

22 May 2026

Dear Sir/Madam,

Enhanced Support Model: Ensuring that our Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs reach their full potential.

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 Education Authority (EA)'s Consultation on the Enhanced Support Model: Ensuring that our Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs reach their full potential.
- 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. Additionally, 27% of children and young people who attend controlled schools are entitled to Free School Meals.
- 38 of 40 Special Schools in NI are controlled schools and 32,250 pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are educated within controlled schools.
- CSSC invited the leaders of controlled schools to share their views on the proposed model. More than 20 schools engaged with CSSC to inform this response.

Policy Background

- The Independent Review of Education (IRE)¹ 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 our education system. The significant funding deficit facing education, with schools reporting deficits

¹ [Independent Review of Education](#)

and infrastructure delays directly undermines efforts to support our children and young people.

- The profile of our pupil population has continued to change over recent years resulting in increased pressures in SEN provision. SEN Transformation is a priority for the Executive and adequate resourcing is essential to support the SEN Reform Agenda and deliver “Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs”.
- Effective multi-agency working is required without delay to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEN. Enhanced partnership working between Education and Health is vital as early identification supports earlier intervention and better outcomes.
- CSSC has publicly raised concerns regarding the significant constraints on 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 Institute of Fiscal Studies.
- Historic underfunding has resulted in reduced school budgets which has impacted negatively upon services provided to all schools by the EA but particularly Controlled Schools. It is vital that the Northern Ireland Executive agree a multi-year budget with an adequate and appropriate settlement to give schools the opportunity to plan and implement new processes such as the Enhanced Support Model (ESM) but also current programmes such as nurture funding and extended schools.
- As noted in the TransformED NI² strategy published in March 2025, "The growing economic power houses of the 21st 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.

Flexibility and funding – key considerations for schools

- In general, the leaders of controlled schools are supportive of the ESM proposals to allow schools greater flexibility to tailor support for children and young people with SEN. Ultimately, school leaders are keen to ensure that SEN support is available to children and young people at every stage of the Code of Practice and that adequate resourcing is provided at every stage of the learner’s journey.
- While school leaders agree in theory with the overall aim of the ESM, significant concerns were expressed regarding the support for schools’ practical implementation of this model, and several school leaders described a lack of clarity regarding the processes that will need to be followed to implement the model. Concerns were also expressed regarding the unknown resource allocation to schools to facilitate new models of provision.

² [TransformED NI: Transforming teaching and learning: a strategy for Educational Excellence in Northern Ireland | Department of Education](#)

- School SENCOs have supported significant SEND Transformation in controlled schools in recent years and concerns were expressed about the potential for a premature introduction of this model to add to SENCO workload when processes such as the Graduated Response Framework are not fully embedded. The proposed timeline for what CSSC understands is a phased introduction, is seen as 'extremely tight' and the introduction of these proposals at this stage of the academic year does not give schools sufficient time to plan for changes to their provision for children with SEN.
- School leaders expressed the view that the success of the proposed ESM also relies on the support which precedes the statutory assessment process and effectively resourced Local Impact Teams (LIT) responsive to the needs of children and young people are crucial. LITs should be able to support capacity building in schools but also direct interventions which precede or potentially mitigate the need for statutory assessment. Without effectively embedding the processes around early identification and intervention alongside the Graduated Response Framework, schools' trust and confidence in the capacity of the Education Authority to introduce an effectively resourced ESM are low.
- In discussing implications for staff workload, school leaders also referred to the demands of other strategies on staff capacity to implement change, referring to the significant expectations of the Department's TransformED strategy for teaching and learning. Without sufficient support to embed current policies and strategies, school leaders are concerned that competing demands may contribute to staff workload pressures. Nursery School Principals have highlighted workload pressures due to lack of principal release which fails to recognise the demands of leadership coupled with the responsibilities for principals of also being the SENCO in the nursery sector.
- School principals expressed concerns that the ESM could jeopardise relationships with parents. Principals noted that their ability to implement flexible approaches will rely on agreement from parents who, having navigated a complex statutory assessment process, may be reluctant to accept anything other than the traditional offer of 1:1 classroom support.
- Principals were clear that EA must support schools in communicating the rationale for these new approaches to parents. School leaders are concerned that EA will not place

significant value on the schools' professional judgement, failing to recognise that staff hold the deepest understanding of the child's needs. This is not about EA automatically endorsing school decisions regarding flexible models of support but ensuring that those closest to the child meaningfully shape the outcome. Schools recognise that situations will arise where their professional view of the support a child needs is not shared by the parent. It is critical that EA places genuine value on the school's professional judgement and that this expertise is clearly articulated and consistently applied particularly as parents will be wary of differing approaches across schools. This reinforces the need for transparent communication and shared understanding so that decisions remain grounded in the child's best interests.

- School leaders acknowledge that 1:1 support is not always needed on a full-time basis for one child and that support from a classroom assistant can be utilised to benefit more than one child's learning. Parents' understanding that the classroom assistant support is exclusively for their child' can often lead to friction between parents and school leaders so the potential to leave this negotiation of how to use the additional resource to support the child to principals could compromise the quality of school and parent relationships. Schools acknowledged that the numbers of classroom assistants within their schools has increased significantly in recent years, which increases the management load for school leaders. One school noted that they currently have 11 classroom assistants split between two Primary 5 classes and that such a scenario adds to the complexity of management for school leaders and also places pressure on available classroom space.
- The publicised concerns of different advocacy groups about the legality of the ESM has also led to concerns that schools may be faced with litigious action and some school leaders, sharing previous examples of insufficient support from EA when faced with SENDIST tribunals, expressed concerns about the capacity of EA to provide the relevant support to schools in such instances.
- In implementing a more flexible model, the lack of available space will for many schools present as a challenge. Some school leaders commented on the lack of accommodation to facilitate opportunities such as small group withdrawal or additional teacher led classes. The lack of available accommodation may therefore limit the extent to which schools can be creative in their use of this proposed flexibility.

A Range of Perspectives Across Schools

- During engagement with school leaders, differing views were apparent across school phase, type and size.
- The leaders of nursery schools describe how they are often the first professionals to note the additional needs of the child and referred to missed opportunities for earlier

intervention due to inconsistencies in access to health visiting support. Principals note that the required support often comes too late during the pre-school year and in many cases the statutory assessment process is incomplete when the child transitions to P1.

- The view was expressed that there appears to be no specific plan for Early Years in the consultation despite various studies and research reports which emphasise the importance of this stage of development and of early intervention. A more joined up approach to service provision between Education and Health is critical. The need for greater support for parents beginning pre-birth was emphasised with a focus on supporting parents to understand their child's developmental milestones and how to best support the different stages of development.
- The leaders of nursery schools emphasised the need for a review of the adult:child ratio in statutory nursery classes and believe that this would better support the expertise within controlled settings to support children with SEN. School leaders have welcomed the flexibility enabled by the Pre-School Inclusion Fund to resource additional support and many have directed this resource to the recruitment of additional adult assistant to address the inadequate adult:child ratio and strengthen their capacity in meeting the needs of an increasingly more complex pupil profile who, as previously mentioned, have often not had their needs identified prior to the pre-school year.
- While the EA's LITs are available to support statutory pre-school settings, CSSC is conscious that staffing levels of the Early Years Teams are not at a sufficient level to provide the timely support required. School leaders also highlighted that where LIT intervention is provided, adult:child ratios are compromised because of the need to release an adult assistant to facilitate small group withdrawal.
- School leaders have expressed concerns about consistency of provision across schools and have cautioned that the level of support which schools will be able to provide will rely on the number of children with statements of SEN within the setting. School leaders emphasised that the number of statements within a setting does not always represent an accurate picture of need within schools and the resource required to meet those needs.
- Post-primary schools are more receptive to the proposed model as they have already been enabled to employ a flexible model of support, in many cases, converting

classroom assistant hours to teaching hours which have supported smaller class sizes or resourcing interventions by other professionals. One school outlined how 144 of their young people have a statement of special educational needs and a flexible approach to the resource associated with these statements has enabled them to employ 66 full time classroom assistants and 16 teachers. They believe that this flexibility has been crucial in ensuring that pupils receive the right support from both teaching and non-teaching staff.

- The school spoke highly of the crucial role that classroom assistants perform in supporting pupils with SEN to fully access their learning but also to fully access social interactions,, acknowledging that the needs of their young people are varied and the role of the classroom assistant in supporting relationship building is an extremely important contribution to ensuring that their young people's needs are met.
- While some primary schools have also enjoyed the flexibility to pool the classroom assistant resource and employ a teacher, it has not been the experience of all primary schools and several school leaders have shared their experiences of requests to facilitate more creative, flexible approaches which were subsequently refused by EA or curtailed due to parental refusal to agree amendments to their child's statement.
- This response has emphasised the need for all schools to be resourced effectively to meet the needs of children with SEN. All phases of education have experienced a change in their pupil profile with more complex needs impacting on the ability of staff to respond as, often, the training available has failed to keep pace with the changing pupil profile. Special schools are clear that the ESM does not propose any meaningful change for special schools and this is a source of frustration for a sector which has communicated that they already feel unsupported due to their inability to access the support of the Local Impact Teams.
- Practitioners within special schools have articulated how they are often regarded as the experts and, in many situations, expected to support mainstream schools who have agreed to facilitate specialist provisions. They raise concerns about the extent to which they as the identified experts are being supported to further develop their capacity to meet the complex needs of our most vulnerable children and young people. It is crucial that EA continue to meaningfully engage with special schools to establish their resourcing and support requirements.

Classroom Assistants – valuing and supporting the role

- School leaders across all phases of education acknowledged the vital role that classroom assistants carry out in the school environment and commented on the range of interventions which classroom assistants support in schools. Several school leaders described how the expectations of the role have changed and the duties of a classroom assistant have moved beyond traditional expectations. Schools spoke of their significant investment in the professional development of classroom assistants to facilitate a range

of interventions and noted that there needs to be a better understanding of the changing pupil profile so that professional development opportunities can be provided by the EA which supports staff capacity to respond.

- School leaders agreed that this vital role is inadequately remunerated leading to difficulties in retaining quality staff. Several school leaders referred to enhanced career pathways in other jurisdictions with better pay structures which could be emulated in Northern Ireland, and which recognise the role as comparable to that of a Teaching Assistant allowing also for enhanced responsibilities.
- School leaders are in favour of developing an enhanced career pathway for classroom assistants which is supported by a recognised pay scale and appropriate professional development which supports staff to meet the needs of a more complex pupil profile. This would attract more recruits into the profession and address the current acute workforce pressures schools experience when trying to recruit. However, many were sceptical this could be achieved in the current financial environment.
- While acknowledging the contribution of classroom assistants to supporting school provision, there was some agreement with the view articulated in the consultation document that 1:1 support is not always the best solution to meeting specific needs and as the child grows older, reliance on this approach may become less beneficial for the child's long-term development. School leaders acknowledged that there are times where an over-reliance on classroom assistants can lead to the child developing a learned helplessness which hinders the development of necessary independence skills. It was also noted that while classroom assistants can support children and young people in building positive relationship with peers, there is a potential risk that 1:1 support, for some children, may prevent their full inclusion amongst peers.
- In discussing the minimum qualification levels for classroom assistants' schools were of the view that GCSE English and Maths should be a prerequisite for employment to ensure that classroom assistants have the necessary skills to support children who experience difficulties with literacy and numeracy.
- School leaders highlighted that the essential criteria to employ classroom assistants has been changed by the EA and concerns about the EA's commitment to professionalise the workforce whilst also reducing the criteria for recruitment were expressed by some school leaders. Many schools recognise that a minimum qualification standard should be

established to work as a classroom assistant due to the significance of the role, however, the need to retain those with relevant experience from other previous roles was emphasised, and principals cautioned against criteria which could restrict entry of suitably experienced individuals to the profession. School leaders referred to how many of their most effective classroom assistants were parents returning to the workforce and their nurturing skills were invaluable to supporting the child's development.

- It was noted by many schools that permanent 52-week contracts would be more beneficial for school provision, supporting staff retention and would also enable staff to more fully engage with school improvement. School leaders noted that currently, classroom assistants employed on temporary part-time contracts are often unable to attend school development days as their participation requires the school to fund additional hours which is not always possible due to limited school budgets.

A multi-disciplinary approach to supporting controlled schools

- During engagement with schools, there was widespread agreement that other professions need to be involved in the implementation of the ESM. Schools spoke of the potential benefits of Allied Health Professional Support provided onsite and spoke of how place-based interventions would benefit children and their families. One post-primary school spoke of the need for educational psychology support on-site and described how previous educational psychologist support had worked well to support the pupils but also staff's ability to respond to behaviour which challenges.
- The need for greater access to the support of Allied Health Professionals has been a recurring theme in conversations with the leaders of special schools for several years. During EA's consultation activity with special schools it was noted that special schools are having to support parents of children with SEN who, frustrated by the lack of AHP support in specialist provisions in mainstream schools, mistakenly believe that a move to a special school will result in better AHP support which is often not the case with special schools also frustrated in their access to this vital support.
- School leaders spoke of the significant speech and language delays with which some children present and described the difficulties for parents in managing appointments. School leaders noted that such support provided on site would better support children and their families, however, school leaders are very aware of the shortages in speech and language therapists available to schools.
- The work of RISE NI was discussed and there was agreement that at its best, when characterised by direct intervention for the child, this represents an effective model, however, school leaders noted that the support from RISE NI has become overly reliant on advice and guidance rather than the direct interventions which serve to support the child but also build the capacity of school staff.
- School leaders queried whether the services of other professionals would be sourced and managed by the EA as service provider or whether schools would be responsible for

this. If schools were to be responsible, additional funding and expertise would need to be provided to help manage and support these staff.

Conclusion

- School leaders strongly feel that there is a lack of clarity on what the ESM will look like in practice. There is significant scepticism from primary school leaders, regarding the capacity of EA to support schools to implement these changes.
- CSSC has noted a significant lack of trust in the consultation process and in the underlying motives for change which schools believe are largely driven by the serious budget pressures facing schools. There is also widespread concern about the proposed implementation timeline and the ability of schools to prepare for participation at this stage of the academic year and in a context in which there are concerns about the legal standing of the model.
- While in favour of enhanced flexibility to meet the needs of children and young people with SEN, schools require more detail about the processes to support implementation and believe that EA should provide specific guidance and flowcharts to support the decision making of principals and SENCOs. Without more detailed advice and guidance for schools, there are concerns that the ESM will not deliver the intended outcomes for our children and young people.
- Schools also require assurances that these changes will be supported with recurrent funding from EA. Principals were clear that these changes cannot come from existing school budgets.
- CSSC is happy to discuss this response with the Education Authority.

Yours faithfully,



Mark Baker
Chief Executive