

Written evidence submitted to the Northern Ireland Executive Draft Programme for Government Consultation 2024-27 'Doing What Matters Most'.

Submitted by the Controlled Schools' Support Council

Date: 4 November 2024

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Background

- As the support body for almost half of the schools in Northern Ireland, the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Northern Ireland Executive's Draft Programme for Government Consultation 2024-27.
- The controlled sector is the largest education sector in Northern Ireland, representing 49% of all schools. CSSC supports controlled schools in Northern Ireland (NI) which include Nursery Schools, Primary Schools, Secondary Schools, Grammar Schools, Integrated Schools, Special Schools and Irish-Medium Schools.
- As 37 of 39 Special Schools in NI are controlled schools and 32,387 pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are educated within controlled schools, CSSC welcomes the focus of the Programme for Government on better support for children and young people with SEN.
- Education in Northern Ireland must be provided with sufficient funding that provides equity to our children and young people. Schools need stable budgets with a clear pay and price commitment. Schools need multi-year budgets.
- CSSC is concerned with the significant limitations to education funding and its impact on our children and young people. This follows over a decade of systemic underfunding of education in NI evidenced by a report from the Institute of Fiscal Studies¹.
- This historic underfunding has resulted in reduced school budgets which impacted negatively upon services provided to all schools by the Education Authority (EA).
- School leaders are clearly stating that unless this under investment is addressed, it will be impossible to provide our children and young people with an education that ensures they have the best start in life.
- Whilst the most recent budget (30 November 2024) included an announcement of funding of £18.2 billion for NI next year and is the largest real-terms settlement to the region in the history of devolution, not only is the NI education system at a different starting point to education than elsewhere in the UK, there are different levels of need. With much of the education budget being allocated to staff costs, this increase will also be needed to cover the higher National Insurance costs also announced by the UK Government in this budget.
- CSSC believes there is an opportunity for greater recognition of the significantly important role education plays in shaping, investing and protecting the future of our children and young people and of the immeasurable impact education has on the economy and wider society.
- In 2023 we marked the 25th Anniversary of the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement and it is important that we state the role that education must continue to play in a post conflict society.

¹ <https://ifs.org.uk/news/school-spending-pupil-highest-scotland-lowest-northern-ireland>

- The recent Independent Review of Education (Investing in a better future, published December 2023) addressed many of the key issues in education providing a number of recommendations. These recommendations provide an evidence-based approach to any consideration of Reform and Transformation of Public Services in Education.
- This Programme for Government Consultation, 9 months after the publication of the Independent Review of Education, provides a timely opportunity to truly address equity in education, not just bringing it up to the levels enjoyed in the rest of the United Kingdom, but to the level where it is fit for the purpose required in Northern Ireland in 2024 and beyond.

‘Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy’

- CSSC agrees with the Programme for Government’s commitment to grow a globally competitive and sustainable economy.
- The Independent Review of Education stated that ‘Education is the greatest investment any society makes in its own future. Responsible citizenship, prosperity and fulfilled lives depend on it. In a world changing at an unprecedented pace, peace and prosperity depend on education more than ever before. Northern Ireland can be a 21st century success but only if it develops a capacity to operate at the cutting edge of knowledge and has a workforce that is constantly extending and refreshing its capabilities’.
- Whilst outlining the extensive good in the NI education system, the Review concluded too many young people, disadvantaged by poverty, emerge under skilled and underqualified after compulsory education.
- The Review authors referred to ‘investment’ in education, as meaning investment in knowledge, social cohesion, creativity, wellbeing – both physical and mental – and caring for and helping others. They highlighted how success in each of these areas will bring great economic as well as societal benefits.
- They went on to say that such a system will both retain and attract talent and will ensure that Northern Ireland has the skilled workforce it requires to support a thriving economy.
- Their recommendations, which are costed and achievable, are designed to make that vision a reality, with the potential to deliver an ‘excellent education’ for all.
- The Education Minister has already made some commitments to this area, announcing that he will bring forward legislation to ensure that young people in NI stay in education or training until they are 18, highlighting that jobs today require high levels of skill and education and that participation in education beyond 16 will directly impact upon life chances for young people.
- CSSC agrees with the Review statement that ‘additional spending will not of itself guarantee better outcomes. Investment will have to be carefully targeted, and outputs carefully measured.’

- CSSC also agrees with the authors when they state the future prosperity and wellbeing of Northern Ireland requires commitment to sufficient funding of education. This will be key to growing a globally competitive and sustainable economy.

‘Deliver more Affordable Childcare’

- CSSC notes the Programme for Government’s commitment to deliver more affordable childcare and is conscious of the contribution that standardisation of pre-school session times to full time hours will make to this commitment.
- CSSC is aware of the Minister’s intention to work with EA to enable 100 pre-school settings to transition to deliver at least 22.5 hours of pre-school education per week from 2025, however, CSSC is conscious that this transition – at the time of responding – does not include capital investment which will be required by many settings to make this transition beyond 2025.
- CSSC understands that the standardisation of the initial 100 pre-school settings is simply a prelude to the transition of other pre-school settings and would emphasise the need for capital investment to be made available to allow for enhancements to the accommodation of those settings who will require additional space.
- CSSC is aware that the survey carried out by RSM UK Consulting LLP captured the capital costs of transition and the Department of Education (DE) will therefore be aware of the extent of the investment required to address accommodation issues and to equip EA’s Catering Services to be able to provide lunches to each setting.
- CSSC understands that the intention is to transition existing settings over a 5-year period and notes from the draft Programme for Government the intention to evaluate the 2024/25 interventions to inform the future longer-term development of the strategy.
- CSSC would emphasise that continuing to support the roll out of standardised pre-school sessions should be considered a priority as failure to do so will leave a more inequitable situation in place for families, with families in some areas able to avail of full-time sessions and all the attendant benefits for the child, and others not.
- The Programme for Government acknowledges that ‘early years intervention provides the best long-term outcomes for our children particularly those facing disadvantage and can make a long term difference to a child’s communication skills and their educational and health outcomes, a view informed in no doubt by the findings of the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement In Northern Ireland (May 2021), who reported that, ‘more recent evidence has found that full-day pre-school children had higher scores than part-day children on literacy, language, maths, socio-emotional development and physical health, had increased school readiness skills and reduced absences.’

- Full-time provision would also mean that staff are better placed to provide support to meet the needs of children presenting with SEND with more time to put in place targeted interventions.
- CSSC has engaged with the leaders of controlled schools and primary schools with nursery units to inform our response to several public consultations with the potential to impact on the sector.
- School leaders informing CSSC's response to the consultation on statutory admissions criteria referred to the emotional health and wellbeing benefits of full-time provision as well as its educational benefits noting that full-time provision would allow for the enhancement of children's personal development and mutual understanding skills. The children's ability to avail of school lunches, would be an opportunity to further develop children's socialisation and independence skills.
- These benefits were confirmed by two controlled settings who were able to participate in the Department's pilot to amalgamate pre-school session times for 2023/24. Other benefits included the ability of the setting to ensure an equal distribution of children with SEN in both full-time classes thus supporting the adult response to all children and the reduction of penultimate age children in the setting with more children of target age ready for the pre-school curriculum.
- Standardisation to full time hours will also have benefits for the workforce, enabling staff to engage with further professional development and allowing more time for collaboration between staff teams involving the sharing of effective practice, which will enhance the children's educational experience.

'Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs.'

- CSSC agrees with the inclusion of Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs in the Programme for Government and welcomes the Executive's acknowledgement that 'the current education system is struggling to keep pace with the changing pupil profile' and the need for 'significant transformation which requires additional investment.'
- CSSC would emphasise that this investment must support children and young people to have their needs met in the setting most appropriate to their needs and that this will include provision in mainstream settings (including specialist provision classes) and Special schools.

a) Early Years Support for SEND and opportunities to better support earlier interventions.

- CSSC notes the work of the DE/EA Transformation programme and the workstreams associated with the End-to-End Review of Special Educational Needs and has made its views known to key officials through representation on the SEND Programme Reference Group and the SEND Programme Advisory Group. CSSC agrees with the vision of ensuring that 'children and young people

with SEND get the right support from the right people at the right time and in the right place.’

- Earlier identification of SEND must be a priority to ensure earlier interventions to support the needs of our children and young people. It is CSSC’s view that the Early Years must be seen as an important foundation for children’s learning and achievement.
- Strengthened partnerships between Education and the Health and Social Care Trusts are crucial to providing enhanced support for children with SEN. The leaders of controlled nursery schools/units have highlighted inconsistencies in families’ access to health visitors which has left the needs of some children undiagnosed until their pre-school year.
- Access to the advice and support of health visitors is crucial in enabling parents to avail of appropriate support for their children in the years preceding and during pre-school education and school leaders have highlighted the 3+review by health visitors, delivered in pre-school settings as an example of effective cross-sectoral collaboration. Indeed, greater collaboration between Education and Health would impact positively on all phases of education with data sharing also enabling more effective area planning with the data held by Health and Social Care Trusts regarding the needs of children from birth ensuring that the schools’ estate is planned for and supported to respond effectively to meet the needs of all children.
- In acknowledging the importance of the early years, CSSC must also highlight the need to review adult:child ratios in statutory pre-school settings to further enhance support for all children but especially those children presenting with SEN.
- CSSC is conscious of the valuable support that settings put in place for children with SEN and how this support often requires the employment of additional adult assistants. Many of these children will not complete statutory assessment until they have transitioned to primary school and the setting will have resourced this much needed, additional support at a cost to their own school budgets.
- CSSC would recommend consideration of how additional adult support can be resourced for settings in this situation.

b) SEND Transformation and the implications for mainstream schools

- In respect of changes proposed to SEND Supports, CSSC is conscious of the work being taken forward by EA to establish Local Integrated Teams (LIT) to replace the current model of siloed, SEND specific services with a network of localised, phase specific, multi-specialist EA support teams.
- CSSC understands that the LITs will be overseen by a Regional Management Unit which will carry out the relevant triage to the Local Integrated Teams following school’s engagement with a Graduated Response Framework.
- CSSC understands that the new arrangements will allow for the removal of the Educational Psychology Service’s current ‘gatekeeping’ role at Stage 2 removing

the barriers to current supports and will allow a higher volume of children and young people to be supported simultaneously.

- CSSC is conscious that the roll out of these changes has already been delayed due to resource constraints, and the inability to provide timely capacity building in advance of integrating a new system which will require schools to familiarise themselves with a new system which will involve new ways of engaging.
- The new system, underpinned by the school's use of a digital Personal Learning Plan (PLP), will require schools to access support through a digital Request for Involvement Form. However, CSSC is aware that due to the stop/start nature of SEND reform in previous years and the fact that the new Code of Practice has not been ratified by the Executive, some schools yet to transition to the use of PLPs will potentially require refresher training.
- Resourcing the EA's ability to provide training in the use of PLPs and the Graduated Response Framework is therefore crucial for the 'go live' date of January 2025.
- Ensuring that staff are confident and capable to meet needs is recognised by the DE End to End Review as a crucial component of successful SEND support and on-going capacity building required to ensure this (and informed by the needs of the sector) must be supported through an adequate resource which will finance training which is relevant and which supports schools to engage with new systems and the increasingly more complex pupil profile presenting in schools.

c) Resourcing specialist provisions in mainstream schools

- CSSC notes the increase in the establishment of specialist provisions in mainstream schools and through active participation on Area Planning Local Groups is aware that this need will persist for the foreseeable future.
- CSSC acknowledges the support available for new specialist provisions from the Specialist Settings Support Teams. However, this support is not available for more established provisions who report that they too have experienced a change in their pupil profile which requires different approaches to supporting their pupils and therefore new training.
- Conscious of the parental right to designate a mainstream school as their preferred setting, it is crucial that all settings are appropriately resourced to effectively meet the needs of the child and provide an appropriate learning environment.
- In acknowledging the need for a workforce which receives relevant capacity building to ensure confidence to meet the needs of our children and young people, the expertise of Special schools needs to be recognised, and investment made to support Special schools' efforts to build the capacity of colleagues in mainstream settings.

d) Supporting the Vision for Special Schools

- CSSC is conscious that DE through the End-to-End Review of Special Educational Needs has engaged extensively with the leaders of Special schools and has developed an understanding of the vision that the leaders of Special schools have for their provision which includes meaningful collaboration between Education and Health to deliver the interventions required for children with the most complex needs.
- Special Schools have articulated a vision which includes the presence of Allied Health Professionals in school settings, onsite nursing support, counselling services and specifically consistent access to the relevant therapies and interventions across the Health and Social Care Trusts.
- In the absence of relevant training from Pupil Support Services to respond to the increasing complexity of needs presenting in Special schools, the leaders of Special schools have sought the support of other external agencies to support staff's response to children and young people with SEND. However, this support comes at a price and there is also the consideration of time to disseminate this training to all staff within the setting.
- CSSC is conscious of DE's engagement with the leaders of Special schools regarding the appropriateness of current arrangements for school development days (SDDs). School leaders have confirmed that additional school development days are required for Special schools to ensure that their purpose is not compromised and that Special schools, like their mainstream counterparts have the time required to focus on continuous improvement of learning and teaching, and, curriculum development.
- Currently the complexity of need presenting in Special schools necessitates time to avail of a wider range of training than that required of mainstream schools. Additional school development days would better allow for the dissemination, evaluation and embedding of capacity building programmes which address specific needs. Ideally these programmes would also include capacity building from Health and specific training for the many Special schools who educate children with medical needs.
- CSSC welcomes DE's recognition that the situation of Special schools is unique in the need for additional school development days and understands that a business case for Special schools to receive additional days will be progressed. It is crucial that this is resourced to ensure that staff in Special schools are able to enhance their capacity and in the longer term also contribute to the evidence-based programmes and interventions that can be extended to mainstream schools and specialist provisions in mainstream schools.
- CSSC welcomes the Minister's announcement of 12 February 2024 on capital investment across the education sector which included funding bids of £528 million to the Department of Finance to meet education capital needs and an additional 100 million of capital above the draft budget allocation to meet pressures in regard to Special Educational Need placements.

- An investment in the Special schools' estate is critical. CSSC is all too aware of the accommodation pressures in a number of schools with some schools, in response to an increasing demand for places, having to repurpose spaces which would have previously been used for specific therapies and interventions to become classrooms.
- With an increase in challenging behaviour in Special schools it is crucial that some children have the space to be able to deal with sensory processing difficulties which have a detrimental impact on their emotional health and wellbeing. Investment is urgently required to allow Special schools to return repurposed accommodation to their original purpose.
- The input of Health to the provision of Special schools is essential when we consider the acute behavioural profiles presenting in many Special schools.
- Special schools require Health input to the development of behavioural plans which will support them to respond to their children and young people's dysregulation.
- Health input to these behavioural plans would reassure staff in Special schools that they are responding in the most appropriate manner, informed as they would be by the expertise of Health colleagues. The input of Health to the development of training to support the adult response to dysregulated behaviour should also inform any training received by the staff of specialist provisions in mainstream schools.

e) Supporting appropriate pathways for children and young people with SEND

- CSSC welcomed the inclusion of 'Transitions' as one of the 12 workstreams in the Department of Education's (DE's) End to End Review of SEN.
- CSSC is aware of concerns in relation to supporting appropriate pathways post-16 for children with SEN educated in specialist provisions in mainstream schools and the potential for continued provision within a specialist provision environment.
- Consideration needs to be given to supporting the development of relevant and meaningful qualifications for children who attend specialist provisions in mainstream schools.
- In developing appropriate pathways and consultation with practitioners in respect of the qualifications which will best serve children and young people with SEN it is recommended that the views of school staff are sought.
- The leaders of controlled Special schools in discussions about pupils' experience of Transition have referred a void in the support that young people receive when they transfer to Adult Services.
- Effective multi-agency working is required without delay to improve this situation. The 2014 Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service Briefing Paper g5 on Transition Planning in Northern Ireland refers to a variety of small-scale transition support programmes available to young people with disabilities, however, the paper highlights regional inconsistencies in terms

of access to these programmes and as they are delivered by voluntary and community organisations their resources are limited and often uncertain.

- Special schools have commented on the anxiety suffered by parents as they look towards this transition which in their view does not present any opportunity for continued learning. Moreover, it is noted that the opportunities for supported employment are often limited. The report on Transition Planning was published in 2014 and yet the concerns in relation to the inconsistent arrangements to support the transition of young people with special educational needs persist.
- In conversations with Special schools the role of local authorities was highlighted as having the potential to support pupils in Special schools to acquire work experience during their time at school but also as a means to support their transition into gainful employment post-19.
- CSSC notes that one of the draft Programme for Government's three long-term missions is People and ensuring that everyone can live a long, healthy and happy life.
- The draft Programme for Government commits to joint working across departments, statutory agencies and voluntary and community organisations and this is an area which would benefit from that commitment and contribute to the programme's social inclusion strategy.

'Reform and Transformation of Public Services'

- CSSC promotes our children and young people being educated together and advocates for the need for transformation and investment in the education system. We support the draft Programme for Government's commitment to collaborative working and relentless focus on innovation and efficiency in service delivery. It's important that all voices are heard in any process of reform and transformation.
- As part of the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) Agreement it was agreed that "The Executive will establish an external, independent review of education provision, with a focus on securing greater efficiency in delivery costs, raising standards, access to the curriculum for all pupils, and the prospects of moving towards a single education system."
- The Independent Review is a thorough, evidence-based consideration of the fundamental issues impacting education in Northern Ireland which included extensive engagement with stakeholders.
- The Independent Review has set out proposals for progressive reform of the education system over the next two decades and will have significant resource implications. For that reason, a phased approach to implementation will be necessary.
- The 25 key recommendations include the need to prioritise investment in education, promote learner's learning together, expand early years education,

reconfigure the network of schools, simplify the management of education, reform the curriculum and increase the age of educational participation to 18.

- Any reform and transformation should be focussed on investing in the future of our children and young people, delivering education in the way it should be delivered.
- Schools in Northern Ireland are not managed or supported in the same way. This has a significant impact on education for children and young people, specifically for controlled schools which are the only schools managed by the Education Authority (EA). 49% of all schools are controlled schools, including nursery, special, primary, post-primary, grammar, controlled integrated and controlled Irish-medium schools.
- A number of reports have highlighted that this is unfair. The Independent Review said that having “the managing authority role (controlled schools) has always been a challenge because EA also provides a wide range of services to all other schools”. EA is a provider of services to all schools however it has a specific and vital role for controlled schools which creates a conflict and results in inequitable provision.
- The Independent Review explained these inequitable findings “A relevant consideration is that Maintained post-primary schools tend to perform above expectations in relation to socio-economic circumstances and to a higher overall standard than controlled schools. It has been suggested that this is due, at least in part, to a positive ethos within the Maintained sector fostered by strong leadership and school support from CCMS. By contrast, Principals in the controlled sector have suggested that the EA is stretched too thin and is conflicted by servicing all school types, leaving controlled schools relatively unsupported. At the very least this would indicate that sectors should be supported with greater consistency and equity”.
- CSSC welcomed the recent announcement from the Education Minister to take action on this particular issue by establishing a delivery and implementation Taskforce to lead in the development of a managing authority to support the controlled schools sector.
- CSSC also welcomes the acknowledgement by the Independent Review that all sectors should be supported with greater consistency and equity.
- CSSC agrees with the Programme for Government’s direction in this regard and the statement ‘Reform and transformation cannot just be able money and how it is allocated.’