



**Independent Autism Reviewer
for Northern Ireland**



NI ASSEMBLY EDUCATION COMMITTEE STRATEGIC REVIEW OF SEN

INDEPENDENT AUTISM REVIEWER BRIEFING

JUNE 2026

Summary Briefing

Key Findings and Questions for Scrutiny

The success of Special Educational Needs (SEN) reform in Northern Ireland will not be determined by whether systems change. It will be determined by whether children experience education differently as a result.

The central challenge facing government is not designing reform. It is delivering reform consistently, accountably and visibly in every school, every classroom and for every child.

Introduction

This summary briefing is provided in response to the Education Committee's commitment to engage with the Independent Autism Reviewer as part of its Strategic Review of current SEN provision and the SEN Reform Agenda.

The Committee is undertaking an important examination of both the challenges within current SEN arrangements and the extent to which proposed reforms are likely to improve outcomes for children and young people.

This presents an opportunity to consider not only the structures and processes that support children and young people with SEN, but also the wider conditions required for meaningful participation, genuine belonging and measurable improvements in outcomes.

While this briefing focuses primarily on evidence relating to autistic children and young people, many of the observations and conclusions are equally relevant to neurodivergent pupils, and children and young people with SEN more broadly.

This briefing draws upon research literature, departmental publications, oversight and inspection reports, professional and academic evidence, international practice, lived experience evidence, stakeholder engagement, and the Reviewer's own monitoring, survey and polling activity. Sources and supporting evidence can be provided to the Committee upon request.

Scope and Approach

In preparing this briefing, I considered not only the formal structures and processes associated with SEN provision, but also the conditions that evidence consistently identifies as necessary for successful inclusion and improved outcomes.

The evidence reviewed included consideration of:

- culture, belonging and relational safety;
- workforce capability and autism-informed practice;
- early identification and needs-led support;

- inclusive environments and anticipatory adjustments;
- participation and partnership with children, young people and families;
- integrated health and education support;
- visibility, data and accountability; and
- consistency of experience across schools and classrooms.

These themes are closely interconnected in practice. Taken together, they point towards a broader conclusion:

Children and young people do not experience legislation, strategies, governance structures or reform programmes.

They experience classrooms, relationships, and support.

They experience participation and belonging.

The Central Question

The success of SEN reform will depend not solely upon new legislation, structures, processes or guidance. It will depend upon whether those reforms are translated into consistent everyday experiences for children and young people.

The central question must remain:

How will we know that reform has improved the lived experience, participation and outcomes of children and young people rather than simply changing administrative processes?



How will government know whether reform is making a difference?

The system question.

NOT JUST...



Has reform been implemented?



Have policies been published?



Has training been delivered?



BUT RATHER...



Can **outcomes** be demonstrated?



Can **variation** be identified?



Can **hidden groups** be seen?



Can **accountability** be evidenced?



Evidence that reform is improving outcomes for all children.

THE SYSTEM MUST BE ABLE TO...



VISIBILITY

Who is seen and who is missing?



PREVALENCE

Do we understand the scale?



WAITING LISTS & ACCESS

Are children getting support in time?



DATA & INFORMATION

Is the data accurate, complete and linked?



ACCOUNTABILITY

Can leaders be held to account for outcomes?



INTEGRATION

Are health and education working together?



CLASSROOM CONSISTENCY

Does good practice reach every classroom?



GOVERNANCE

Is decision-making clear, joined-up and strategic?



INSPECTION

Does scrutiny focus on experience and outcomes?



ACTIVITY IS NOT THE PURPOSE OF REFORM. OUTCOMES ARE.



CHILDREN DO NOT EXPERIENCE POLICY. THEY EXPERIENCE PRACTICE.

Key Findings

Key Finding 1: Reform Must Be Judged by Children's Experiences

Several recurring findings emerged across the evidence base I examined. These findings may assist the Committee in considering both the strengths and challenges within current arrangements, as well as the conditions likely to be required if reform is to deliver meaningful, sustainable and measurable improvements in outcomes.

Throughout the evidence, a distinction emerged between:

- activity and outcomes;
- compliance and impact;
- placement and participation;
- attendance and belonging; and
- consultation and influence.

Children and young people do not experience reform through legislation, governance structures or delivery plans.

They experience reform through classrooms, relationships, support, participation and belonging.

The ultimate test of reform is therefore whether children experience earlier support, greater participation, improved wellbeing and better outcomes.

Key Finding 2: Culture Is the Foundation of Effective Inclusion

Evidence consistently demonstrates that culture is one of the strongest determinants of whether inclusion succeeds in practice.

Culture influences:

- how needs are recognised;
- how distress is interpreted;
- whether adjustments are made;
- whether families are trusted; and
- whether children experience school as a place of belonging.

Schools operating within the same policy and funding frameworks can produce markedly different experiences because culture differs.

Culture should therefore be viewed not as a peripheral issue, but as an inclusion issue, a safeguarding issue and an outcomes issue.

Key Finding 3: Workforce Capability Is the Critical Enabler of Reform

Every reform programme ultimately arrives at a classroom door. Children experience teachers, classroom assistants and school leaders, not policy documents.

A broad range of evidence shows that most education professionals want to support children effectively. The challenge is not commitment. The challenge is capability, confidence and support.

The Committee may therefore wish to consider whether sufficient attention is being given to workforce capability as a prerequisite for successful reform.

Key Finding 4: Children Should Not Have to Reach Crisis Before They Become Visible

A recurring theme across research is that the strongest systems identify emerging need before difficulties escalate into crisis.

Children should not have to fail before they become visible.

Particular scrutiny may be required regarding:

- children awaiting assessment;
- children on reduced timetables;
- children experiencing prolonged absence;
- children educated through EOTAS;
- children whose needs remain unrecognised; and
- children whose difficulties emerge gradually rather than dramatically.

The Committee may wish to ask:

Which children remain invisible within current systems and how would we know?

Key Finding 5: Inclusion Requires Educational Environments to Adapt

Evidence is increasingly demonstrating that successful inclusion depends not solely upon helping children adapt to school, but upon helping schools adapt to children.

Many barriers can be reduced through:

- predictable routines;
- accessible communication;
- anticipatory adjustments;
- sensory awareness;
- structured transitions;
- flexibility; and
- psychologically safe environments.

Inclusion should therefore be judged not simply by placement, but by participation.

Key Finding 6: Educational Participation Depends Upon Effective Health and Education Integration

For many children, participation in education depends upon access to health-related expertise.

Children do not experience communication needs, sensory processing differences, emotional regulation difficulties or physical health needs as separate educational and health issues. They experience them as barriers to participation.

The critical question is not:

Who owns the service?

The critical question is:

Who owns the outcome?

Key Finding 7: Northern Ireland Measures Activity Better Than Outcomes

Through my work as the Autism Reviewer it is evident across systems that Northern Ireland is currently stronger at measuring activity than outcomes.

Within education, existing systems can often report:

- referrals;
- diagnoses;
- waiting lists;

- placements;
- enrolments; and
- service activity.

However, they are less able to demonstrate:

- participation;
- belonging;
- educational access;
- lived experience;
- pathway effectiveness;
- long-term outcomes; and
- whether support is improving children's lives.

A mature system should be capable of demonstrating not only what services were delivered, but whether children's lives improved as a result.

Five Areas for Committee Scrutiny

There are five clear areas which will warrant ongoing and careful scrutiny:

1. The Enhanced Support Model

How can Northern Ireland transition towards more inclusive models of support while continuing to discharge its duties to individual children and young people?

2. Health and Education Accountability

How can Health and Education jointly own educational participation and outcomes where health-related barriers affect a child's ability to access education?

3. Consistency Across Schools and Classrooms

How can reform be implemented consistently across Northern Ireland so that children's experiences do not depend upon geography, school, classroom or teacher?

4. Visibility Before Crisis

How will the system identify and respond to emerging need before children experience crisis, exclusion, prolonged absence or placement instability?

5. Outcomes and Accountability

How will Northern Ireland know whether reform is succeeding and what evidence will demonstrate that children are genuinely better off?

What Would Success Look Like?

By the end of the current reform programme, government should be able to demonstrate:

- earlier identification of need;
- fewer children reaching crisis before support is provided;
- fewer reduced timetables;
- fewer informal exclusions;
- improved attendance;
- greater participation;
- stronger feelings of belonging;
- improved family confidence;
- more consistent experiences across schools;
- better access to health-related support;
- improved transitions; and
- stronger post-school outcomes.

These are the measures by which reform should ultimately be judged.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

— The conditions most associated with positive outcomes —



THE TEST OF REFORM



The question is not whether reform has occurred.

The question is whether children and young people experience education differently as a result.

Concluding Reflection

The challenge facing Northern Ireland is not a lack of commitment to children and young people with Special Educational Needs.

The challenge is ensuring that this commitment is experienced consistently in practice.

Successful reform will not be demonstrated by the publication of guidance, the completion of workstreams or the implementation of new processes.

It will be demonstrated when children receive support earlier, participate more fully, experience a genuine sense of belonging and achieve better outcomes.

Ultimately, the test of reform is not whether systems change. It is whether children experience education differently as a result.

HAS REFORM IMPROVED THE LIVES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE?

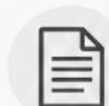


THE ULTIMATE TEST OF REFORM IS WHETHER CHILDREN AND FAMILIES CAN **SEE AND FEEL** THE DIFFERENCE.



HOW WILL GOVERNMENT KNOW THAT REFORM HAS IMPROVED THE LIVES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE?

NOT



Policies published



Processes redesigned



Training delivered



Structures created



BUT



Participation



Belonging



Earlier support



Consistency of support



Positive outcomes

1

MEASURE PARTICIPATION, NOT JUST PLACEMENT



A child can have a school place, attend school and appear in the data...



But still not be genuinely included.

THE RELEVANT QUESTIONS:



Can they participate?



Can they contribute?



Do they belong?



Are outcomes improving?

2

THE CHALLENGE IS CLASSROOM CONSISTENCY



Northern Ireland does not lack legislation, strategies, frameworks or policies.



The challenge is whether those reforms are experienced consistently in classrooms, corridors and playgrounds.



CHILDREN DO NOT EXPERIENCE POLICY. THEY EXPERIENCE PRACTICE.

Annexes

The following annexes provide additional analysis and context to support the Committee's scrutiny of current SEN provision, the SEN Reform Agenda and the conditions required for successful implementation.

Annex A

The Enhanced Support Model: Transitioning from Individual Adult Support to Inclusive Practice

Focus: Legal safeguards, workforce capability, accountability, implementation risk and outcome measurement.

Annex B

Integrated Health and Education Support: Moving from Collaboration to Shared Accountability

Focus: Educational participation, shared accountability, enforceability, and support for children with and without Statements of Special Educational Needs.

Annex C

A Reasonable SEN Process: From Identification to Outcomes

Focus: Early identification, needs-led support, specialist advice, graduated intervention, escalation pathways, transition planning and outcome monitoring.

Annex D

From Policy to Practice: Ensuring SEN Reform Reaches Every School, Every Classroom and Every Child

Focus: Implementation fidelity, consistency across schools and classrooms, culture, leadership, governance and whole-school inclusion.

Annex A

The Enhanced Support Model: Transitioning from Individual Adult Support to Inclusive Practice

A recurring theme within the Department's evidence is that one-to-one support should not be regarded as the sole route to inclusion, independence or positive educational outcomes.

The available evidence broadly supports this position. Research suggests that excessive reliance on individual adult support can, in some circumstances, unintentionally reduce independence, limit opportunities for peer interaction and increase dependence upon a particular adult.

However, the evidence does not support the opposite assumption that reducing, replacing or reorganising one-to-one support will automatically improve outcomes.

The key question is therefore not whether one-to-one support is inherently good or bad, but how Northern Ireland transitions towards more inclusive models of support while continuing to meet its legal duties to individual children and young people.

The Central Principle

The Department is not required to preserve a particular support model. It is required to continue meeting its duties to individual children and young people throughout any transition.

The safest route is therefore a phased, evidence-informed approach that:

- maintains accountability;
- builds workforce capability before flexibility;
- monitors outcomes closely; and
- ensures that no child experiences a reduction in educational access, participation, safety or opportunity during implementation.

Scrutiny Questions

Evidence and Rationale

- What evidence demonstrates that the Enhanced Support Model will improve outcomes?
- What evidence from Northern Ireland supports the proposed approach?
- What specific outcomes are expected to improve?
- What evidence would trigger modification or pause?

Legal Duties and Safeguards

- How will the Department ensure that no child experiences reduced access or participation during implementation?

- What safeguards will exist for children currently dependent upon existing support arrangements?
- How will concerns be escalated where reform is not working?

Accountability

- How will support be specified and monitored?
- How will parents know whether support has been delivered?
- What constitutes non-delivery under the new model?

Measuring Success

- Attendance.
- Participation.
- Belonging.
- Educational progress.
- Placement stability.
- Independence.
- Parent confidence.
- Post-school outcomes.

The key scrutiny question

How will the Department demonstrate that children are better off under the Enhanced Support Model than they were previously?



What Matters Most?

International evidence shows these eight conditions create the greatest likelihood of positive outcomes for children.

1



BELONGING.

Children do best when they feel safe, valued, understood and that they belong.

2



CAPABILITY.

Confident, skilled staff make the biggest difference. Ongoing learning, mentoring and support matter.

3



EARLY SUPPORT.

Identify needs early and provide the right support before difficulties escalate.

4



INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS.

Reduce barriers and create predictable, accessible and flexible environments.

5



PARTICIPATION.

Children and young people should be active partners in decisions that affect them.

6



INTEGRATED SERVICES.

Health and education work together around the child, not in separate systems.

7



VISIBILITY.

Good data and clear accountability ensure children are seen, progress is measured and gaps are closed.

8



CONSISTENCY.

Good practice should be reliable for every child, everywhere.



When these conditions are in place together, children are more likely to **participate, belong and achieve positive outcomes.**

Annex B

Integrated and Embedded Health and Education Support: Moving from Collaboration to Shared Accountability

Many barriers affecting educational participation do not sit neatly within either health or education. Communication differences, sensory processing differences, emotional regulation, anxiety, motor coordination, eating and drinking difficulties, continence needs, physical health needs and transition challenges can all affect attendance, participation, learning and inclusion.

Children do not experience these as separate health and education issues. They experience them as barriers to participation.

The question for reform is therefore not whether Health and Education collaborate, but whether both systems accept shared responsibility for the outcomes children experience.

At present the proposed reforms do not appear to create a sufficiently clear shared duty between education and health where health provision is necessary for educational access, participation or progress.

The shift across SEN reform to needs-led and school-led delivery, itself makes the case for increased health responsibility.

The Children's Services Co-Operation Act (NI) 2015 establishes a framework for cooperation between children's authorities, but while cooperation language can sound strong, it does not secure integration, governance or enforceability.

The Central Principle

The critical question is not, *who owns the service?* It is, *who owns the outcome?*

Without ownership there cannot be accountability.

Where health-related support is necessary for educational participation, attendance, communication, regulation or progress, there is a strong argument that both systems should share responsibility for achieving those outcomes, and do through a joint education-health model.

Children with Statements of Educational Need

The Committee may wish to seek assurance that where health-related provision is necessary:

- responsibilities are clearly defined;
- provision is sufficiently specified;
- monitoring arrangements exist;
- review arrangements are established; and
- escalation routes are available.

Children without Statements of Educational Need

The more significant challenge may concern children who do not have Statements of Educational Need.

If reform successfully reduces reliance upon Statements, what mechanism will ensure that health-related barriers remain:

- visible;
- recorded;
- monitored;
- reviewed; and
- enforceable?

Children should not lose access to accountability simply because they do not have a Statement.

Scrutiny Questions

Shared Accountability

- How will Health demonstrate its contribution to educational outcomes?
- Where barriers prevent participation, who is accountable for improvement?

Children without Statements

- What accountability mechanisms will exist?
- How will needs be monitored and reviewed?
- How will escalation occur?

Measuring Success

- Attendance.
- Participation.
- Reduced timetables.
- Placement stability.
- Communication access.
- Family confidence.
- Educational outcomes.

Reform must ensure that children receive the support necessary to participate in education.



INTEGRATED HEALTH & EDUCATION SUPPORT

— Working Together Around the Child —

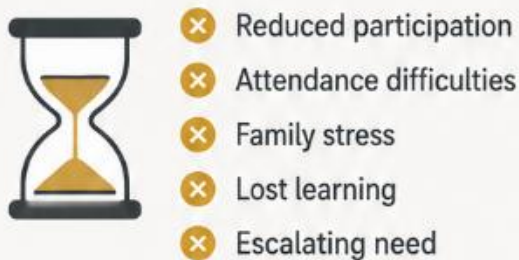
1 CHILDREN EXPERIENCE BARRIERS



2 SUPPORT SHOULD WORK TOGETHER



3 DELAY HAS CONSEQUENCES



4 WHAT MATTERS MOST?



THE KEY QUESTION



Not:
“Who owns
the service?”

BUT

But:
“Who owns
the outcome?”



Children do not experience health needs and education needs separately.

They experience barriers to participation.

Annex C

A Reasonable SEN Process

A reasonable SEN process should be judged not by how efficiently children move through administrative stages, but by whether they receive timely support, participate meaningfully and experience positive outcomes.

What Should a Reasonable SEN Process Comprise?

1. Early Identification and Visibility

Children should become visible before crisis. Identification should include:

- pupil voice;
- family concerns;
- attendance and participation;
- wellbeing indicators; and
- recognition of emerging barriers.

2. Understanding Need

The focus should be understanding the child's experience, including:

- strengths;
- communication;
- sensory experiences;
- participation barriers;
- wellbeing; and
- environmental factors.

3. Immediate Needs-Led Support

Support should begin when needs emerge.

Children should not be required to wait for assessment before receiving reasonable support.

4. Graduated Support and Review

Review should focus on:

- implementation;
- participation;
- attendance;
- wellbeing;
- educational progress; and
- lived experience.

5. Access to Specialist Advice

Where required, children should have timely access to educational psychology, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and other specialist expertise.

6. Escalation and Accountability

Escalation should not require crisis. Children and families should understand:

- when concerns can be escalated;
- who makes decisions;
- how decisions are reviewed; and
- what rights exist.

7. Transition Planning

Planning should begin early and continue throughout key transitions.

Success should be judged by whether transitions succeed, not whether plans exist.

8. Monitoring Outcomes

The final stage should focus on:

- participation;
- attendance;
- belonging;
- wellbeing;
- educational progress; and
- transition outcomes.

WHAT SHOULD A REASONABLE SEN PROCESS LOOK LIKE?

A CHILD-CENTRED, NEEDS-LED PROCESS THAT IMPROVES OUTCOMES



FOUNDATIONS ACROSS EVERY STAGE



CHILD & FAMILY PARTNERSHIP



CLEAR ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES



TIMELY ACTIONS & REALISTIC TIMESCALES



MONITORING & IMPLEMENTATION



ACCOUNTABILITY & ESCALATION



THE OUTCOME WE ALL WANT

A REASONABLE SEN PROCESS SHOULD NOT BE JUDGED BY HOW EFFICIENTLY CHILDREN MOVE THROUGH ADMINISTRATIVE STAGES.

IT SHOULD BE JUDGED BY WHETHER CHILDREN RECEIVE THE RIGHT SUPPORT, AT THE RIGHT TIME, IN THE RIGHT PLACE, SO THEY CAN PARTICIPATE, BELONG AND ACHIEVE.



PARTICIPATION
Engaged in learning and school life



BELONGING
Feeling safe, valued and included



PROGRESS
Accessing learning and making progress



WELLBEING
Emotionally healthy and supported



POSITIVE LIFE OPPORTUNITIES
Now and in the future

WHAT SHOULD A GOOD SEN CODE OF PRACTICE ACHIEVE?



RIGHTS INTO PRACTICE

- Rights-based
- Child-centred
- Accessible and clear



EARLY SUPPORT

- Needs-led
- Early identification and intervention
- Preventative not reactive



PARTNERSHIP

- Children and young people have a voice
- Families as partners
- Health and education working together



PARTICIPATION & BELONGING

- Focus on participation
- Belonging and inclusion
- Positive outcomes for learning and wellbeing



CONSISTENCY & ACCOUNTABILITY

- Clear roles and responsibilities
- Consistent support across all settings
- Monitorable delivery and clear escalation routes



A GOOD CODE SHOULD HELP ENSURE THAT CHILDREN RECEIVE
THE RIGHT SUPPORT, AT THE RIGHT TIME, IN THE RIGHT PLACE,
AND ARE ABLE TO PARTICIPATE, BELONG AND THRIVE.



VISIBLE BEFORE CRISIS



SUPPORT THAT
MAKES A DIFFERENCE



REDUCING BARRIERS



IMPROVING OUTCOMES



CLEAR ACCOUNTABILITY

Annex D

From Policy to Practice: Ensuring Reform Reaches Every School and Classroom

The challenge facing Northern Ireland is no longer whether reform exists – it is whether reform is, and will be, experienced consistently by children and young people.

The Central Principle

Consistency is not uniformity. Every child should be able to expect a consistent minimum standard of:

- dignity;
- participation;
- understanding;
- support;
- accessibility;
- safety; and
- belonging.

The Challenge

Many reforms fail not because policy is flawed. They fail because implementation is inconsistent.

As reform travels through the system, intentions can gradually become diluted, interpreted differently or applied unevenly.

A key issue is *implementation fidelity*.

Scrutiny Questions

Implementation

- How will the Department know that reform has reached every school?
- How will implementation drift be identified?

Leadership

- How will Boards of Governors scrutinise inclusion?
- How will school leaders be held accountable?

Classroom Consistency

- How will agreed supports be implemented consistently?
- How will consistency be maintained across subjects and staff?

Whole School Experience

- How will inclusion be monitored beyond lessons?
- How will participation be supported throughout the school day?

Measuring Success

- Attendance.
- Reduced timetables.
- Participation.
- Belonging.
- Wellbeing.
- Family confidence.
- Educational outcomes.

The ultimate test:

If two children with similar needs enter two different schools in Northern Ireland, can they reasonably expect the same standard of inclusion, participation and opportunity?

If the answer is no, reform will not yet have achieved its purpose.



**Independent Autism Reviewer
for Northern Ireland**



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