THE SKILLS FOR
NORTHERN IRELAND'S FUTURE - CAREERS GUIDANCE AND DATA SHARING**

Thank you for your letter of 4 November 2025 seeking further clarity from the Department of Education in respect of Recommendation 6 (Data Sharing) and 10 (Careers) of the Committee's Report.

Recommendation 6 – Data Sharing

The respective Departments note the latest communication from the Committee and have listened to the discussion at your meeting on 23 October 2025. I wish to emphasise that there is no resistance from either Department to taking appropriate action. However, it would not be possible for either Department to commit to an exact timeframe or subsequent actions without a genuine understanding of what the work entails, what the resource commitments are likely to be and which parties need to be involved.

It may be helpful if I expand upon the earlier responses provided to try to illustrate some of the complexities that arise in relation to the data sharing issue. 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 to help inform future planning and resourcing requirements.
- Arms-Length Bodies – including the Education Authority working with the Health and Social Care Trusts, the Further Education Colleges need a more granular level of detail to help them plan for and make provision at sub regional level, taking account of more detailed issues around capacity, accommodation, transport and geographical considerations.

- A person-specific level of information exchange is then required in relation to individuals and their unique needs to help smooth the 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 means 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 legislative requirements that data sharing is for a specific and explicit purpose. Rather, it is likely that multiple agreements are required and that these will each involve different organisations within the overall ecosystem. The previous response did not intend to suggest that there were legislative barriers; rather it was simply explaining that the legislative standards to be adhered to, means the issues are more complex than they first appear.

There are existing data sharing agreements, for example, between the Education Authority and the Health and Social Care Trusts and between the Education Authority and the Careers Service. Anecdotal feedback suggests that the existing arrangements are not effective. Understanding these issues is key and the scoping work will provide a detailed cross-departmental assessment of the issues and how best to address them.

As was indicated in the previous reply, the preliminary scoping work will be undertaken through a working group under the auspices of the Department for Education's SEN Delivery Plan Operational Implementation Oversight Group.

The organisations likely to be involved in this work include:

- Department of Education – SEN Reform Officials, 14-19 Strategy Officials, Analytical Services
- Department of Health – Learning Disability Policy Officials, SPPG, Analytical Services
- Department for Economy – Careers Service, SEN Policy Officials, Analytical Services
- Department of Finance & NISRA
- Education Authority
- Health and Social Care Trusts
- Further Education Colleges

The type of issues we need to understand are:

- What information is currently shared?
- Who is it shared with and when?
- 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?

The aim is to have the working group in place, with an agreed Terms of Reference and Membership by end-January 2026. The working group will be asked to complete their initial scoping by end of June 2026. It is not possible to commit to specific actions beyond this point as it would be inappropriate to pre-empt the outcome of that work. It may be worth noting that work is underway to progress 16-18 legislation which will require all young people to remain in education or training until age 18. This work includes the development of a monitoring and reporting tool which will provide data on the number / proportion of young people in education or training in school FE college, College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise or training or apprenticeship. This will require relevant protocols to be put in place to support this process including the sharing of data.

In the meantime, as outlined in the previous response, both Departments, in conjunction with Health officials, will continue to explore the potential for appropriate data sharing arrangements and take relevant action. This will require preliminary work to be undertaken before any commitments can be made. This work will be progressed under the auspices of the Department's SEN Reform Operational Implementation Oversight Group which held its first meeting in October 2025. The scoping will also take into consideration any implications arising from the Department's work on new legislation relating to those aged 16-18 years remaining in education.

It is also important to note that the issue of Special Educational Needs (SEN) should not be conflated with the number of young people who are Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET) – while some young people with SEN may be NEET there are also many other reasons why young people find themselves in this situation.

Recommendation 10 - DE Commissioning ETI

The Department has commissioned ETI to deliver an evaluation of the quality of careers education in post-primary schools. This work has commenced and an update on the emerging findings will be provided to the Department in February 2026. Feedback from school leaders, careers teachers and students will continue to inform future plans, helping to address any gaps in provision and support more equitable access to high-quality careers education and advice.

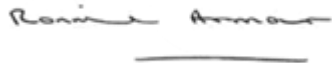
The Department will consider the findings of the ETI evaluation and any additional reform or resources will be considered by the Department at that stage.

The joint Departmental Careers Action Plan, which was published in June 2025, builds upon recommendations and commitments from key policies and strategies including the 14-19 Framework (*Developing a More Strategic Approach to 14-19*

Education and Training: A Framework to Transform 14-19 Education and Training Provision) and DfE's Skills Strategy. For example, one of the supporting actions within the 14-19 Framework was to "consider how the ETI can quality assess the provision of the careers service and careers guidance interventions in schools as part of the inspection process." This will now be taken forward in response to the supporting action in the Careers Action Plan which requires the Department to "engage with ETI for inspection reports and evaluations to review and improve the standard of provision of careers."

I hope this is useful.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ronnie Armour". Below the signature is a horizontal line.

RONNIE ARMOUR