

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Education

Public Consultation Report Proposals to establish a dedicated organisation to support controlled schools

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Mr Givan (The Minister of Education): Today marks a pivotal step for education in Northern Ireland as I publish the outcome of my Department's public consultation on creating a dedicated organisation to champion and support controlled schools. The consultation outcomes provide a powerful mandate for change.

The controlled sector is the largest school sector in Northern Ireland comprising half of all publicly funded schools. It is a particularly diverse sector encompassing all phases and types of schools, including nursery, primary, secondary, grammar, integrated, Irish-medium and special schools.

Despite serving half of all publicly funded schools, the controlled sector faces persistent challenges. There are long-standing disparities in educational outcomes between controlled and Catholic maintained schools, which highlight the need for improved support for the sector. External examination results show that Catholic maintained schools consistently outperform controlled schools, despite higher levels of Free School Meal entitlement. Controlled schools are also historically more likely to require external intervention to improve provision and to enter the Department's Formal Intervention Process.

The Independent Review of Education (December 2023) highlighted the suboptimal support arrangements for the controlled sector. In particular, it emphasised that the Education Authority's (EA) broader remit across the education sector limits its ability to provide focused support to controlled schools, act as an advocacy body for the sector, or develop its unique ethos, vision and values. At the same time, the Controlled Schools' Support Council lacks statutory authority or powers, which restricts its ability to provide comprehensive support and influence policy and delivery.

Following consideration of the evidence presented by the Independent Review, I established a Taskforce to consider potential solutions for improvement. The Taskforce reported in December 2024 recommending a two-phase approach to reform, with the immediate formation of a Controlled Schools Unit (CSU) within EA and, in the longer-term, the establishment of a dedicated body to provide focused governance and strategic leadership for controlled schools.

The CSU is now in place with several key initiatives already underway to support controlled schools. The proposed Phase 2 would see the creation of a new statutory organisation, created through primary legislation, to support controlled schools. My Department's public consultation, which closed on 11 December 2025, sought stakeholder views on this proposal.

It was proposed that the new organisation would become the managing authority for controlled schools and that its remit would mirror that of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), ensuring equity across sectors. In responding to the consultation, CCMS expressed strong support for the approach taken, noting that establishing a dedicated organisation for controlled schools *"would bring the sector into line with the statutory arrangements that have long benefitted the Catholic maintained sector, strengthening equity and balance across the education system. It would also provide the strategic leadership, clarity of purpose and sectoral accountability needed to improve outcomes for children and young people"*.

The new body would assume legal responsibility for:

- Providing advice to the Department, EA, or any other relevant body on matters relating to controlled schools
- Developing and promoting the vision and ethos of the controlled sector, and advocating on its behalf
- Coordinating and planning the effective provision of controlled schools
- Supporting the effective management and governance of controlled schools by providing advice and information to Boards of Governors, principals, and staff, with a particular focus on school improvement
- Employing all teaching staff in controlled schools and developing a scheme of appointment
- Preparing a Scheme of Management for controlled schools, in consultation with Boards of Governors
- Requiring Boards of Governors to submit reports and returns that cannot be obtained by the Council from the Department or EA

744 responses were received to the consultation, with around one-third of all responses coming from school leaders (principals and vice principals), mainly those working in the controlled sector. The second largest group of respondents were school governors (22%), followed by parents and carers (15%) and teachers (14%).

There was a very clear desire for an effective 'strategic voice' for controlled schools, which would carry out a range of key functions. **Ninety-one percent of respondents agreed that support for controlled schools must improve and eighty-four percent backed the creation of a dedicated organisation.**

The consultation outcomes provide an undeniable platform for change. With overwhelming support, particularly from school leaders, I will move immediately to bring these proposals back to the Executive and press for their inclusion in the legislative programme. This is not a matter for further delay; it is a clear call to action.

I first raised this issue with the Executive in June last year and worked to facilitate constructive discussions with colleagues and the Independent Review panel. I launched a public consultation to ensure that the voices of stakeholders were heard at the highest level. Those voices have now spoken with clarity and conviction. This mandate cannot be ignored. We must act decisively to deliver the dedicated support that controlled schools both need and deserve.

Stakeholder feedback also strongly reinforces the priorities set out in my Department's TransformED Strategy, particularly the urgent need for stronger school improvement services, enhanced leadership support and greater access to curriculum expertise and subject-specific professional development across all sectors. Through TransformED, we have already begun investing in high-quality professional development, but this consultation makes clear that more must be done. My Department will, therefore, further reflect on the feedback from this consultation to inform the development of proposals to deliver a coherent system-wide approach to professional development, curriculum support and school improvement services across all school sectors, ensuring every school has the tools to succeed.