

The Missing Middle: A System Delivery Risk Across Northern Ireland Government

STATUTORY BASIS AND PURPOSE

This report is issued in exercise of my statutory functions under section 3D of the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.¹ It is issued independently and is not subject to direction or control by any Department.

Its purpose is to identify and clarify a significant system delivery risk made visible through the cancellation and subsequent reinstatement of special school summer schemes,² and to establish what those events reveal about how delivery holds, or fails to hold, where responsibility is shared across government.

This report examines what those events reveal about how public systems operate where delivery depends on coordinated action across government.

Through the exercise of my statutory functions, I have established a clear line of sight between statutory duties, system operation and lived experience. This is not a one-off breakdown, but a recurring and predictable pattern in how delivery is secured in practice across government in Northern Ireland.

This report also draws attention to the human impact of that pattern, particularly for families supporting those with the most complex needs.

INTRODUCTION

The decision on 27 March 2026 to proceed with special school summer schemes, reversing the previous days' announcement of their cancellation, provided immediate relief to children, young people and families who rely on that provision for structure, regulation, continuity, care and practical support through the summer period.

However, the events preceding that resolution raise significant questions, particularly in relation to cross-departmental working and communication.

¹ [Autism Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#)

² [Statement on summer schemes at special schools | Education Authority Northern Ireland](#); [Statement on summer schemes at special schools | Department of Education](#); [Joint statement by the Department of Health and the Education Authority | Department of Health](#); [Summer Schemes Update | Education Authority Northern Ireland](#); [Special Schools Summer Schemes | Education Authority Northern Ireland](#)

A resolution is welcome, but it is not the same as reassurance. It does not undo the uncertainty, distress and disruption already experienced by families. It does not answer why a known and valued service became unstable so late in the process.

The question is not simply one of what happened. It is a question of how delivery holds, or does not hold, when coordinated action across government and its systems is required, and the very real human impact of that.

A SYSTEM PATTERN, NOT A SINGLE EVENT

The circumstances surrounding the withdrawal and reinstatement of special school summer schemes are consistent with a wider pattern identified through the exercise of my independent statutory scrutiny.

This pattern is well recognised and has been evidenced repeatedly across policy, practice and independent analysis over time.

Across multiple areas, evidence indicates recurring weaknesses in coordination, limited cross-government ownership, and insufficiently clear accountability for delivery in practice.

This is not about intent, but rather how systems operate together in practice.

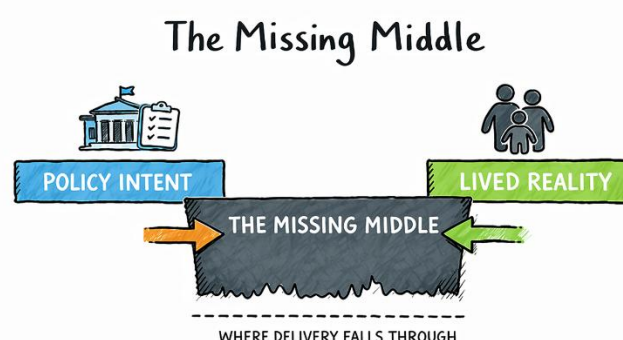
**Activity exists. Commitment exists. Responsibility exists in part.
But the conditions required for reliable delivery are not consistently secured.**

This issue goes directly to whether statutory and public responsibilities are being realised in practice where delivery depends on coordinated action across government.

THE MISSING MIDDLE

Government and policy commitments establish what should be delivered. Services and frontline provision reflect what is experienced. Between these sits the point at which delivery must be secured.

This report describes that critical space as the ‘missing middle’.



The missing middle is the gap between policy intent and lived reality, where the operational arrangements, shared responsibilities, practical pathways and accountability required to make delivery work have not been clearly agreed, aligned or sustained.

This is where delivery succeeds or fails in practice.

Where this middle is weak or absent, a consistent pattern emerges. Responsibility is shared but not clearly held. Delivery becomes conditional rather than reliable. Problems are resolved late rather than prevented early. Families absorb the uncertainty created by the system.

Where delivery depends on coordinated action across government systems, the absence of operational alignment creates predictable failure.

The missing middle is not visible in strategy documents and is not clearly owned at a cross-government level. It is, however, experienced every day by the people who rely on services.

Therefore, the line of sight between statutory duties, system operation and lived experience is not consistently maintained and does not hold in practice.

SPECIAL SCHOOL SUMMER SCHEMES AS A SYSTEM TEST

Recent events relating to special school summer schemes provide a clear example of this problem.

The initial position was definitive. The Education Authority advised that schemes could not proceed safely without the necessary support from health, and this position was presented as final for 2026.

The following day, the joint statement from the Departments of Education and Health confirmed that nursing support would be provided at every site, enabling the schemes to proceed.

The safety logic did not change. The underlying requirement did not change. Importantly, the need for nursing support was already known.

What changed was alignment.

A position presented as final was resolved within a short timeframe. This demonstrates that the constraint was not absolute, but conditional on alignment across government and its delivery systems.

This was not impossibility.
It was unaligned delivery.

This is the missing middle.

The events surrounding the summer schemes should therefore be understood not simply as a service-specific issue, but as a practical test of Northern Ireland's capacity to secure reliable delivery where responsibility is shared across government.

DEFINED SYSTEM DELIVERY RISK

The events relating to summer schemes demonstrate a wider and well-evidenced challenge in how policy is delivered in Northern Ireland.

Independent analysis, including recent system-level reviews, has identified persistent silo working, limited cross-government ownership, and a gap between stated commitments and real-world outcomes.

The missing middle sits at the centre of that gap.

Government carries a delivery risk where cross-government alignment is not secured in advance.

This risk is foreseeable.

This does not sit within a single Department. It is a cross-government delivery issue requiring cross-government ownership.

The pattern described is not unpredictable. It is a foreseeable consequence of delivery arrangements that are not secured across system boundaries.

This is where examination must now focus, where change must occur, and where assurance is required.

WIDER RELEVANCE

Through my statutory role, I maintain oversight across a range of areas where delivery depends on coordinated action across government systems. The pattern described in this report is therefore not confined to one service or one moment. It is visible across multiple areas of public provision.

It is evident, in different forms, across transition to adulthood, respite and short breaks, access to education and sustained participation in school, and other points where autistic people and families must navigate the interfaces between health, education, social care and community provision.

In transition to adulthood, planning is not consistently multi-agency or operationalised across systems. Continuity into adulthood is not reliably secured.

In respite and short breaks, the issue is often framed solely as scarcity. While capacity pressures are real, they do not fully explain lived experience. Funding has increased, but provision has not aligned to need and delivery is not operationally secured.

Support remains fragile, inconsistent and inaccessible.

The same families are repeatedly exposed to the same structural weaknesses in how government systems operate together in practice.

THE HUMAN IMPACT

The human impact of these events has been visible and immediate. Distress experienced by children and families has been clearly reflected through media coverage and in direct communications received through my Office.

This distress is not new.

To inform my scrutiny, I surveyed autistic people, families and carers across Northern Ireland.³

A clear majority of respondents reported that public services do not make life easier. Most reported not being listened to. Half reported that their situation had worsened over the previous two years.

This demonstrates that the events relating to the SEN summer schemes are not isolated to a single moment. It reflects an established pattern.

What is described within the system as complexity is lived as uncertainty, exhaustion and, at times, crisis-level pressure.

“We are exhausted from fighting the system.”⁴

Survey responses consistently describe support as contingent on escalation or crisis, rather than reliably available.

Work, rest, family life, sibling needs, transport, care arrangements and health management all become more precarious when parents and carers are required to absorb risks that should sit with public systems.

These are not incidental frustrations. They are indicators of what happens when people are left to bridge the gap between systems that do not reliably join up.

The impact is not evenly distributed. It falls most heavily on those with the greatest level of need.

Families supporting those with the most complex needs must navigate the most complex systems. Those with the least spare capacity carry the greatest coordination burden.

A SYSTEM THAT GETS IN ITS OWN WAY

When difficulties arise, the response in Northern Ireland is often to add layers. Additional policies, frameworks, structures and processes.

Some of this may be necessary. However, additional activity does not in itself secure meaningful delivery.

Where the underlying problem is weak operational alignment, further layers increase complexity, diffuse responsibility and delay resolution.

Additional activity risks obscuring rather than resolving the conditions required for effective delivery.

Meetings are not outcomes.

Frameworks do not secure continuity.

Process does not guarantee support.

³ Independent Autism Reviewer for NI ‘Autistic Lived Experience Survey’ (2026) - the survey was open from February to mid-March 2026 and received over 600 responses, including around 500 qualitative accounts. A full report will follow.

⁴ Independent Autism Reviewer for NI ‘Autistic Lived Experience Survey’ (2026), anonymised respondent.

The issue is not how much is being discussed. The issue is what has changed as a result.

WHAT MUST NOW CHANGE

The need for change is unequivocal. Reliable delivery requires the following conditions:

Clear ownership at a cross-government level where delivery is shared. Where a service depends on more than one part of the system, responsibility must not remain collective in principle and diffuse in practice. There must be a clearly identified lead for securing delivery as a whole, even where operational contributions come from more than one organisation.

Agreed and operationalised cross-system delivery models, not assumptions. It is not enough to say that education has a role and health has a role. The system must define, in advance, how those roles connect in real conditions, including what support is required, how it is provided, by whom, and what happens when pressures arise.

Delivery defined in practical and testable terms. Too often, systems can describe activity without demonstrating whether support is reaching people consistently. Delivery should be observable, measurable and capable of scrutiny across geographic areas and organisational boundaries.

Accountability mechanisms aligned to how delivery actually happens. If an outcome depends on combined action across government, then separate reporting on separate contributions is not enough. There must be joint visibility of whether the whole service is functioning as intended.

Built-in contingency arrangements. If one part of the system cannot deliver, there must be a known and agreed route for preserving continuity. Services of this kind should not be forced into late stage uncertainty because fallback arrangements were never settled.

Coordination located within the system, not with families. The burden of coordination must be lifted from families and placed where it belongs. Coordination is a cross-government responsibility. It should not be outsourced to people already carrying extraordinary levels of care.

These are the basic conditions of reliable delivery, and against which effective scrutiny can properly test whether statutory and public responsibilities are being realised in practice.

Delivery must be secured not only in design, but at the point at which support reaches people. The system must be able to demonstrate not simply that services exist, but that they are consistently experienced as intended.

CONCLUSION

The resolution enabling special school summer schemes to proceed this summer is welcome. But it must mark the beginning of ensuring that delivery is reliably secured in practice across government.

Where outcomes depend on coordinated action across government, delivery does not fail by accident. It fails where alignment has not been secured in advance.

That risk is real.

It exists even where solutions are available.

It is felt first, and most acutely, by families.

Public systems should not depend on distress, escalation or crisis to function. Change should not be triggered only once families have absorbed uncertainty, disruption and harm. That is not a safeguard. It is a failure of design.

That is not sustainable.

It is not acceptable.

It is not consistent with statutory responsibility.

This is not an isolated issue. It is a systemic condition.

This is the point at which public intention either becomes dependable support, or collapses into uncertainty.

This is where attention must now sharpen.

This is where accountability must now hold.

This must not be set aside as resolved.

The system can deliver. The resolution clearly demonstrates that.

It must now do so reliably, not exceptionally.



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