

## **CSSC Consultation Response: Establishment of a new organisation to support controlled schools**

- The Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Education's consultation on the establishment of a new organisation to support controlled schools.
- The controlled sector is the largest education sector in Northern Ireland, representing 49% of all schools. It includes nursery, primary, post primary, grammar, special, integrated and Irish medium schools. The sector has a non-denominational Christian ethos and welcomes children of all faiths and none.

### **Question 1: To what extent do you agree that current support arrangements for controlled schools are satisfactory?**

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☒ Strongly Disagree

- CSSC does not consider current support arrangements for controlled schools to be satisfactory. The *Independent Review of Education: Investing in a Better Future (2023)*, the *Taskforce Report, Development of a Proposed Model for Support for Controlled Schools (2024)* and the lived experience of school leaders across Northern Ireland's largest education sector, that includes 545 schools serving nearly 150,000 children and young people, highlight that the Education Authority's (EA) broad statutory remit across all sectors creates competing priorities. Although the EA is the managing authority only for the controlled sector, its responsibilities and functions span all sectors, which limits its capacity to provide focused, equitable and effective support for controlled schools.
- The Independent Review stated that EA's role across all school sectors "results in complicated systems for school management which are, in particular, suboptimal for the controlled sector." This is reflected in feedback from controlled school leaders, who reported the need for greater strategic focus on the priorities and unique challenges of the controlled sector. They also emphasised the need for strategic oversight and challenge along with proactive, relational and targeted support to schools. They further identified confusion about EA's structures, roles and responsibilities.
- GCSE data since 2012 shows that Catholic maintained schools have consistently outperformed controlled schools by between 8 and 12.6 percentage points, despite Catholic Maintained schools having higher levels of Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME). Controlled schools are also historically more likely to enter

the formal intervention process and to require external support to improve education provision. These disparities are not inevitable. The Independent Review has attributed differences in performance, in part, to the presence of sector-specific support structures, highlighting the role of strong leadership and dedicated support in the Catholic maintained sector, and identifying principals' concerns about EA's capacity to sufficiently meet the needs of the sector it manages.

- The EA's governance arrangements further constrain its ability to provide a focused managing authority role for controlled schools. Its Board includes representatives from political parties, the Transferors Representatives' Council, Trustees of Catholic Maintained Schools, and representatives from the integrated, Irish medium, voluntary grammar, and controlled sectors. Whilst this reflects the diversity of the education system, it does not provide governance with a primary focus on the controlled sector. Decision making reflect a universal service provider and not a managing authority and therefore balance the interests of all school sectors, and as a result, accountability structures cannot be independent, consistent, equitable, or sufficiently strategically focused to meet the specific needs of controlled schools.
- CSSC, as a voluntary body, has provided independent advocacy, promoted the ethos of the controlled sector, supported governors, and contributed to policy development. Through delivery of its non-statutory functions, it has demonstrated leadership and representation on behalf of controlled schools. However, without statutory responsibilities, CSSC does not have the powers to be truly effective, be an equal partner with other sectoral bodies or to provide equitable challenge and support to the controlled sector.
- In contrast, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) operates as a dedicated statutory body with a primary focus on its sector. This dedicated support infrastructure has been attributed by the Independent Review as contributing to "a positive ethos within the maintained sector fostered by strong leadership and school support from CCMS".
- The Taskforce Report (2024) recognised that longstanding systemic difficulties in the delivery of effective support for the controlled sector predate the existence of both the EA and CSSC. Its proposed two-phase approach begins to address these issues, with the interim collaborative Controlled Schools Unit (CSU) in phase one providing immediate tangible improvements and a transitional pathway to the establishment of a dedicated body in phase two. CSSC believes that this approach presents the most significant opportunity in a generation to

secure more coherent and equitable support for controlled schools and to achieve sustainable improvement in how the sector is supported.

- Therefore, CSSC supports the work to establish the CSU within the EA working in close partnership with CSSC, as a short-term interim collaborative model of support. The CSU can begin to deliver a more joined up approach to support, with an aim to complement and enhance transactional service delivery for controlled schools, providing a defined route towards a dedicated body in the longer term. However, the CSU sits within the EA's governance structures, which must balance priorities across all sectors, and therefore cannot provide the independence, primary focus, or sector specific governance required to achieve equitable and consistent support.
- The longer-term establishment of a dedicated body will ensure that controlled schools' benefit from an organisation that will
  - have a primary focus on controlled schools,
  - provide focused governance and accountability structures,
  - provide strategic leadership and promote a child centred, inclusive sectoral ethos and a clear vision for high quality education,
  - develop a coherent sectoral strategy to drive improvement within a sustainable network of schools,
  - act as an independent advocate for the controlled sector,
  - provide sector-specific challenge, intervention and build the capacity of leaders to provide targeted school support, and
  - promote equity and consistency of support across all sectors.
- A dedicated body will build on current interim arrangements to deliver required improvements by ensuring focused resources, with statutory powers and expertise to support ongoing improvement efforts in controlled schools. These reforms will enable the EA to prioritise universal service delivery and its responsibilities to all schools, while ensuring that close to 150,000 children and young people in controlled schools receive the dedicated, equitable support they deserve.
- A new organisation operating as a collaborative partner to CCMS, will also engage with other education sectoral partners such as the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG). This will include, where relevant, the potential for sharing services that enhance efficiency and consistency of support across the education system, creating opportunities that benefit all schools and the communities they serve.
- For these reasons, CSSC concludes that the current arrangements are not satisfactory. A dedicated body with statutory authority, within independent

accountability structures which support its primary strategic focus on the controlled sector, is required to ensure equitable and effective support for controlled schools and improved outcomes for their children and young people.

**Question 2: To what extent do you agree that there is a need to improve support for controlled schools?**

☐ Strongly Disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree   ☐ Agree   ☒ Strongly Agree

- CSSC strongly agrees there is clear and evidenced need to improve support for controlled schools. CSSC notes the conclusion of the Independent Review that existing arrangements for the controlled sector are “suboptimal.” CSSC also agrees with the analysis set out in the Taskforce Report, which considered this evidence and identified recommendations for significant improvements to support for controlled schools.
- The Independent Review found 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.” This conclusion is evidenced by Key Stage 4 (GCSE) data since 2012, outlining that Catholic maintained schools have outperformed controlled schools by between 8 and 12.6 percentage points, although Catholic Maintained schools have higher levels of FSME. Although GCSE attainment has improved across both sectors, the historic difference in attainment between controlled and Catholic maintained schools remains.
- Of the 13 high performing schools identified in the *Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU) study Effective School Leadership in Disadvantaged Communities (2025)*, nine were Catholic maintained schools and only one was a controlled school. The Independent Review has attributed differences in performance, in part, to “a positive ethos within the maintained sector fostered by strong leadership and school support from CCMS,” whilst noting that “principals in the controlled sector have suggested that the Education Authority is stretched too thin and is conflicted by servicing all school types.” CSSC endorses the Review’s conclusion that “at the very least this would indicate that sectors should be supported with greater consistency and equity.”
- CSSC agrees with the analysis in the Taskforce Report, which highlights that controlled schools are more likely to enter formal intervention than Catholic maintained schools. While both sectors receive support from the EA during formal intervention, the maintained sector benefits from additional sector specific leadership engagement through CCMS, including targeted support and

challenge informed by multidisciplinary review. These differences highlight the need for more equitable support structures to ensure consistent opportunities for improvement, leadership development, and access to high quality education for all children and young people.

- CSSC acknowledges the Taskforce Report's observation that creating new structures without parallel change in policy may risk transferring the challenges experienced by the EA to a new body. CSSC recognises that structural change alone will not address all barriers to improvement and that success will depend on clear policy direction, well defined accountability structures, and effective collaboration across the education system.
- CSSC agrees with the Taskforce Report's finding that the conditions for improvement, including strategic leadership, joined up and consistent support, and focused accountability structures, are not supported by current system arrangements for the controlled sector. CSSC is of the view that establishing a dedicated body that supports independent governance, clear accountability, and a primary focus on controlled schools will enable more effective sector-specific leadership and build capacity to support improvement.
- The Taskforce Report identified a model for establishing a dedicated body for the controlled sector, setting out a range of options in terms of functions and responsibilities. Option 3B within the report describes a body with functions comparable to those of CCMS, but without employment responsibilities or property ownership. The functions of Option 3B align closely with the themes identified in the CREU study, providing further evidence of the importance of these areas for effective strategic leadership and school improvement.
- The identified CREU study themes are as follows:
  - Clarity of vision: A dedicated body will provide a strategic and unifying vision for high-quality education and improvement for the controlled sector,
  - Championing children: It will embed a child-centred ethos of inclusivity, aspiration and achievement for all learners,
  - Connection: It will build strong connections with local communities through its role in appointment of governors, and ethos and leadership support, recognising schools as 'part of rather than apart from their communities',
  - Character: It will build the capacity of leaders, so that they are equipped with the skills, confidence and resilience to succeed.

- Continuation: It will work with schools and education partners to provide collaborative models of leadership development, to support future leaders.
- CSSC's view is that these findings reinforce the importance of sustained improvement supported by effective strategic leadership and sector-specific support. Establishing a dedicated body with a clear sectoral focus, underpinned by statutory responsibilities, will ensure the authority delivers consistent and equitable support for controlled schools consistent with the recommendations of the Independent Review.
- CSSC is convinced that the functions proposed under Option 3B of the Taskforce Report provide a coherent and deliverable model to achieve these aims. Together they outline a balanced framework to support effective oversight, leadership development and continuous improvement across the controlled sector.

**Question 3: To what extent do you agree with the proposal to establish a new dedicated organisation to support Controlled schools?**

☐ Strongly Disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree   ☐ Agree   ☒ Strongly Agree

- CSSC strongly agrees with the Department's proposal to establish a new organisation to support controlled schools. CSSC supports the Department's view that this 'offers a transformative opportunity to address the deficit of support for the controlled sector contributing to the transformation of our education system in support of our children and young people'. The expected benefits outlined are consistent with the Taskforce Report analysis and proposals previously endorsed by CSSC and its membership at its Annual General Meeting in 2025.
- CSSC is of the view that the new dedicated body should act as an authoritative and strategic organisation, supporting controlled schools to provide high quality education for the children and young people in their communities. Its governance structures will provide strategic leadership and support for the controlled sector, with an overt sectoral focus that is robust, responsive, and has the aim to raise standards in controlled schools.
- The Department's consultation document outlines a range of proposed legal responsibilities for the new body, including (but not limited to) statutory duties in relation to advocacy, ethos, area planning and governance, and providing advice to the Department, EA and other relevant bodies. CSSC agrees that

statutory responsibilities are necessary to ensure that the new organisation can effectively deliver the anticipated benefits.

- CSSC supports the Department's view that the establishment of a dedicated new organisation will strengthen equity and effectiveness across the education system. CSSC is of the view that the body should have functions and responsibilities comparable to those of CCMS, excluding employment responsibilities and property ownership. This model provides the most practical and deliverable framework for achieving the identified benefits and ensuring consistent support for controlled schools. It also ensures ongoing effective collaboration between what would be the two largest sectoral bodies. CSSC supports shared education by promoting sectoral sharing at the highest level.

### **Employment**

- CSSC does not necessarily agree that the new body should assume responsibility for employing all teaching staff in controlled schools. CSSC proposes that teacher employment responsibilities remain with EA. This would support a more streamlined legislative process for establishing the new body and recognises significant ongoing improvements within the EA's HR directorate. Retaining employment functions within the EA avoids unnecessary separation of teaching and non-teaching employment functions and enables the new organisation to focus its resources on core leadership support functions. It also allows EA to retain the informal support role it plays in employment across all sectors.
- This position remains open to future progress towards the longer-term reform recommended by the Independent Review, including the potential development of a single employing authority. Effective collaboration will be essential to ensure this approach works in practice. CSSC proposes that clear protocols are developed between the new organisation and the EA to ensure that it has an appropriate role in leadership appointment processes, that relevant data is shared to inform strategic planning, and that HR support is responsive to the context and needs of the controlled sector.

### **Property ownership and estate management**

- CSSC agrees with the Department's proposals that property ownership and estate management should remain with the EA. Retaining these responsibilities within the EA maintains the practical benefits of a centralised approach, ensures continued efficiency and coordination in managing the school estate, avoids the

significant complexity of transferring property ownership and maintenance functions, and supports continuity of service and capital project delivery.

- Collaborative arrangements between the new body and EA will be important to ensure that capital investment priorities reflect the strategic vision for controlled schools, that the organisation's voice is heard in decisions affecting the controlled schools' estate, and that estate planning supports the sustainability and development needs of controlled schools.

### **SEN Provision**

- CSSC notes the Department's proposal that EA will retain legal responsibility for ensuring sufficient school provision, with particular regard to pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and will remain responsible for planning and delivering SEN services. CSSC agrees with this position, recognising that the planning of provision and the delivery of SEN services are interdependent and must be coordinated effectively.
- CSSC is of the view, however, that the education and leadership support elements relating to the 38 Special Schools within the controlled sector should transfer to the new organisation. This includes responsibility for developing leadership capacity and supporting schools to strengthen their ability to meet the needs of pupils. Special schools play a vital role in supporting the diverse needs of their children and young people, whilst also contributing valuable expertise across the wider school system.
- Collaboration between the new organisation and EA will be essential, supported by clear protocols to ensure that leadership development, SEN provision and service delivery are connected, complementary, and focused on achieving improved outcomes for children and young people.

### **Ethos development and support**

- The Department has proposed that the new organisation will assume legal responsibility for developing and promoting the vision and ethos of the controlled sector, and for advocating on its behalf. The new body should embed a unifying ethos for controlled schools that promotes the sector's diversity, inclusivity and connection to the communities they serve underpinned by a non-denominational Christian ethos. This collective ethos will support equity, a culture of aspiration and high expectation, guiding the sector's strategic vision, ensuring consistency with the Children and Young People's Strategy, system wide priorities, and the distinct needs of the controlled sector.



- It will cultivate strong leaders equipped with the tools to nurture positive and inclusive learning environments where children and young people feel valued, motivated, and supported to achieve.
- CSSC recognises the importance of an intentional integrated ethos for controlled integrated schools, within the universal ethos of the controlled sector, which is open to all faiths and none. This reflects the diverse and inclusive nature of controlled schools and the communities they serve. As well as this, both English and Irish are used for curriculum delivery within the sector and CSSC is of the view that, in supporting a collective ethos, the new organisation should acknowledge and reflect these important aspects of the sector's identity as part of its role in promoting the ethos of controlled schools.

### **School governance**

- CSSC supports the proposal that the new dedicated body will have a statutory duty to promote effective management and governance of controlled schools by their Boards of Governors, comparable to CCMS's role for Catholic maintained schools. CSSC proposes it should also have a contributing role in the appointment of governors as well as the proposed statutory responsibility to prepare a scheme of management for controlled schools, in consultation with Boards of Governors. This will ensure that the right leaders are in place with the skills, understanding, and local community context required to provide effective governance and support improvement within their schools.
- Governors will be supported to uphold the ethos, vision, and values of both the sector and their individual schools, through the provision of bespoke sectoral guidance and support. This will complement the universal governor training role that will continue to be provided by the EA.
- The new organisation will develop sector-specific guidance for governors that supports improvement and raising standards. It will foster strong relationships with Boards of Governors, developing trust and a deep understanding of the local challenges faced by schools. Its relational approach will ensure meaningful collaboration and effective tailored support.

### **Leadership appointment and development**

- The new body's functional remit will ensure equitable support for the controlled sector by augmenting the universal support provided by EA. It will deliver bespoke guidance and development to enhance leadership capacity. CSSC proposes that in collaboration with the EA as employing authority, it will

contribute to the teachers' appointment scheme and have oversight of the appointment of leaders in controlled schools ensuring the right leaders are appointed and are equipped to drive improvement. A solution would be that the leadership element of the EA's Membership and Teaching Appointments Committee would transfer to the new organisation with the wider employment role remaining with the EA.

- The Department has proposed that the new organisation will provide mentoring, coaching and professional development that is sectorally relevant. CSSC currently provides this type of support, and this work would continue through the new organisation ensuring continuity and building on the established relationships and understanding of the needs of controlled schools.
- The new organisation will ensure provision of bespoke professional development tailored to the sector-specific challenges of controlled schools, building the capacity of leaders to support improvement and develop the skills they require to address issues within their local context. Collaborative leadership across the education system will also be a central focus. It will encourage shared learning among clusters of schools and foster strong networks of collaborative leadership within the controlled sector and beyond to raise standards, drive sustainable improvement and improve outcomes in schools.
- The new body will empower leaders to work in partnership to deliver proactive, evidence based targeted school to school support, and to welcome and embrace challenge. It should have the authority to deliver rapid data-driven interventions where need is identified through multi-disciplinary review and inspection. It will understand the context of individual schools, be ready to use its powers effectively to support them, ensuring interventions align with broader sectoral and system priorities.

### **Area planning**

- CSSC agrees with the Department's proposals that the new organisation should have a statutory duty to coordinate and plan the effective provision of controlled schools. The new body should assume a subsidiary planning role in relation to controlled schools, comparable to that currently held by CCMS for Catholic Maintained Schools. With these statutory responsibilities, it will present evidence-based proposals that reflect the interests of the controlled sector in the Area Planning process. Given the significant demographic changes underway it is vital that all sectors have effective plans on how to ensure educational provision is in the right place, of the right size and of the highest quality. EA's

role as the operational umbrella body will be enhanced without its dual role including the controlled sector.

- The dedicated body will represent the interests of the controlled sector within the planning process through ensuring appropriate representation on planning groups. Like other education partners, it will take into account the educational needs across all sectors as well as its own. It will work in partnership with the EA and in collaboration with other sectors, in identifying innovative, creative, and shared solutions for sustainable provision. It will engage with all other sectors in the process, with a view to adding to educational quality and sustainability.
- Under current arrangements, in preparing the Area Plan, the EA must collaborate with CCMS as the planning authority for Catholic maintained schools. Under new arrangements, there should be a similar duty on the EA to collaborate with the new dedicated body. It is noted the Independent Review of Education has recommended a move to a single planning authority. Whilst the Department explores this recommendation further, the new dedicated body will work within current area planning structures.

### **Sectoral advocacy**

- CSSC agrees that the new organisation should have statutory powers to provide advice to the Department, EA, or any other relevant body on matters relating to controlled schools, reflecting the statutory function that CCMS provides for Catholic Maintained Schools. It will work to address the controlled sector's context specific challenges, including the enduring gap in educational outcomes and the impact of historic deficits of support for controlled schools
- By establishing the new body as an equal partner with a primary strategic focus and the powers to advocate effectively for the sector within the broader educational framework, it will be able to work closely with other education sectoral bodies to support effective collaboration across the system.

### **Accountability and reporting**

- CSSC agrees with the Department's proposals that there should be a statutory requirement for Boards of Governors to submit reports and returns to the new body that cannot be obtained from the Department or the EA.
- As a statutory body, the new body should be accountable to the Department of Education for delivering its statutory duties and functions and have ability to

- hold controlled schools accountable, combining its support function with a robust challenge function to ensure schools meet agreed targets and objectives.
- It will ensure that all programmes and initiatives are consistent with departmental policies, standards, and system-wide priorities, as well as the sector specific strategic priorities of the controlled sector.

**Question 4:**

**Which of the following functions proposed by the Department should the new organisation have in relation to Controlled Schools? (Tick all that apply)**

- ☒ Vision, advocacy and representation
- ☒ Leadership and governor appointments
- ☒ Leadership development and support
- ☒ Governance and accountability
- ☐ Employment of teachers
- ☒ Area planning for the controlled sector
- ☒ Sector-specific governor training and support
- ☒ Sector-specific school improvement and professional development

**Which of the following functions not proposed by the Department should the new organisation have in relation to Controlled Schools? (Tick all that apply)**

- ☐ Employment of non-teaching staff
- ☐ Estate management
- ☐ School ownership
- ☐ Planning of special educational needs provision
- ☐ Other (please specify)

**Question 5: To what extent do you agree with the proposed phased approach to implementation, with the immediate establishment of a Controlled Schools Unit (CSU) within EA followed by a new organisation?**

- ☐ Strongly Disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree   ☐ Agree   ☒ Strongly Agree

- CSSC strongly agrees with the concurrent, phased approach to implementation set out in the Taskforce Report. CSSC acknowledges that this approach is already underway through the establishment of the CSU within EA. This concurrent model reflects the Taskforce's recommendation for an interim collaborative arrangement that will support transition to a dedicated body with independent governance and accountability.
- CSSC recognises the CSU as a necessary and valuable short-term interim collaborative model of support . The concurrent two phased approach enables collaboration between CSSC and the CSU, bringing together CSSC's sector knowledge, ethos development work, and trusted relationships with schools and governors, alongside the experience of CSU staff who have been engaged in direct delivery of statutory responsibilities within EA. This collaboration will inform the design, culture, and operating arrangements of the future organisation, ensuring that the new organisation will have the values, expertise and relationships needed to be effective from the outset.
- While this interim model is envisaged to provide immediate improvement, CSSC agrees with the Taskforce's analysis that the CSU cannot achieve full independence or a primary focus on the controlled sector, as it sits within EA's broader governance structures which have competing priorities. The CSU should therefore be considered an important interim measure within a broader process of transformation.
- Initial preparatory work for the new organisation is already underway and must continue in parallel with the CSU phase to sustain progress and ensure continuity of support through to the establishment of the new organisation. This includes ongoing development of the legislative and governance framework, planning for the transfer of relevant budget associations, and design of staffing structures. This work will be essential to ensure the new organisation can operate effectively and independently from the point of establishment.
- Staffing and budget arrangements for the new organisation should draw from existing resources within the system. CSSC currently employs 18 full-time equivalent staff with an annual operating budget of approximately £1.1 million. The CSU is supported by ring-fenced funding of around £1.2 million within EA. This figure does not include other EA staff whose roles contribute to statutory functions that may transfer to the new body, such as elements of school governance, school improvement and area planning who provide support to the controlled sector. These roles, along with their associated budgets, if transferring to the new organisation will form part of its initial operational workforce.

- For comparison, it is CSSC's understanding that CCMS operates with an annual budget of approximately £3.5 million and employs around 46 staff, however it holds additional statutory duties as an employer and property owner. CCMS currently supports around 30 percent fewer schools than the proposed new organisation will serve. This comparison demonstrates that the proposed model for the controlled sector is proportionate and represents efficient use of public resources.
- Implementation will require careful planning and consideration. Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (TUPE) arrangements must ensure a seamless transition for staff transferring from CSSC and the CSU, protecting terms and conditions and minimising disruption to service delivery. Effective collaboration with education partners, including CCMS as an authority with comparable responsibilities, will also be important to ensure shared learning and a consistent approach to sectoral support.
- Harmonisation of terms and conditions will be required to ensure fair, consistent, and coherent employment structures from the outset, avoiding the creation of a two-tier workforce and the associated equality and equal pay issues.
- The new organisation will inherit an established Corporate Services team from CSSC through TUPE transfer. To maximise resources and promote consistency across the education system, opportunities to share business support functions with other education bodies, such as CCMS, should be explored.
- Once staffing and associated budgets transfer, there will be no further need for CSSC or the CSU within the system, as their functions will be subsumed by the new organisation subject to the legislation enacted by the Assembly. This transition will establish a single dedicated body with the authority, accountability, and focus required to deliver equitable and effective support for the controlled sector.
- In developing the new organisation, there are important lessons to be drawn from CSSC's experience since its establishment. CSSC's approach has been relational rather than transactional. It has built trust with schools and governors, enabling open dialogue and effective support. CSSC's responsiveness to the needs of schools, its commitment to consultation and engagement, and its recognised role as the voice of the controlled sector are key strengths that should be carried forward. Embedding these principles in the design and operation of the new organisation will be central to its success.
- CSSC supports the concurrent phased approach as the most effective means of ensuring continuity and knowledge retention, minimising disruption, and

delivering a structured transition to a dedicated body capable of providing independent sectoral leadership and equitable support for controlled schools.