



Controlled Schools' Support Council
2nd floor, Main Building
Stranmillis University College
Belfast, BT9 5DY
T: 028 9531 3030
E info@csscni.org.uk

3 March 2026

Dear Sir/Madam,

Department of Education Consultation on a pupil attendance strategy - Attendance Matters

Feedback from the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC)

CSSC welcomes the opportunity to consider and respond to the Department of Education's consultation on a pupil attendance strategy - Attendance Matters.

The Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) is the sectoral support body for controlled schools in Northern Ireland. CSSC works on behalf of controlled schools and the wider controlled education sector to enhance the quality of education provision.

The controlled education sector is the largest, most diverse education sector in Northern Ireland comprising 49% of all schools across all phases: nursery, special, primary, secondary, grammar, integrated and Irish medium schools.

CSSC's vision is to empower controlled schools to serve their communities by enriching the lives of their children and young people.

CSSC's mission is to:

- Support better outcomes for all pupils through provision of high-quality education.
- Build understanding that the controlled sector is diverse and inclusive.
- Promote the role controlled schools have in serving their communities.
- Engage and collaborate with partners to ensure equitable support for the controlled sector.
- Optimise opportunities to encourage effective governance in controlled schools.
- Represent the sector effectively to ensure an enduring and valued role for controlled schools within a network of sustainable schools.
- Promote trust and respect by nurturing a collective ethos, reflective of the controlled sector's values and culture.

Controlled Schools' Support Council www.csscni.org.uk
Registered with The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland NIC107873
A company limited by Guarantee Registered in Northern Ireland NI619273

CSSC welcomes the development of the Attendance Matters Strategy and its aim to support children and young people to attend school every day. CSSC shares the concerns regarding recent trends in the level of pupil absence and acknowledges that regular and consistent school attendance is vital as a key determinant of pupils' learning, wellbeing, and long-term success.

Supporting and promoting regular school attendance is a shared responsibility that extends beyond schools themselves. CSSC welcomes the strategy's recognition of this, particularly the clear articulation of the roles and responsibilities that various stakeholders should undertake to help children and young people attend and engage in school.

CSSC notes the six priority areas which the Department will focus on to ensure that children and young people attend school every day and considers that with effective resourcing of these areas, the associated actions have the potential to support school attendance given the strategy's emphasis on understanding why children are missing from education and the emphasis on promoting nurturing, trauma informed environments. The draft strategy presents a more realistic and needs-led approach to addressing attendance issues.

CSSC has consulted with leaders of controlled schools across primary, post primary and special schools to inform this response. The challenges experienced and concerns raised differ significantly between schools, ranging from isolated issues such as unauthorised holidays to more complex individual circumstances with the attendance rates of a significant number of children and young people falling below 80%, or, in some cases, not attending school at all. The 'increase in the number of children who feel unable to attend school' is a serious concern.

School leaders within the controlled sector, with whom CSSC engaged to inform this response, welcome the focus on exploring the underlying causes of poor attendance, the acknowledgment of the importance of a supportive school environment, the emphasis on data driven early intervention and a Transformed Education Welfare Service. However, there were some concerns expressed regarding the potential impact of the strategy without stronger enforcement and clearer parental accountability.

Priority 1: Nurturing, Trauma-Informed Environments to Reduce Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA)

CSSC welcomes the consultation document's emphasis on supporting nurturing, trauma informed environments to reduce emotionally based school non-attendance. Over a number of years CSSC has worked with the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, contributing to the goal of embedding a trauma informed approach across Northern Ireland's public services. Through CSSC's Ethos and Leadership Programme, support is offered to controlled schools to embed trauma informed approaches within the culture of the school. CSSC training raises awareness of the skills that promote a trauma informed approach to practice.

CSSC recognises that trauma informed approaches are relevant to all phases of education and emphasise the importance of taking a relational approach to supporting our children

and young people. CSSC is conscious that many controlled schools implement specific strategies and interventions which can be described as trauma informed, inclusive of, but not limited to, restorative practices and Nurture provision. Engagement with school leaders has highlighted the challenges within the current financial context in sustaining current levels of small group nurture provision. Resourcing and supporting all schools to develop a trauma informed approach which benefits the whole school population has the potential to support interventions at the earliest opportunity avoiding an escalation of the behaviours which can lead to poor attendance.

The 2023 ETI Evaluation of the Preventative Curriculum in Schools and EOTAS Centres report endorsed the impact of staff professional learning in trauma informed practices. In ETI's compendium of phase insight reports, 2021 to 2024, it is noted that an increasing number of schools are using trauma-informed practice and nurturing approaches to support those children who are experiencing anxiety and/or have difficulty with social interaction, concentration and attachment. Inspection evidence shows that these approaches will only be effective as part of significant cultural shift within a school, where the theory is well-understood and there is a whole school commitment to adapt and customise the approaches, supported by robust implementation and review over a sustained period of time. Staff training must be effectively resourced to ensure that strategies, inclusive of trauma informed approaches, nurture and restorative practices are embedded into the school culture and support our children and young people to experience school in the manner that ETI describe 'as safe and secure but also as a warm, enriching and enjoyable place to be.'

CSSC notes the different roles and responsibilities which contribute to promoting attendance at school and is very aware of the significant contribution which could be made by a school counsellor, school nurse and social worker/home-school liaison officer, but emphasises the significant gaps in this type of support across schools.

The Independent Review of Education recommended that wellbeing in schools be prioritised, 'There is a need for greater investment in health and wellbeing interventions and pastoral care. To address complex needs and support the wider school workforce, schools should be enabled to employ specialist staff, such as social workers. This will require new funding and joint working with colleagues in health. Every school should have direct access to counselling services and crisis workers, either through dedicated posts within schools or resources shared between schools.'

School leaders have long emphasised the need for increased school-based counselling, staff training in trauma-informed approaches to support in addressing EBSNA, flexibility in provision and appropriately trained staff and accommodation which facilitates small-group

withdrawal in sensory rich environments to support highly anxious pupils, including those in special schools. Schools highlight the need for increased capacity within the Education Welfare Service and greater access to CAHMS. While some special schools may have access to school nursing, this is not the case for all and many do not have this specialist support despite the increasing complexity of pupil profile which includes social, emotional, behavioural and wellbeing needs.

Post-primary schools which have been able to resource counselling services report a significant positive impact on their pupils while other schools which have been able to employ youth workers and social workers also report positive outcomes which enhance the schools' current pastoral provision.

During CSSC's communication with principals, significant concerns were raised regarding the experiences of young people in special schools who may be identified as EBSNA. Many special schools are currently operating beyond their intended capacity, resulting in environments that were previously highly specialised and supportive becoming increasingly congested. Consequently, bespoke spaces and individualised learning programmes that would once have been available to support these pupils are no longer feasible. CSSC acknowledges that the Department is aware of these concerns and that the Education Authority's Plan of Action for special schools includes short, medium and long term plans to address current and projected demand for places and the intention to work to return accommodation to its original intended use. Special schools which have reported more complex behaviours have communicated a vision for special schools which truly embraces collaboration between Education and Health. CSSC notes the SEND Reform Agenda's Outcomes Framework with its focus on collaboration and multi-agency support as an approach capable of ensuring that schools are better equipped to support children and young people's regulation.

CSSC welcomes the proposed action within Priority 1 for the Education Authority to promote a new self-assessment tool in conjunction with guidance for managing attendance, including EBSNA. School leaders have noted the need for specially trained staff teams capable of supporting pupils in very small group settings. CSSC welcomes the commitment within the strategy for the Education Authority to provide professional support to schools, which will further strengthen understanding in relation to EBSNA.

CSSC welcomes the inclusion of the contribution of the Education and Training Inspectorate in the sharing of effective practices, examples of which have already been identified through the inspection process in controlled schools. CSSC welcomes the Department's intention to 'continue to support the Nurture Advisory and Support Service (NASS) to promote whole-school nurturing approaches, improving educational and wellbeing outcomes.'

Priority 2: Inclusive Strategies to Promote Positive Behaviour

CSSC recognises the importance for Boards of Governors to have the appropriate policies and procedures in place to manage behaviour, attendance, safeguarding, bullying etc. CSSC endorses the position that all regulations should be followed and implemented fully by schools through the leadership of the principal and Board of Governors. To ensure that policy and practice reflects a trauma informed and nurturing approach, CSSC commends the

SBNI's Trauma Informed Organisational Toolkit as a resource which enables leaders to evaluate their journey to implement a trauma informed approach.

Controlled school leaders expressed the importance of ensuring pupils feel safe, secure and regulated to learn, with many providing counselling and mentoring support. Support for challenging behaviour is essential in line with the agreed policy as is the promotion of positive behaviour.

CSSC is aware that some special schools, after an incident has occurred, may have to resort to a suspension. This is always a last resort and temporary measure but required on occasion to support the child, allow staff to regroup, recover and plan a way ahead following severe incidents which in some cases have resulted in damage to the school's accommodation which must be addressed to ensure the safety of pupils and staff. These incidents emphasise the need for a preventative approach with increased access to support which includes that of the Health and Social Care Trusts, access to school based mental health services and relevant community and voluntary services. The SEN Reform Agenda presents data which reveals that after cognition and learning, the rise in presenting need has been particularly acute in the category of Social, Behavioural, Emotional and Wellbeing (SBEW) and since the publication of the Reform Agenda, CSSC is aware that Requests for Involvement received by the Education Authority have seen the identified SBEW needs overtake those requests for support to meet cognition and learning needs.

Priority 3: Using data to identify vulnerable Children and Young People and deliver early interventions

CSSC recognises the impact of effective data analysis in the early identification of children and young people who require prompt intervention to address their attendance at school. The value of the data produced through SIMS/EDIS and from the Department of Education was acknowledged during CSSC discussions with controlled schools.

However, while the data will provide insights into attendance patterns across groups of children and young people, it cannot capture the individual circumstances behind each case of non-attendance. The strategies implemented by schools along with the quality of the relationship between school and home are crucial in identifying pupils' needs and ensuring the right support is put in place.

The commitment to continued funding streams to support children and young people attend school regularly is positive, however, it is unclear if additional funding will be made available across the education system for upskilling school staff, embedding trauma

informed and nurture approaches in school as well as other evidence-based support approaches.

Priority 4: Addressing Children missing education

CSSC welcomes Priority 4 which acknowledges the complex issue of children missing formal education and agrees that this requires appropriate resources and collaboration across different departments and educational bodies to ensure that an effective policy and corresponding procedures can be developed and fully implemented.

Elective home schooling remains an area in need of stronger regulation. CSSC would welcome improved transparency and accountability to ensure a child's right to education is not compromised.

Controlled school leaders also stated the requirement for monitoring of elective home-schooling to ensure high-quality provision and recommended that if the provision is not adequate then the child/young person should attend school.

Priority 5: Whole community approach to improving attendance • The Department of Education will pilot attendance improvement initiatives through the RAISE Programme involving schools, families, and communities

Through engagement with controlled schools CSSC is aware of the positive relationships that are established by schools as they work with local councils and a range of community and statutory organisations, including counselling services, youth services, extended schools' programmes and external providers such as sports clubs. CSSC welcomes the focus on piloting attendance initiatives through the RAISE programme, in partnership with schools, families and communities and would emphasise the need for wider dissemination of effective strategies.

While some communities play an active and supportive role in working with parents to promote regular school attendance, others would benefit from stronger, more consistent community engagement. Many schools indicate that deeper collaboration with local community and voluntary services would help families overcome practical and emotional barriers to attendance. Strengthened community partnerships can reinforce the value of consistent attendance, provide families with accessible support and create a shared sense of responsibility for ensuring that every child and young person feels able to attend and thrive in school.

CSSC agrees that everyone has a role to play in encouraging and promoting school attendance and this is supported by controlled school leaders who articulated the importance of working closely with parents. Schools expressed how they engage with parents as soon as possible, when attendance issues are identified, to support early intervention approaches, such as raising awareness of the impact of school absence, opening lines of communication to ensure that parents can discuss concerns.

School leaders have raised significant concerns about increasing levels of non-attendance among some newcomer families, particularly in relation to extended periods of leave for childminding responsibilities, low-cost travel and cultural or religious holidays and wish to stress the importance of raising awareness about the impact that prolonged absences have on pupils' learning, wellbeing and integration, as well as the vital benefits of consistent attendance in school.

Controlled school leaders expressed concerns regarding the volume of unauthorised absences, including holidays taken during term time. They also highlighted the significant challenges faced by parents who, despite their best intentions, struggle to secure their children's regular attendance. School leaders also suggested that parents should be supported to establish good routines and work with the school when issues arise. The need for a media campaign which would not only highlight the need to attend school but also the impact of not attending (especially in the long term), was also emphasised.

While CSSC welcomes the recognition that schools cannot be expected to resolve complex family circumstances, it is acutely aware of the extensive efforts made by schools to engage with parents and to liaise with external agencies to provide appropriate support. CSSC also recognises that schools would benefit from improved communication and coordination among support bodies to ensure effective multi-agency working, thereby maximising the impact of interventions. Despite the overall value of partnerships in supporting pupils who access them, some schools regrettably report that pupils with very low attendance or school avoidance often do not engage with these opportunities, which inevitably limits their impact.

Priority 6: Transforming support for schools and settings

Based on their experience school leaders have indicated the need for additional and more timely support, including quicker access to specialist mental health services, increased capacity within the Education Welfare Service, and enhanced pastoral and nurture resources.

CSSC has also been made aware of a concern regarding a perceived absence of priority afforded to special schools by the Education Welfare Service. CSSC recommends engagement with special school leaders to ensure there is shared understanding of the specific needs of this sector. Mainstream schools would welcome more capacity within the Education Welfare Service, along with clearer pathways to external agencies, which they believe would also strengthen their ability to respond.

Controlled school leaders informed CSSC of the many ways they work to support pupils who do not attend school regularly including early identification, regular monitoring, contact with home, identification of trigger points, letters and phone calls and referral to the Education Welfare Service when required, alongside a range of pastoral, nurturing and multi-agency supports. It is worth noting the concerns expressed in relation to pupils whose attendance falls below 80-90%, as some school leaders find the interventions previously referenced become less effective despite flexible provision, key adult support and ongoing parental communication. School requests for assistance from statutory bodies should be addressed in a timely manner to ensure there is proactive support and help to address complex needs.

CSSC welcomes the focus within the strategy to implement a transformed Education Welfare Service aimed at supporting children and young people experiencing personal difficulties with attendance as well as delivering preventative and early interventions.

CSSC acknowledges that the increase in pupil absence clearly demonstrates a need for effective interventions to address concerns, this will require investment in time and money and a focus on the impact of this investment. CSSC would reiterate concerns regarding sufficient resources being made available and efficient service delivery to ensure effective implementation of the strategy especially within the current financial climate.

All schools are currently navigating difficult budgetary pressures with recent media coverage indicating that some can no longer sustain established nurture provisions, this reinforces the requirement for sufficient funding to ensure the attendance strategy is effectively implemented, challenges are addressed and current systems become fully operational.

In addition, some schools also expressed the view that greater use of sanctions may be necessary, as they want to see increased parental accountability alongside clearer understanding among all services involved in a child's care or welfare about the scope of each other's interventions. Schools have highlighted that expectations placed on education, and at times on other services can be unrealistic, which can create tension or misunderstanding when trying to deliver the most appropriate support.

Communication is key at all levels in supporting families to ensure children and young people attend school and CSSC welcomes the extensive engagement that is being undertaken with different stakeholders to inform this consultation. Fundamentally it is vital that interventions happen in a timely manner and that strategies are put in place in the initial stages of education prior to post primary, ensuring nurturing, positive attitudes to education as early as possible. Schools have indicated that support varies case by case, and limited staffing and access to external support often delay early intervention. CSSC would welcome greater synchronisation and multi-agency support that works collaboratively placing the child or young person at the centre from the earliest point and for as long as is required.

CSSC is grateful to the Department of Education for the opportunity to contribute to this consultation and is available for further comment if necessary.



Controlled Schools' Support Council
2nd floor, Main Building
Stranmillis University College
Belfast, BT9 5DY
T: 028 9531 3030
E info@csscni.org.uk

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Baker', written over a horizontal line.

Mark Baker
Chief Executive