

31 March 2026

Dear Sir/Madam,

**Department of Education Consultation on the Five-Year Education Budget Strategy:  
Delivering a Stable, Sustainable and High-Quality Education System**

**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 Consultation on the Five-Year Education Budget Strategy: Delivering a Stable, Sustainable and High-Quality Education System.
- The controlled sector is the largest education sector in Northern Ireland, representing 49% of all schools. CSSC supports controlled schools in Northern Ireland which include Nursery Schools, Primary Schools, Secondary Schools, Grammar Schools, Integrated Schools, Special Schools and Irish-Medium Schools.
- 38 of 40 Special Schools in NI are controlled schools and 32,729 pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are educated within controlled schools.

**Investing in Education**

- The Independent Review of Education (IRE)<sup>1</sup> 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.'
- CSSC continues to be concerned about the impact of underfunding on children in our education system. This may have a more significant impact on the most vulnerable children. The significant funding deficit facing education, with schools reporting deficits and infrastructure delays, directly undermines efforts to support disadvantaged children. The strategy must address how adequate, sustainable education funding will be secured.

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<sup>1</sup> [Independent Review of Education](#)

- CSSC remains concerned with the significant limitations to education funding and its impact on our children and young people and specifically the greatest impact being on the most disadvantaged children and young children. This follows over a decade of systemic underfunding of education in NI evidenced by a report from the Institute of Fiscal Studies<sup>2</sup>.
- Historic underfunding has resulted in reduced school budgets which impacted negatively upon services provided to all schools by the Education Authority (EA) and specifically controlled schools given EA's role as managing authority.
- As noted in the new TransformED NI<sup>3</sup> strategy released in March 2025, "The growing economic power houses of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are those nations that have placed an absolute premium on getting their education system right. Northern Ireland must do the same." This aligns with CSSC's position that education is not merely an expense but an investment in Northern Ireland's future.
- 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.
- With the increase in SEN provision requirements and 33,729 SEN pupils in controlled schools, adequate resourcing of support is essential. The Department should recognise the connection between SEN support needs and disadvantage, ensuring that children with additional needs receive the wraparound services necessary for their development.
- Effective multi-agency working is required without delay to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and young people. This is particularly important for supporting appropriate pathways post-16 for children with SEN, where there are often gaps in support during transition to adult services. The strategy should ensure coordinated support across education, health, and social services to support young people during these critical transition periods.
- CSSC agrees with the Department of Education that the current draft strategy will still lead to difficult funding decisions having to be taken in order for the Department to live within its means. CSSC agrees that this will have a negative impact on the education system, with children with Special Education Needs facing significant impact. Therefore, CSSC is supportive of innovative ways to ensure that children and young people can get adequate support within the parameters of the resources available.

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<sup>2</sup> [How does school spending per pupil differ across the UK? | Institute for Fiscal Studies](#)

<sup>3</sup> [TransformED NI: Transforming teaching and learning: a strategy for Educational Excellence in Northern Ireland | Department of Education](#)

### Education Reform

- CSSC is supportive of mechanisms that ensure schools are financially stable but also safeguard quality education in Northern Ireland. It is important that any changes in service provision are evidence-informed and align with the ethos of the school involved.
- 27% of children and young people who attend controlled schools are entitled to Free School Meals. CSSC recognise the importance of children and young people having a nutritious meal when attending school as it been shown that it improves their learning. We welcome that the Department are looking to modernise this service, however, this should not be to the detriment of the quality of food or limit the access to children and young people that rely on this service. CSSC also supports the proposal to direct the EA to introduce a standardised approach to its provision of catering services commissioned by schools such as breakfast clubs and school meals provision.
- There is widespread recognition that the cost and availability of home to school transport has increased dramatically over the last number of years. It is important that the policy ensures equitable access in line with the needs of children and young people. However, CSSC does recognise the need to ensure sustainable costs are achieved. Therefore, while the need for reform is necessary, it must be balanced against the need to protect the Department's obligations on equality and parental preference of school.
- In cases of children with SEN, there needs to be a recognition that children and young people should be able to attend the school that is best able to cater for their needs and appropriate transport should be provided to ensure that this is possible.
- CSSC note the proposal to transition from the current classroom support model for children with SEN Statements in mainstream schools. Support is currently based predominantly on one-to-one assistance and is proposed to change to the implementation of alternative models of SEN support that prioritise whole school strategies and small group teaching. It is important that any change is funded appropriately and gives schools the flexibility to tailor support to the needs of children and young people. It is also important that any changes respect the positive impact classroom assistants have had on our children and young people and maximises their expertise moving forward.

- It is also important that all staff are given appropriate training and development in this transition to ensure that it can be implemented to a high standard for the benefit of the children and young people involved.
- CSSC notes that IRE made a recommendation to ‘reconfigure the network of schools’<sup>4</sup>. This recommendation noted that an area planning commission should be set up to ‘prepare a plan for a revised network of schools with more efficient and sustainable admission and enrolment numbers, capable of offering a complete curriculum experience to all learners.’<sup>5</sup> According to IRE this would generate savings of up to £100 million. CSSC supports this recommendation noting that appropriate pupil-teacher ratios should be included in the planning to ensure we have the right schools, in the right places of the right size.
- The total school age population is projected to fall, by 8.2% between 2023/24 and 2030/31. This means that it is imperative that action is taken to ensure schools are sustainable and an appropriate size. It is important to note that communities will need reassurance that any change to school provision is implemented in a managed way that is evidence informed.
- It is concerning that 71% of grant-aided schools are now projecting deficits in their accounts. Therefore, there is a great need to change how schools are funded to ensure they can be sustainable in the future. As staffing is the major cost for every school, it is difficult to manage school budgets. Therefore, it is encouraging to see the Department looking at other centralised staffing methods to ensure that the right staff are in the right school whilst also ensuring local decision making is respected. This, alongside other proposals will ensure that schools are agile, and are able to be sustainable in the long term, especially considering the restructuring of the school estate due to a school-age population decline over the next decade.

## Conclusion

- The TransformEd NI strategy notes that “high-performing education systems are those that achieve excellence, equity and efficiency: world-class levels of performance, for every pupil, at a sustainable cost.”<sup>6</sup> This won’t happen without sufficient funding or investment and significant system change.
- CSSC is supportive of the Department’s view that structural reform is required to ensure that an education system is sustainable within challenging financial circumstances. In particular, CSSC is supportive of the guiding principles of education reform in the consultation document of “protect learning, protect teachers and protect school funding”.<sup>7</sup>
- A young person is less likely to outperform in their examinations if they go to a controlled school. 63% of young people from non-grammar maintained schools will

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<sup>4</sup> [Investing in a Better Future - Volume 3.pdf](#)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> [TransformED NI Ex Summary.pdf](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Microsoft Word - DE-Five-Year-Budget-Strategy-4-2-26](#)



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gain 5 GCSE including English and Maths A\*-C compared to 54% in non-grammar controlled schools. Any change in education provision must not be to the detriment of controlled schools or the children and young people that attend them.

- CSSC remains committed to working constructively with the Executive and the Department of Education to ensure that all children and young people in Northern Ireland have access to high-quality education that prepares them for life and work in the 21st century.

Yours faithfully,

Mark Baker  
Chief Executive