

Specialist Provisions in Mainstream Schools – Part 1

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Introduction

It is well documented that both the numbers of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and the complexity of the SEN need have increased significantly in recent years, with the demand for places in special schools continuing to grow on an annual basis. The profile of these pupils has changed over recent years and continues to change, with a significant increase in the number of pupils with severe learning difficulties* (SLD), and insufficient capacity to place these pupils in special schools which are oversubscribed. Since 2017, there has been a 21 percent increase in the number of learners attending special schools and a 36 percent increase in the number of learners with a SEN statement. The special schools' estate in Northern Ireland (NI) was not designed to cope with this growth, with many special schools having limited space for expansion. This, set alongside a growing desire from parents for their child with SEN to be educated alongside their peers, has created a greater demand for placements in mainstream schools.

Children and young people with SEN in our schools in 2022/23 accounted for 19% (66,404) of the school population. Of the 66,404 children on the SEN register, over one-third (24,282) have a statement of SEN, an increase of 36% in the last five years. Eighty-five percent of all pupils with SEN (56,300) are educated in mainstream schools, while ten percent (6,930) are educated in special schools. Five percent of all pupils with SEN (3,174) are educated in specialist provisions in mainstream schools (SPiMS).

A critical juncture came in June 2020 when emergency planning came into effect to address a shortfall, particularly in special schools, of suitable placements for children and young people with SEN. The Education Authority (EA) opened at pace SPiMS classes, in both primary and post-primary, to meet need. A DP is required under Article 14 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 before any significant change can be made to a school. This requirement, with respect to the establishment of a SPiMS, was abolished to help remove the barriers to access to suitable provision for pupils with SEN in mainstream schools and to expedite the process of establishing such provision.

DE's vision is that 'Every child and young person is happy, learning and succeeding'. For pupils with SEN, this has been articulated as meaning 'their needs are met with the **right support**, delivered by the **right people**, at the **right time** and in the **right place**'. Driving forward transformation of provision for children and young people with SEN is a key priority for DE.

This report, along with the Education and Training Inspectorate's (ETI) evaluation on [teacher professional learning to support SEN](#) (December 2023), examines the effectiveness of the arrangements and the quality of the provision for pupils with SEN, in particular, for the growing number of those in specialist provisions.

Background

Lived experiences

Children with SEN should be identified early, support should be promptly provided, placements should meet need and be allocated at the same time as placements for peers without a statement of SEN. All stakeholders are however acutely aware this has not been the case for too many children and young people.

Nevertheless, the rapid opening of a growing number of specialist provisions has been against a backdrop of a wholly negative experience for some pupils and parents with delayed communication about their placements, which contrasted with the experiences of other pupils with a statement and their peers who do not have a statement.

All stakeholders accept that the pupil should be at the centre of the process when placements are being made. For all pupils, delayed information about the school they will attend can cause significant and unnecessary anxiety and concern, which is heightened for those pupils with SEN who often struggle with changes in routine. The EA, supported by other educational stakeholders, has accepted we all must do better in this respect.

Transformational change

Various stakeholder reports* published in recent years have been highly critical of SEN services, support and provision in Northern Ireland. Making some 200 recommendations and viewed collectively, they paint a bleak picture and highlight clearly the need for urgent action and transformation to improve the provision, to better meet the needs of pupils with SEN.

To address the many recommendations of these reports, the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Transformation Programme was established in 2020 by the EA, with nine pre-existing EA SEN and DE workstreams initially coming under its umbrella.

The IPSOS report of 2023, the [Independent Review of Special Educational Needs Services and Processes](#) outlined the need to address the recommendations from all of the published reports within a reasonable timeframe and deliver transformational change more quickly and in a more cost efficient manner which focuses on outcomes for children and young people.

DE was tasked with establishing a “plan that will set out the actions that will be delivered to implement transformational change to SEN and the wider education system within reasonable timescales”.

In response, DE is currently progressing an end-to-end review across a number of areas and include clarification and communication of DE’s policy for SEN and area planning and placements. In May 2023, a reconstituted joint DE/EA SEND Transformation Programme Board which includes DE’s deep dives and EA’s Transformation Programme projects was formed, co-chaired by senior officials in DE and EA and reporting to a SEN Strategic Oversight Group, led by the DE Permanent Secretary.

On 5 September 2024 the Executive agreed a draft Programme for Government 2024-2027 ‘[Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most](#)’. It outlines nine priorities for making a real difference to the lives of people here, one being better support for children and young people with SEN. The public consultation on the draft programme closed at the start of November.

Executive Summary

Scope and methodology of the evaluation

This evaluation draws on evidence from visits to 78 primary schools and 35 post-primary schools. Given that this evaluation was carried out during a period of action short of strike by the teaching unions on matters relating to pay and workload, which included non-co-operation with inspection, these visits took place in the schools willing to support the evaluation.

Of those schools identified by the Education Authority (EA) to provide additional SPiMS classes from 2020 until June 2022 and visited by inspectors, almost all had one or more classes established previously and therefore had experience in providing support for particular SEN. Since June 2022, a growing number of schools have had no prior experience of supporting pupils with moderate to severe learning needs.

During the visits, as well as lesson observations, inspectors had discussions with groups of learners from almost all of the SPiMS classes visited, and a group of 20 parents* with children attending these classes, met remotely with inspectors.

Throughout the report, where text is accompanied by an asterisk, this indicates that additional information can be found in Appendix 4: Notes.

Inspectors also held discussions with key members of staff, including principals, special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) and co-ordinators, teachers and classroom assistants from the specialist provisions. Inspectors also reviewed key school documentation, namely the school development plan (SDP), action plans, planning for learning and teaching, and individual education plans (IEPs)*. Inspectors also reviewed self-evaluation documentation introduced by the EA in 2021/22 and completed by those schools with the more recently established specialist provisions.

In addition, a number of meetings took place with representatives of the EA strategic leadership. Analysis was also undertaken of the EA specialist provision proposals published from February 2022 to December 2023. Inspectors also visited four non-statutory early years providers requested by the EA, as part of their Path Finder Project to provide specialist provision for children in 2023/24.

Summary of key findings

While the industrial action which ended in April 2024 limited robust evaluation across schools of how well the provision in SPiMS classes is impacting on pupils' experiences and outcomes, there is clear evidence from this evaluation of strengths, challenges and opportunities.

1. **Pupils** told inspectors that their placement in a SPiMS class has helped them with learning and developing their confidence; they value the support from the staff and the smaller class numbers.
2. **Parents** who met with inspectors welcome how the provision has benefitted their child, not only to progress their learning but also for example, through increased participation in family and social events and growing independence.
3. All too often there has been **insufficient timeliness and uncertainty in the communication** to pupils and their parents of their placements in special schools or specialist provisions, particularly at nursery, year one or year eight. The parents rightly felt let down and disappointed that, unlike their

peers, they were not provided with the same timely communication around their child's school placement. As a result, some pupils experienced delays in the start to the school year due to issues with the readiness of the SPiMS accommodation, with transport or with the recruitment of staff.

4. There are insufficient places for children with SLD in special schools. In some instances, parents found that the expected **placement changed at short notice from a special school to a newly created specialist provision** in a primary school.
5. Schools report that the late placement of pupils, and the sharing with them by the EA of information about their needs, impacts on the timely **recruitment of suitably qualified staff**. Additionally, they face challenges in the **retention** of skilled classroom assistants.
6. There is evidence of schools with SPiMS classes **developing inclusive practices** through the provision of social and learning experiences, and of all schools seeking to develop such practices.
7. The planning, teaching and assessment in the SPiMS classes were mostly effective. The primary and post-primary schools recognise that they **need to better identify and disseminate what is working well and areas for further development when pupils from the SPiMS classes join the mainstream classes**. This identification and dissemination should be informed by robust feedback from the pupils, parents and staff about their experiences and the impact on progress and outcomes.
8. The schools visited spoke about the **challenges in managing and planning for the increasing numbers and multiple needs**. In a small number of the schools visited, there were pupils from five year groups placed together in one SPiMS class. There are increasing numbers of pupils with autism and with social, behavioural and emotional wellbeing (SBEW) needs being placed in SPiMS. The designation of the specialist provision needs to reflect appropriately the needs of the pupils in that school. At the forefront of this work should be **an assessment of the extent to which the specific needs of the individual pupils can be met successfully within the specific composition and context of the SPiMS class**.
9. The primary and post-primary schools report that they would welcome greater advice on **appropriate baseline assessments to support them in measuring better pupil progress and outcomes** in social, independent and life skills, as well as across the curriculum.

10. An important development by the Education Authority has been the **establishment of a single integrated team** from 2021, the Specialist Settings Support Team (EA SSST), to work across the region and provide support and guidance to newly established SPiMS. **Where support and guidance had been received from the EA SSST, almost all the staff spoke positively with inspectors about the quality of the support.** However, the **EA SSST reports that it is experiencing staffing pressures in meeting the demand for its service.** The quality of the support provided by the service did not form part of the consideration of this report. **The support and guidance for SPiMS continues to be provided through a range of pupil support services rather than a single integrated team** and school leaders and the SPiMS staff who spoke with inspectors reported challenges and frustrations with its variability.

Conclusion

Overall, the staff in our primary and post-primary schools, with the support of EA SSST and their counterparts in special schools, have worked tirelessly to provide high quality learning experiences for the pupils being placed in SPiMS classes. In a significant minority of the schools, these pupils would benefit from appropriate and planned opportunities to work alongside their peers in the mainstream classes, particularly as they progress up through the school. In a small number of instances, due in the main to a lack of access to the services of allied health professionals, the pupils' needs may have been better met in a special school setting.

The following are of key importance now in moving forward together:

- **DE's work on the development of a Policy for Inclusion**, which is being informed by, and will build further on, the existing effective practice. It should then inform the work of all educational stakeholders in implementing SEND legislation.
- **Development of an accessible, quick-read child-friendly guide of the various types of specialist provisions and classes**, crucial for learners and their parents, for staff in schools, and for all stakeholders. This is required to bring regional consistency and clarity, and to address use of legacy terminology, associated particularly with longer-established settings. It should be part of a wider communication strategy explaining the process for establishing specialist provision and allocating placements.
- **Strategic development of communities of practice aligned to DE's 'learning leaders' strategy**, with EA's establishment of SPiMS classes providing the needs analysis to inform these communities of practice. For instance, schools would welcome other clusters for specialist provisions and more sharing of effective practice between mainstream and special schools.

- **Evaluation of the effectiveness of the EA SSST**, to: better understand the extent of the **variability in access** to the support and guidance provided to SPiMS classes; monitor the impact of pupil support reforms at stage 2 on the Code of Practice prioritised for September 2024; and identify and disseminate effective practice across the service. The establishment of this integrated team has been an important development and an evaluation of its effectiveness in delivering school support, providing capacity building of staff, and leading to improvements in the quality of provision would be timely, given the cessation of the action short of strike in April 2024.
- **Realising effective and more collaborative, intra- and interdepartmental working by government, and by stakeholders**, including statutory agencies as set down in the Children and Young People’s Strategy is central to supporting all stakeholders to provide a cohesive and impactful multi-disciplinary response.

The ETI will continue to monitor, inspect and report on the provision in specialist provisions, particularly through first-hand observation of practice, to help inform policy and practice in support of teachers and the children and young people in their care.

The views of pupils, parents and staff

The views of learners

The primary and post-primary pupils from the specialist provisions who met with inspectors spoke very positively about their experiences. Almost all of them talked about the high levels of support and encouragement they received from staff, which helped them with their learning and developed their confidence. They spoke about how they enjoyed the smaller numbers of pupils in their specialist provision classes because they found it easier to ask for help and support, than in larger mainstream classes. There were pupils who reported that they find it very difficult to participate in the larger mainstream classes due to the nature of their special educational need, for example, sensory needs or anxiety.

Most of the pupils enjoyed when there were opportunities to socialise with and join lessons alongside their mainstream peers. Some of them also indicated that they would like greater opportunities to participate in mainstream classes; while others reported that they would like to access a wider range of subjects than their schools currently offer to them, to better meet their personal interests and career aspirations.

The views of parents

Inspectors met with a number of parents whose children attended the specialist provisions in primary and post-primary schools. They spoke positively about how their child benefits from their placement in a specialist class, particularly the highly nurturing ethos developed by the teachers and assistants, supported by the principals and SENCOs. They reported that their children benefited significantly from the structured learning environments, individualised learning programmes and the specialist teaching and resources available. They valued good channels of communication established with the staff.

The parents of pupils who received support in the specialist class from outside agencies such as the EA Behaviour Support Service (EA BSS)*, the EA Autism Advice and Intervention Service (EA AAIS)* and therapists from the Allied Health Professional (AHP) services*, valued highly the benefits that additional specialist support has on their children's overall progress, stating that this support had been critical to the placement being successful.

Most parents were particularly pleased about the positive impact attending the specialist provision has had on their child's home life, citing: increased independence and confidence; progress towards initiating conversations; participation in family activities, such as socialising with peers and extended family; and for some younger children, the skills to engage in turn-taking and imaginative play with friends and siblings. A small number of parents were appreciative of their children's newly developed ability to manage their emotions and challenging behaviours at home, using the strategies taught in the specialist class.

A particular challenge experienced by most of the parents of nursery, Year 1 or Year 8 children was the uncertainty around agreed school placements, and the often-significant delays in the EA communicating information to them. A common cause of concern for those parents of pre-school and nursery-age children is that their child's expected placement in a special school was changed at very short notice to a newly created specialist provision in a primary school. A small number of parents whose children were due to take up their special school places, when available, chose for their child to remain in the SPiMS as a result of their child's highly positive learning experiences and the progress being made.

A majority of the parents with children in the post-primary SPiMS classes reported that their child had very good opportunities to join their mainstream peers for an appropriate number of classes. A significant minority however indicated that their child had an unduly limited choice of key stage (KS) 4 subject options. There were however some parents who believed that the school's approach to replicating the mainstream curriculum within the specialist class was too demanding for their child.

These parents felt that their child needed a greater focus on life skills, such as personal safety and social skills. They wanted less emphasis on regular assessments and homework which tended to cause their child significant levels of stress and anxiety.

Parents were also concerned at the inequitable availability of post-primary specialist classes across the region. For some parents whose children had been in specialist classes in primary school, placements offered by the EA at KS 3 in either mainstream or special schools were not always appropriate to their child's needs. A small number of parents of year 11 and 12 pupils highlighted that there was no specialist provision available in the school post-16 and they were concerned with the limited post-16 options available in their locality. A small number of schools also suggested that post-16 specialist provision needed to be made available for pupils to support them further with the development of their life, social and independent skills.

The views of school staff

Across both the long- and newly established provisions visited, many leaders reported unacceptably long delays in receiving information from the EA regarding the ages and specific needs of pupils being placed in the specialist provisions. Consequently, planning effectively for the new pupil intake was difficult.

A minority of the schools reported they had to overcome additional challenges, which included: finding appropriate accommodation within their school estate for the specialist provision; recruiting suitably qualified and experienced staff; and receiving resources, staff professional learning and minor works in a timely manner from the EA. While the school leadership teams worked at pace to respond to these challenges, this required a significant investment of time alongside whole-school management responsibilities.

A particular challenge which was cited by school leaders was the recruitment of classroom assistants as the information on the pupils and their needs often did not arrive until late in the last term of the school year or later. Retaining classroom assistants employed on temporary contracts has also been difficult.

School staff reported to inspectors that a growing number of pupils with autism are being placed in learning support classes rather than autism specialist classes. In a small number (3 primary) of specialist provisions, over two-thirds of the pupils placed there had autism. While they were generally supported well, with appropriate structures which promoted their independence and participation in individual learning programmes, for some, however, there were significant additional barriers to their learning. These were attributed by staff to limitations in the accommodation, the wide range of varying pupil needs within the one class, and the adult-to-pupil ratio which differs to that provided for specialist classes in social communication/autism.

A small number of schools reported being unsuccessful in making a requested change of designation to the EA, from learning support class to social communication/autism specialist class. Further, within the SPiMS framework, the EA acknowledge that “there remains a range of terms to describe specialist provisions”. The EA has helpfully set out agreed terminology to try to bring regional consistency and clarity to the description of these classes.

The placement of pupils with social, behavioural and emotional well-being (SBEW) needs alongside pupils with autism is also a particular challenge for staff to overcome, as the needs and behaviours of each group of pupils are very diverse. In a significant number of schools visited, the leaders reported having to provide additional classroom assistants from the school’s own budget in order to meet the needs of all the pupils in such classes. The EA cannot quantify the number of pupils with SBEW needs in specialist classes, apart from those who have SBEW as their primary need, yet this data is essential so that pupils can be placed and supported appropriately.

Key findings

Addressing shortfalls in the school estate

Insufficient special school placements

In September 2021, children with SLD whose parents anticipated them being placed in a special school were placed in statutory early years settings, as there was insufficient capacity in special schools. At the same time, specialist classes for children with SLD were created within mainstream primary schools which had never had such provision until then. Thereafter, further specialist classes were established in 2022 to place children with SLD in mainstream schools, where there were no places in special schools. These provisions are now referred to as specialist provisions for early years and foundation (SP EYF).

An increasing number of children with SLD were again placed in a specialist provision in an early years statutory setting rather than a special school in September 2023 and September 2024. Notably, due to the pressures to secure early years placements, children have also been placed in four non-statutory provisions for the 2023/2024 academic year, as part of an EA pilot pathway finder project*.

Specialist Provisions in Mainstream Schools (SPiMS)

Through its Area Planning Team working with its Special Educational Needs Placements Team, the EA establishes and funds SPiMS to support children with a SEN statement when the statement indicates that “specialist teaching within a small group setting” is most appropriate; a modified curriculum can then be offered, to balance learning opportunities alongside important life and social skills.

The EA allocates funding per staff costs to SPiMS, with a staffing complement set down per provision type.

Staffing/Specialist Provision (per class)	Staffing Complement (per class)	Staff Cost (per class) (funded by the Education Authority)
Learning	1 Teacher and 1 Classroom Assistant	£75,000
Social Communication	1 Teacher and 2 Classroom Assistants (depending upon pupil numbers)	£100,000
Learning (SP EYF)	1 Teacher and 2 Classroom Assistants (depending upon pupil numbers)	£115,000
Set Up Cost	-	£3,000
Annual Allowance	-	£3,000
Set up Funding (DE letter 23 April 2024)	-	£20,000 (capital grant for equipment)

Table 1: Taken from EA's [Specialist Provisions in Mainstream Schools](#) document.

Between 2017 to 2021, 106 temporary resource provisions* were established across 86 primary and post-primary schools; 76 of these opened between 2020 and 2021. With insufficient timely action to respond to analysis of the long-term need and insufficient oversight of a long-term strategy, an emergency response was necessitated from 2020. The EA funded teachers and classrooms assistants in these ‘emergency resource provisions’, with the temporary nature of these subsequently regularised.

Two EA SEN area planning pilots resulted in the approval of 170 SPiMS across 81 schools. The number of SPiMS classes have increased from 230 in 2017 to 471 by June 2023, with the number of pupils attending SPiMS increasing by 55 percent over the same timeframe, supporting over 4,000 pupils across the region.

The perception of a minority of the schools ETI visited was that the EA decision to establish a specialist provision in their schools was based on the availability of space and/or accommodation, with a focus on finding places rather than the 'right place'. It is important that the process of establishing a specialist provision is not perceived as being driven by where there is available accommodation because the overall enrolment in a school is not at capacity. A small number of schools further reported that there was a reluctance by the EA to consider the school's professional expertise at supporting types of special educational need when considering the appropriateness of the child's placement.

All stakeholders need to clearly understand the application by the EA of the six criteria and associated indicators of the 'Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools'* in this process, to include the extent to which these are used to firstly identify schools and thereafter establish specialist provisions.

The continuum for provision continues to evolve. The recent call to schools to put themselves forward for consideration of newly established SPiMS provision is a welcomed move, where schools are actively committing to inclusive practices and developing staff confidence and competence in meeting the needs of pupils with SEN. The EA is working to identify appropriately areas where new special school provision and specialist provisions are required to provide pathways* between primary and post-primary provision. As it prepares to publish its second operational plan and stakeholders shift from emergency/crisis responses to a more strategic provision, the EA has recognised that, unlike the first plan, this must clearly articulate the identified gaps that exist across geographical areas, such as for specialist provisions in early years and well-considered strategic planning for the establishment of specialist provisions with appropriate transition pathways, and how potential challenges such as lack of space or accommodation will be mitigated. The EA recognises that there have been instances where a number of specialist provisions had been closed previously, only to be necessarily re-opened a few years later. Some of the specialist provision staff in primary schools who met with ETI reported their concern that pupils in KS 2 may not be able to transition alongside their peers to their local post-primary school, either because the school does not have a specialist provision class suited to the needs of the pupils or if they do, has an insufficient number of available places to accommodate their pupils.

All stakeholders recognise that transition based on good communication and timely sharing of relevant information is critical for all pupils. Staff with whom inspectors met discussed that planning was a crucial consideration as pupils with SEN transitioned from one phase to another and through the key stages: from early years to Year 1 in primary; from Year 7 in primary to Year 8 in post-primary; and from KS 3 to KS 4 and from KS 4 to post-16 provision. There has been and there continues to

be inequity and uncertainty for pupils and parents at key transition stages. For a growing number of pupils effective transitions have been limited by insufficient places in KS 2 and KS 3 specialist provisions, special schools, and limited access to appropriate pathways into Further Education and work-based learning (WBL) provision.

Clear communication is required of the strategic approach being developed and implemented, whereby the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders are articulated. Further, as we all work towards a more inclusive Northern Ireland for all, the EA and all stakeholder partners* need to communicate effectively the benefits of SPiMS for all pupils, their school communities, the wider education system, and society as a whole.

Learning experiences and outcomes

Delivering a curriculum

Lessons were observed in the specialist provisions, across the curricular areas of literacy, numeracy, and world around us in primary (25) and maths, English, geography, personal development, music and occupational studies in post-primary (23). The planning, teaching and assessment were mostly effective, with the sustained and enthusiastic engagement of pupils in positive learning environments.

The positive characteristics of these lessons included:

- teachers and classroom assistants who knew the pupils and their individual needs very well;
- positive working relationships between staff and pupils, and the staff working collaboratively and effectively with each other to keep good oversight of the pupils' learning throughout the lessons;
- the teacher and classroom assistant(s) moving around the classroom, giving appropriate provision of at elbow support* and encouragement when required;
- learning activities tailored and resourced appropriately to meet individual pupil ability and interest, and linked appropriately to the pupils' individual targets;
- well planned, paced and sequenced learning experiences, which were purposeful, relevant and contextualised;

- opportunities to develop a wide range of skills, such as research, problem-solving, turn-taking and group work, and to develop the pupils' life and social skills;
- the use of visual support strategies, scaffolded learning and choice boards; and
- techniques to manage emotions and behaviours modelled by staff and used well by pupils with SBEW needs to regain a state of calm, reduce their stress levels and enable them to engage with individualised learning activities more fully and for longer periods of time.

In a small number of lessons, there was limited evidence of progress and engagement in learning for some of the pupils, in part because the planning did not meet their needs. The learning was not well enough scaffolded, structured or paced, and the adults in the classroom were not well enough deployed.

The staffing ratios varied in the classes visited, from one teacher with two classroom assistants to one teacher with four classroom assistants. There was also variability in the numbers of pupils in the SPiMS classes, with as many as 17 pupils accommodated in one class in one instance. It is important to note that the EA advise that the pupil numbers per class are a guide and other factors such as the profile of need within the cohort or the size of the classroom may alter the capacity. While this may be appropriate, the EA must also consider that their guidance around pupil and staff ratios exists to ensure that the specialist class can provide the necessary small group support which the pupils require.

School leaders and staff have focused on how best to create a learning environment in the specialist provisions to meet the needs of the pupils, through designing and repurposing rooms. There is a focus on low-stimulus environments, with quiet areas and sensory spaces and well-considered colour schemes. Leaders have also committed to all of their staff, pupils and parents seeing the specialist provision as an integral and valued part of the school.

Where specialist provisions had been accommodated in existing school buildings, a significant majority of specialist provisions visited had developed very purposeful areas within, or very accessible to, their classrooms. These included well-resourced sensory rooms, quiet areas, and communal social areas, all of which were used effectively and contributed well to pupils' wellbeing and readiness to learn. However, inspectors also saw a small number of examples where classroom space was limited and prevented group work or the provision of sensory spaces. Similarly, there were a small number of examples in primary where insufficient outdoor space had limited the outdoor play and outdoor learning opportunities for the children.

A small number of post-primary schools visited were at various stages of whole school new build programmes, to include specialist provisions. In conjunction with the EA, careful and appropriate consideration was being given to where the specialist classes would be situated within the schools in order to develop further the opportunities for the pupils to participate in a wider range of inclusive learning activities with their peers.

In the primary specialist provisions visited, the curriculum was for the most part broad and appropriately balanced to meet individual pupil need. There was evidence of the short-term planning being used very well to map and review the learning of individual pupils across the curriculum. In a majority of these provisions, delivery in the curriculum areas of the arts, physical education, and the world around us involved the pupils learning alongside mainstream peers. In a small number of primary schools where it was identified as appropriate for the individual pupils, they also joined literacy and numeracy lessons with their peers in the mainstream school.

In some instances, learners in specialist classes in primary remained with their teacher for three years which staff reported helps them to devise a three-year programme for the learners, avoids duplication of themes/topics and enables detailed provision mapping for each learner to outline the support provided and the progress made. Planning for composite classes was considered carefully and collaboratively by key stage staff and the specialist teacher, providing opportunities for team-teaching* and joint review of the planning and evaluations. In two primary schools visited, where pupils were grouped in a composite FS/KS1/KS2 class, the quality of the provision was not effective enough, and impacted adversely on the learning experiences of, and the outcomes attained by, the children.

In primary schools with specialist provision for SLD for the first time, they reported initial difficulties in planning to meet the learning and holistic needs of their pupils. Support from the EA's Specialist Setting Support Team (SSST), along with consultation with local special schools and sourcing specialist training, was seen as crucial to assist the staff well in developing their provision.

In most of the post-primary specialist provisions, a wide range of subjects were offered, at appropriate levels, either within the specialist class or through joining their peers in mainstream classes. Despite the significant challenges, the teachers in the specialist classes, supported by the mainstream specialists in their schools, planned and modified the curriculum. In the more effective practice, in a small number of the post-primary schools visited, the collaborative planning resulted in well-aligned delivery of units of work, allowing pupils' easy movement between specialist and mainstream classes. There was well-considered assessment of the pupil's readiness to participate in the mainstream class and identification of any support required.

In all post-primary schools, a range of general and applied qualifications were available to all pupils at KS 4. There was evidence of the schools reviewing the curriculum provision well in advance of pupils transitioning from KS 3 into KS 4, to ensure sufficient time to plan and prepare for the introduction new courses that were relevant to the individual needs, interests and abilities of the pupils. Accreditations include General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs), the essential skills, BTECs and a range of entry level qualifications. The evidence shows that the individual pupils in specialist provisions achieve well in these accreditations.

In a significant minority of the post-primary schools, the curriculum offer at KS 4 was not sufficiently broad and balanced for the pupils. A factor cited by the staff was that it can be a challenge to provide such a curriculum in small post-primary schools with single teacher departments. A challenge cited by staff in specialist post-primary provisions is a need for a greater range of alternative accredited qualifications to support better progress of their pupils to post-16. Two of the post-primary schools visited by ETI were participating in a Northern Health and Social Care Trust's KS 4 transition programme being delivered in nine post-primary specialist provisions. Helping Young People into Education and Employment (HYPE) was co-delivered by MENCAP and the schools, with the opportunity for the pupils to achieve accredited qualifications and develop interview skills. The pupils were supported with their applications to post-16 provision and travel-training to prepare them to travel independently to the post-16 organisation or work. As part of the programme, pupils were also provided with the opportunity to work in community-based work placements and the schools reported that the pupils were supported very well by MENCAP's employment officers. Since the visits, this programme has ceased.

The teachers of the SPiMS classes reported that it can be challenging to deliver the curriculum in composite classes at KS 3, comprising pupils from three year groups (years 8, 9 and 10) or in a small number of cases, five year groups (years 8 to 12). The placement of pupils from Years 8 to 12 in the one SPiMS class does not afford the pupils the same transition experiences as their peers moving from KS 3 to KS 4 and can be particularly difficult for the younger pupils. Additionally, it can become increasingly difficult for staff to respond to individual need and support pupils to develop their wider skills and dispositions, alongside achieving appropriate qualifications to progress beyond KS 4. Where such five year group provision arises, the quality and impact on the learning experiences, outcomes and progression of the pupils needs to be robustly evaluated.

In the most effective practice, in the specialist provisions visited across primary and post-primary, the curriculum was highly differentiated with individual and class timetabling to include for example, circle-time and a bespoke multi-sensory approach for each pupil. The pupils' emotional health and wellbeing needs, and the development of a broad range of life and social skills were prioritised well. There

were examples of a range of creative therapies, such as art, lego and equine therapy, along with fitness and sports programmes being delivered to benefit the pupils' wellbeing. There was also an appropriate focus on attainment in more formal academic areas for individual pupils.

School leaders highlighted the importance of a clearly articulated ethos and whole school vision for inclusion when specialist provision is being established in mainstream settings. Many of the schools emphasised that the specialist class was not viewed as a stand-alone entity but appropriately, is an integral and valued part of the school. They cited examples of pupils in the specialist classes joining their peers in a number of curriculum areas, being in the same form class as their mainstream peers and discussed opportunities for integration in whole-school activities such as assemblies, school productions, extra-curricular activities, preparation for church-based sacraments and residential outings.

There was evidence across the visits that schools are moving towards more inclusive practices exemplified through:

- a flexible response to pupil need and diversity;
- increasing opportunities for meaningful pupil participation;
- adapting learning and teaching strategies to meet more effectively pupil need;
- reviewing the curriculum to reflect pupil interest, ability and career aspirations, with for example post-primary specialist classes organising the timetable to align with the mainstream classes, to enable inclusion and participation;
- younger pupils participating in joint play-based learning sessions and developing a range of social, communication and physical skills through meaningful interactions with their peers; and
- providing quiet spaces for pupils in the specialist class who may be anxious about socialising with large numbers of their peers at break or lunch time.

Across the visits a small number of staff who spoke with inspectors often used the words "*integration*" and "*inclusion*" interchangeably, but they are however not synonymous. In a small number of schools, there were examples that potentially undermined a vision of inclusion, such as: pupils being assigned a mainstream form class but attending registration in the specialist provision; and pupils in the specialist class having their own table in the dining hall or their own designated play area and

no opportunities to mix with their peers in mainstream classes. While some of these arrangements may be appropriate for particular pupils and their needs, specialist staff should review if the arrangements are appropriate for **all** of the children in the specialist class. Across primary and post-primary schools, staff recognise the need to discuss with pupils and monitor regularly their experiences in mainstream classes to identify and disseminate what is working well and address any areas to develop and improve. Discussions between staff and pupils could help them to explore the extent to which inclusion is a lived experience for pupils and identify how their experiences could be further improved to live out their school's vision for inclusion more effectively.

Just as there is evidence of schools developing inclusive practices through the social and learning experiences provided in the mainstream classes and of all schools seeking to develop such practices, there is also evidence of emerging practices in respect of what schools describe as “reverse inclusion” or “reverse integration”*. In a small number of schools, they discussed the opportunities for “reverse integration” or “including” pupils, whereby pupils from the mainstream joined their peers in the specialist class. However, it was clear from these discussions that there was a range of practices, and these now need to be better understood, through system-wide evaluation.

All stakeholders need to consider, and understand more fully, the potential benefits and challenges of both “inclusive” and “reverse” practices. Importantly DE is working on the development of a Policy for Inclusion, to include a definition of inclusion which should then inform the work of all educational stakeholders in implementing SEND legislation.

Monitoring and evaluating progress

All of the staff who spoke with inspectors provided examples of how they use their professional judgement in considering the individual progress of each pupil, alongside the use of a range of assessments tools which allow them to celebrate and evidence progress. They value the importance of understanding their pupils' attitudes to learning and their feelings about their social and emotional health and wellbeing.

The schools are using a range of assessments to obtain a baseline of each pupil's starting point and then monitor their progress and attainment across the curriculum. They report that they would welcome greater advice on appropriate baseline assessments to support them in measuring better pupil progress and outcomes in social, independent and life skills, as well as across the curriculum. In those newly established specialist classes for pupils who have SLD, staff were appropriately sourcing professional learning opportunities in the use of specialist SLD assessment tools, such as [CCEA's Prerequisite \(Q\) Skills Framework](#).

The individual education plan (IEP) was a key document for staff to monitor the pupil's progress across the targets set and to capture the successes experienced. In a sample of IEPs reviewed by the inspectors, the range of targets included literacy and numeracy, communication, and life skills and reflected well the specific needs of the individual pupils. The targets were appropriate and progress was reviewed at regular points in the school year, informed by assessments, observations of pupils and their work, and discussions with mainstream staff. A small number of schools emphasised the input of the classroom assistants in setting, supporting and assessing progress against set targets.

For those primary specialist classes who had access to a range of therapies from allied health professionals, specialist therapy targets were included in pupils' IEPs, developing further their progress in, for example, speech and writing skills. In a small number of post-primary schools, the IEP targets were focused narrowly and inappropriately on subject specific targets, resulting in too many targets across the curriculum and a limited focus on the development of the pupils' wider skills.

The role of the SENCO is viewed as central to the management and oversight of the specialist provision in all of the schools; in most of the schools visited the SENCO was a member of the school's senior leadership team. In some of the schools, the SENCO worked across both the Specialist provision and the mainstream; in others, the SENCO worked closely with a specialist provisions coordinator. The SENCO kept strategic oversight of the provision for pupils with a statement of SEN in the specialist provision and the mainstream. They focused on monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the specialist provision and SEN throughout their schools. As a consequence, there was generally effective operational management of the specialist classes.

In a small number of the primary and post-primary schools visited, there was evidence that pupil progress was being monitored collaboratively by the SENCO, the specialist provision co-ordinator, the literacy and numeracy co-ordinator and the principal and vice-principal. This allowed for a joined-up approach to oversight by the specialist provisions and the mainstream.

There were examples of primary schools where the leaders had used effectively elements of DE funding streams to facilitate full-time hours for SENCO duties, with the SENCO's teaching role backfilled. The staff who spoke to inspectors reported that there were significant benefits with this approach, for the specialist classes and the whole-school SEN provision. They spoke about how the time facilitated: more purposeful liaison with parents and professionals; adequate planning for well-timed pupil and staff support; direct teaching support to specialist classes; liaising with staff

to arrange tailored staff professional learning; and supporting arrangements to monitor and assess pupil progress and wellbeing. In a number of schools, the staff welcomed the allocation of this dedicated time given they had an increasing number of pupils with complex SEN presenting in mainstream classes, alongside delivering provision to more than one specialist class.

Notably, a member of the school board of governors had been assigned responsibility for the oversight of the specialist provision in a small number of the schools.

When inspectors spoke with SENCOs and specialist provision coordinators, they spoke about the importance of the school leadership prioritising SEN within the whole school and “keeping it to the top of the agenda”

Staff development and support

Professional learning for staff

The ETI report “An evaluation of teacher professional learning in meeting the needs of learners with special educational needs’ detailed that over one third (36%) of teachers indicated that they do not have the knowledge, skills and understanding to meet their learners’ SEN.

Leadership teams emphasised the need to address the changing and more complex needs of their pupils through appropriate professional learning for teachers and classroom assistants.

In most cases, the schools where specialist provisions have been established since 2021 reported that they had been supported well by the EA SSST. A majority of the schools visited, through referral processes, had also accessed support from a range of outside agencies, such as the Regional Integrated Support for Education NI (RISENI)*, speech and language, and occupational therapy. They reported that, in addition to directly supporting pupils, the agencies provided beneficial advice for staff, along with resources and training.

In the longer-established LSCs, most of the school leaders were critical of the EA’s arrangements for accessing professional learning and support for their staff. They cited difficulty in contacting the relevant staff and lengthy waiting times to get the support into their schools. However, when support was received, leaders in a significant minority of the schools were appreciative of the knowledge and expertise the EA support services and the SEN link officer provided. These SPIMS also reported few opportunities to cluster with similar settings to enhance their professional development and share effective practice.

A small number of the schools visited had been pro-active in contacting special schools for support. They spoke positively about the advice received but were very mindful of the increased demands on special school leaders as a result.

In a small number of schools, with agreement from the EA and parents of the pupils involved, classroom assistance hours were converted to teaching support hours which was reported as being beneficial to pupils, where teachers experienced in dealing with complex needs could then be deployed. Such a model is worthy of ongoing review given the difficulty in recruiting and retaining classroom assistants, as well as the significant costs incurred.

There were singular examples where staff spoke of the benefit of having taught previously in the mainstream foundation stage before teaching in a KS 1 specialist provision class; and, of a teacher finding the skills they had acquired previously through youth work useful in supporting the needs of the pupils in their KS 3 specialist provision class.

In the context of specialist provisions for learners with SLD, it is crucial that the EA provides timely and ongoing specialist professional learning for staff to support them to develop their skills and expertise and enable the provision to be skilfully tailored to meet the increasingly complex range of pupil needs.

As part of ETI's teacher professional learning (TPL) evaluation, the SENCOs and teachers who met with inspectors, spoke about how, with the evolving complexity of learners' needs, their TPL is crucial. Most schools engaged in this evaluation highlighted that they need greater access to effective external TPL to meet learners' SEN. Schools report that some TPL is ad hoc and initiative-driven, offered en-masse to very different schools, rather than meeting the specific SEN requirements within a school's context. Over one-half (52%) of teachers who responded to the questionnaire as part of the evaluation did not feel well informed about the TPL opportunities available for SEN. Sixty-four percent of the respondents indicated that, in meeting learners' SEN, they received effective professional learning, but it was as a result of personal research or self-funded study. Almost two-fifths (39%) of teachers who responded to the questionnaire indicated that their internal TPL for SEN was not effective enough.

Professional learning for all staff is a priority. The classroom assistants who met with inspectors as part of the TPL evaluation spoke about how they can access information and pre-recorded online presentations from the EA and other providers. In discussion with the more experienced classroom assistants, they requested a more tiered approach to professional learning.

All of the schools visited as part of this evaluation, who received multidisciplinary advice from the Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA), reported significant positive impact in staff expertise, with direct links to improved outcomes for pupils with autism.

Leaders across almost all of the schools visited reported that they value highly the knowledge and expertise of the specialist provision staff because the staff often then lead professional learning for the staff of the mainstream classes, where there were increasing numbers of special educational needs and to assist with the successful inclusion of the pupils from the SPiMS classes. They recognised that the development of the knowledge and skills of mainstream staff in the various areas of special educational needs not only empowered them, but also supported and improved classroom practice for all pupils.

Support services

The EA set up its Specialist Setting Support Team (the EA SSST) in September 2021, as part of its reviewed programme of support for all specialist settings across the region, with a focus on building the capacity of school staff rather than providing individual pupil support.

The EA SSST brings various support services together in one team, with staff from other EA support services, for example its Behaviour Support Service (EA BSS) and its EA Autism Advisory Intervention and Support Service (EA AAISS). It has focused on providing integrated support to specialist provisions established from September 2021.

At the outset, the EA SSST consisted of a project leader, an operational lead adviser, a team of 15 specialist teachers and 14 intervention officers. Intervention officers worked with the school staff to implement the plans devised by the specialist teachers. They are not required to have a teacher qualification but have a relevant third level qualification.

At its inception, the EA completed a focused baseline audit of the EA SSST's experience and expertise, which captured well the skills and capacity of the team to deliver a range of support services, including professional learning sessions and direct support in the classroom. The newly established team all had previous roles in the EA which were subsequently filled on a temporary basis through a recruitment exercise. The EA identified that the composition of the team needed to be multi-disciplinary, to include disciplines such as speech and language therapy. They acknowledge the importance of collaborative working with the Health & Social Care Trusts, including AHP services and key professionals who deliver direct support for children and young people. While it represents a step towards the implementation of

multi-disciplinary teams in line with the recommendation relating to cross-departmental working within the independent review, the arrangements have been established by the EA to enable collaboration with AHP services, the extent and exact nature of the arrangement is uncertain. The Children and Young People's Strategy provides DE and the EA with the opportunity to explore more effective collaboration with the Department of Health and the Health and Social Care Trusts to ensure all pupils on the continuum of provision can access the support from health when required. Currently the lack of in-school access to allied health professional support in SPiMS classes is impacting adversely on pupil progress and the success of the placement.

In September 2023, the EA integrated its Special Educational Needs and Inclusion Service (SENIS) for SLD into the EA SSST team as a pilot initiative. SENIS provides support for pupils with moderate learning difficulties* (MLD), Down's Syndrome, medical needs and SLD. The intent of the pilot initiative is to provide locality focused, phase specific delivery for a continuum of need, including SLD provision. The establishment and expansion of the EA SSST team represents an appropriate move away from a single service team to regional integrated service teams. The EA has yet to establish integrated teams to support those schools in the west due to capacity issues. This is a necessity to ensure all schools have equitable access to support.

Those schools visited which had longer established specialist provisions for social communication/autism reported that the EA AISS supports effectively those provisions with the assessment of pupil need, and the delivery of pupil programmes.

Schools with longer established provisions report that the significant pupil population that presents with co-morbidity (additional barriers to their primary need) can be disadvantaged by the current EA process and allocation for diagnosis, support and advice. For example, pupils who have both autism and SBEW needs can access support from only one service, either autism or behaviour, based on their primary diagnosis. At the time of the visits, staff in a small number of specialist provisions reported that behaviour support for pupils was withdrawn when pupils are placed in specialist provisions for learning. SENIS support was also not available to pupils in specialist provisions for learning. It is vital that the placement of a pupil does not define the services which will be available; the right place will only be 'right' for a child or young person if, and when, the right support is being provided.

Due to the increase in the number of SPiMS classes, the EA SSST continues to deploy its resource in the main to working with the newly established specialist provisions across early years, primary and post-primary, rather than those that are longer established. A model of support remains for the longer-established SPiMS, whereby the various support services operate independently and largely without collaboration from other services.

A process has been established by the EA whereby the newly established SPiMS are required to complete an extensive baseline evaluation of key areas, namely: provision; pupil progress and outcomes; environment and resources; staff development; leadership, management and governance; care and welfare; safeguarding; partnerships and policies and procedures, and to monitor same. Qualitative and quantitative evidence is gathered by a specialist provision as part of its self-evaluation exercise and in the more effective self-evaluations completed, this is supplemented well by evaluative comments and appropriate information from schools. All specialist provisions and the EA SSST need to ensure that responses to the prompts within the baseline evaluation provide sufficient and evaluative detail, rather than a tick-list with limited information to inform well the action planning process for the specialist classes. School action plans for the specialist classes are agreed and monitored by each school and the EA SSST. A small sample of baseline self-evaluations completed by specialist provisions and reviewed by the ETI illustrated clearly the need for robust identification of areas for development in the interests of the pupils. The EA SSST needs to carefully consider the consistency and rigour of the quality assurance processes for not only the baseline self-evaluations but the subsequent monitoring of the action plans.

The recently established specialist provisions involved directly with the EA SSST report that they have had to wait for varying lengths of time for support to begin. The leadership in these schools cited difficulty in being able to contact relevant staff and that there were lengthy waiting times before support was received. However, once they do receive support, they report that they benefit well from a range of newly introduced services, including for example referral to a triage system for prioritising and addressing need and from access to the recently allocated link-advisory teachers. Longer established provisions want the same level of support as those more recently established. A small number of EA facilitated cluster groups aim to promote the sharing of expertise and good practice, with specialist class teachers invited to these. A small number of schools visited reported frustration that a network for specialist provisions for learning had not been established, while they had been established for specialist provisions for social communication/autism. Almost all staff from the specialist classes in receipt of support from the SSST were very positive in their feedback in relation to the support and guidance they have received to date.

The EA SSST has appropriately identified the need to analyse the impact of its support on the quality of the provision and pupil progress in SPiMS using a variety of sources of evidence, including a wide range of assessment tools. As part of this process, consultation with recently established settings has informed the EA action plans for its self-evaluation of its service delivery. While school leadership teams welcome the introduction of the new self-evaluation framework, it is noted that some specialist class staff have reported the administrative demand overly burdensome and time intensive.

The staff in a small number of primary specialist settings reported being able to access agencies, such as Regional Integrated Support for Education NI (RISE NI), speech and language and occupational therapy through agreed referral processes. It was reported that these agencies contributed well to advice for staff, resources and training, in addition to directly supporting pupils attending specialist classes. In the more effective provision, pupils benefited from weekly AHP input where the therapists provided individual pupil assessments, followed by specialist programmes and monitoring of progress. A number of staff have also benefited from specialist AHP training to provide additional support for pupils in meeting individual therapy targets; this had direct benefits for the holistic development of the pupils, particularly for their communication and fine motor skills, and developed further staff skills. There was, however, variation in the allocation of AHPs to the schools visited and overall, there was insufficient access to AHP support. It is imperative that parents are made aware by the EA of the availability of services within a SPiMS class, linked to the specific requirements set out in the child's statement, at the time of the placement.

Conclusion

Where pupils access their learning should be needs informed. For some, this will mean they will be best placed to learn and progress in a mainstream setting, for others in SPiMS classes and for others, in a special school.

As part of the continuum of SEN provision in Northern Ireland, specialist provisions provide an important opportunity to move towards a more inclusive education model for all pupils. Need however continues to outstrip the availability of places within the schools' estate, and the opening of SPiMS classes is proceeding at pace.

The EA's support arrangements continue to evolve, with the further development of a local integrated teams initiative, the SEN Early Years Intervention Services, and the planned joining with EA SEND support services. Robust oversight and quality assurance of the quality of the provision, the governance and support arrangements is required by all stakeholders to ensure that the provision and support for pupils is appropriate, equitable and inclusive.

It is important that key stakeholders work in partnership to deliver the systemic transformation required and which our pupils and their families deserve. Stakeholders need to better understand the contribution of the community and voluntary sectors in helping children and young people with SEN and their families during and beyond the school day. Sufficient allied health provision, such as through engagement of speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists, needs to be available to work with the EA and the established SPiMS classes. A restored Executive, with strategic allocation of sufficient medium-

to long-term funding and workforce investment across education, health and communities is crucial so that all stakeholders are well-placed to work together to provide sustainable provision which better meet the needs of the pupils and support their holistic development.

With a policy now in place to strategically address the challenges, by projecting better the number of specialist places required and establishing SPiMS which provide pathways for specialist provisions and in geographically appropriate locations, there has been an intentional shift from a reactive, emergency response. However key stakeholders remained to be convinced that a crisis response does not still continue, with perceptions that the process is based solely on finding places, where there is available accommodation and space rather than the 'right place'. For example, detailed planning is required to scope out the transition pathways required between FS, KS 1 and KS 2 to support effectively pupils with SLD.

The vision articulated clearly within DE's Every CHILD Corporate Plan 2023-28, "Every child and young person with SEN is happy, learning and succeeding" resonates with all stakeholders. While account will have to be taken of any future ministerial decisions in respect of the key recommendations, recommendations and actions within the final report of the [Independent Review of Education, Investing in a Better Future](#) (December 2023), DE has worked through and strategically grouped the 200+ recommendations under the headings: 'Right Time, Right Support, Right People, Right Place'.

The Minister of Education, Paul Givan, and the Executive through its draft Programme for Government has signalled the intent to improve the educational experiences of pupils with SEN. The emphasis now is on moving forward together at pace, beyond the well-documented challenges to chart a solutions-focused way ahead, which informs systemic change centred on the children and young people.

Schools are a microcosm of our society, and building equity in education will not happen by accident; it requires strong, intentional, committed leadership from all stakeholders, including those within our schools.

In summary, the following are of key importance now in moving forward together:

- **DE's work on the development of a Policy for Inclusion**, which is being informed by, and will build further on, the existing effective practice. It should then inform the work of all educational stakeholders in implementing SEND legislation.

- **Development of an accessible, quick-read child-friendly guide of the various types of specialist provisions and classes**, crucial for learners and their parents, for staff in schools, and for all stakeholders. This is required to bring regional consistency and clarity, and to address use of legacy terminology, associated particularly with longer-established settings. It should be part of a wider communication strategy explaining the process for establishing specialist provision and allocating placements.
- **Strategic development of communities of practice aligned to DE's 'learning leaders' strategy**, with EA's establishment of SPiMS classes providing the needs analysis to inform these communities of practice. For instance, schools would welcome other clusters for specialist provisions and more sharing of effective practice between mainstream and special schools.
- **Evaluation of the effectiveness of the EA SSST**, to: better understand the extent of the **variability in access** to the support and guidance provided to SPiMS classes; monitor the impact of pupil support reforms at stage 2 on the Code of Practice prioritised for September 2024; and identify and disseminate effective practice across the service. The establishment of this integrated team has been an important development and an evaluation of its effectiveness in delivering school support, providing capacity building of staff, and leading to improvements in the quality of provision would be timely, given the cessation of the action short of strike in April 2024.
- **Realising effective and more collaborative, intra- and interdepartmental working by government, and by stakeholders**, including statutory agencies as set down in the Children and Young People's Strategy is central to supporting all stakeholders to provide a cohesive and impactful multi-disciplinary response.

Appendix 1: Legislative context

The 1947 Education Act NI legislated for the opening of special schools, the 'special treatment of pupils' in separate institutions and/or classes and the 'categorisation of handicapped pupils.' Since that time, it has been the responsibility of the EA to determine if a child required special education and following assessment the child was placed in a special school or 'a special class' or 'unit' attached to a mainstream school.

In 1974, the Warnock Committee was established to investigate the educational provision for children defined as 'handicapped' in England, Scotland and Wales and led to the publication of the Warnock Report in 1978. The recommendations of the report have been seminal in shaping NI legislation, policy and provision, such as the introduction of the term SEN along with new categories of need, SEN statements and advocating inclusive education for all.

The legal framework for the identification and provision of special educational needs is complex and begins with the 1996 Education (NI) Order. Statutory Guidance is provided in the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Need. The 2005 Special Educational Needs Discrimination Order (SENDO) added to the existing 1996 Education (NI) Order and produced a supplement to the Code of Practice. It is important to note that SENDO imposed a duty on Education and Library Boards (the EA, since 2015) to provide parents with advice and information relating to their child's special educational needs. It also extended protection from disability discrimination to children and young people in education and strengthened the rights of pupils with SEN to be educated in a mainstream school, when previously they may have been separated from their peers, families and communities and excluded from mainstream school. The inclusion of pupils with SEN into mainstream settings is a key tenet of the Department of Education's policy which specifies a continuum of SEN provision (mainstream schools, mainstream schools with specialist provision and special schools), with the majority of pupils with SEN attending mainstream provision. There exists therefore a presumption of mainstream education for pupils with a statement of special educational needs unless this is incompatible with the wishes of the parent or the provision of efficient education for other children.

Shortly after the introduction of SENDO in 2006, DE began a review of SEN and inclusion, prompted by the increasing number of pupils with SEN and delays and inconsistencies in assessment and provision. The review culminated in proposals outlined in the 2009 consultation document 'Every School a Good School: The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion'. The responses informed policy proposals and identified legislative changes required, which were agreed by the NI Executive in 2012. However, it was not until 2016, ten years after the review

began that a new responsive SEN Framework emerged. In the interim, the delays in SEN assessment and provision were extended, the associated costs increased exponentially, and the pace of change was far too slow. However, it is a significant development that the new Framework places the child at the centre of a more graduated response to meeting the needs of pupils with SEN which “continues to focus on inclusion, early identification, assessment and intervention for children with SEN through a more equitable framework in which all children with SEN should be able to get the support they need when they need it” (Consultation on Draft Special Educational Needs (SEN) Regulations, 2016).

The SEN Framework is comprised of three parts: the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) 2016 (the SEND Act); new SEN Regulations; and a new SEN Code of Practice. However, the absence of a working Executive and Assembly has delayed the full commencement of all the provisions, duties and rights within the SEND Act (2016) as they are underpinned and supported by new SEN Regulations and Code. Until affirmation can be provided by a restored NI Executive, they remain in draft form. Consequently, the legal framework for the identification and provision of special educational needs is provided in the 1996 Education (NI) Order, amended by the 2005 Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Order (SENDO) and the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Act (NI) 2016. The SEND Act (2016) introduces a number of new duties for the EA and Boards of Governors but importantly broadens special educational needs to include disabilities and reinforces again the rights of pupils to be educated in mainstream schools. An important aspect of the 2016 SEND Act are the duties which relate to co-operation. Specifically, the Education Authority and health and social services must cooperate to identify, assess and provide services to children with special educational needs. There is clear strategic alignment between the SEND Act and the Children’s Services Co-operation Act (2015). The Children and Young People’s Strategy (2020-30) was subsequently developed as the strategic framework to support and improve co-operation between children’s authorities and service providers, in addition to supporting the rights and well-being of children and young people. The strategy adopts an outcomes-based approach which focuses attention on eight high level outcomes for children and young people and the impact on their wellbeing. Within the outcome ‘Children and young people learn and achieve’ it is outlined that “we want our education system to be child-centred, inclusive and child-friendly”.

Appendix 2: Policy context

The Sustainable Schools Policy (SSP, 2009) was developed in recognition of the importance of area-based planning and the need to anticipate and respond to educational need “taking account of impacts within and across areas and across sectors to develop plans that meet the need for provision in that area”. While the SSP does not apply to pre-school or special education provision, area planning applies to primary, post-primary and special schools to enable strategic and sustainable planning for special education provision.

In 2015, a Ministerial Review of Special School Provision in NI undertook a strategic assessment of the provision for and future needs of special schools, in order to develop a regional plan for special schools. The review found there were inconsistencies across the special school sector, for example that provision for learners aged 3-19 provision was not available in every school and learners did not always attend their nearest school. Special schools were recognised as forming part of a continuum of provision for learners with SEN, alongside mainstream schools and learning support centres (LSC). Although LSCs were not part of the detailed analysis of the review, it noted inconsistencies in the continuum of provision (mainstream, mainstream with LSCs and special schools) available in some geographical areas, between key stages and phases. The review recommended that the age range, location and enrolment trends in LSCs and special schools were monitored as part of the continuum of special needs support to ensure equity of provision and identify future area planning requirements.

In response to the Ministerial Review, the first regional area plan (Providing Pathways: Strategic Area Plan for School Improvement 2017-2022) was published by the EA in 2017 and documented the need to improve geographical accessibility to special education provision in mainstream schools and provide for projected growth in special educational needs support. The plan also recommended a reconfiguration of special schools to provide a common provision for pupils aged 3-19. The EA also carried out an annual regional overview of LSCs to identify geographical inconsistencies in the type of provisions available.

In 2020, when emergency planning was in place, it was identified that a more expedient and efficient process was required to facilitate the establishment, closure or change of Specialist Provision in sustainable mainstream schools, without the requirement of a development proposal (DP) which could take a year to complete.

In 2021 the EA undertook a public consultation (Opened 16 October 2020 and closed 12 April 2021) to seek views on the *Draft Framework for Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools*. The purpose of the framework was to outline the EA’s vision, rationale and delivery framework with regards to SPiMS across NI. This framework also contains a proposal to pilot a new process to significantly speed up the establishment of specialist provision in mainstream schools.

The EA indicated it was seeking to put in place a framework to provide learners and parents with a greater level of equity in the availability of SPiMS across the region. It was indicated that:

This programme will provide greater access to inclusive educational opportunities for pupils with a statement of special needs. For children availing of a specialist placement, there is opportunity for wider participation in the school alongside mainstream peers. The EA is committed to promoting inclusion and therefore it is important that this is reflected in this continuum of provision.

The same consultation also provided details to pilot a new process to significantly speed up the establishment of SPiMS. Until 2020, an approved Development Proposal (DP) by the Department of Education (DE) was required for the establishment of SPiMS. The aim of the SPiMS pilot, undertaken by EA on behalf of DE, was to develop, test and agree a new process that would facilitate the establishment, closure or change of specialist provision in (sustainable) mainstream schools in an efficient and expedient manner without the requirement for a DP but consistent with the EA's *Draft Framework for Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools*. The pilot was part of the consultation process for the *Draft Framework for Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools*. It was indicated at the time that on completion of the consultation, outcomes would be analysed and, if successful, this would inform the future process for SPiMS. In relation to the pilot, the EA indicated its objective was to have specialist provision which is flexible and agile to meet the changing educational needs of children and young people and that will provide clarity and transparency for parents on the education and special educational needs support that is available to meet the changing needs of their children.

The new arrangement is also linked to the Annual Plan of Arrangements (APA), outlined in section 2 of the SEND Act (2016). The legislation places a duty on the EA to prepare, consult on and publish an APA before 31 July each year, which sets out the arrangements for special educational provision and staff training and must include the resources and the advisory or support services the EA proposes to make available each year. The establishment of and changes to specialist provisions in mainstream schools forms part of the consultation requirement of the APA.

As part of the endorsement of the Framework for Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools, the then Education Minister also endorsed a second Specialist Provision in Mainstream Pilot. Due to the delayed implementation of the SEND Act (2016) and introduction of the EA's APA, a second pilot was agreed between DE and EA to ensure that learners with a SEN statement had the places they required. This pilot has included a number of emergency-related SPiMS brought forward by the EA for the 2022/23 year and regularised a significant number (80) of historic temporary/emergency SPiMS which the EA put in place at or prior to 2021/22, without a statutory DP.

The framework also informed EA's strategic direction for special schools and specialist provisions in mainstream schools outlined in 'Planning for Special Education Provision: Strategic Area Plan 2022-27', the EA's first Special Education Strategic Area Plan (SESAP). The EA undertook a public consultation on the draft Special Education Strategic Area Plan 2022-27: Planning for Special Education Provision (Opened 18 January 2022 and closed 12 April 2022). It was indicated that this plan focuses on meeting the needs of children and young people with a Statement of Special Educational Need through a consistent model across all areas of Northern Ireland that would see all special schools provide 3-19 provision in the same school and increasing the number of specialist provisions in mainstream primary and post primary schools.

An Operational Plan: 2022-24 (the plan) is in place which identifies the provision required in mainstream and special schools across the region and the short- and medium-term actions to achieve this. The priorities within the plan are to ensure that there is sufficient capacity as well as seeking to address geographical, sectoral and linguistic inconsistencies.

Set against the necessity of opening these specialist provisions at pace to meet an increasing demand, the EA published a number of strategic documents to address the short-, medium- and long-term needs and support improved regional area planning. In particular, the 2021 Framework for Specialist Provisions in Mainstream Schools (the Framework) is "the driver for strategic planning of SEN provision in mainstream schools". The document establishes how the EA proposes to deliver specialist provisions in mainstream schools to address inequity of provision across geographical areas. The EA's vision and guiding principles (Appendix 5) are appropriate, informed by stakeholder engagement and identify how the EA proposes to work with school staff, pupils and parents. While the Framework identifies the need to work collaboratively with the health and social care sector and to provide equitable access to specialist pupil support services, how this is to be achieved remains unclear. Challenges to the realisation of such collaborative working include funding and staffing pressures.

More recently, the publication of the Special Education Strategic Area Plan 2022-27 set the strategic direction of Special Education Area Planning for five academic years. This is a welcome development. The key themes identified are appropriate and include, for example, the need to develop integrated and tiered levels of support. There is, however, insufficient detail on how this will be achieved, particularly with allied health professional services.

Strategic planning across the school estate is detailed well within Operational Plan 1 (2022-24).

Appendix 3: Quantitative terms

In this paper, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

Appendix 4: Notes

- Page 2 **severe learning difficulties***
Children and young people with SLD have significant learning impairments affecting their ability to participate in the school curriculum without high levels of support/ specialist support. They may also have difficulties with mobility and coordination, communication and completing self-help tasks, some may have additional medical needs. Most children and young people will have an Education, Health and Care plan.
- Page 5 **parents***
Includes those with parental responsibility.
- Page 5 **individual education plans (IEPs)***
Personalised Learning Plans have not yet come into effect.
- Page 13 **progression pathways to post-16 provision for pupils***
- Page 9 **the EA Behaviour Support Service (EA BSS)***
Supports the personal, social and educational development of pupils with a Special Educational Need (SEN) arising from social, behavioural and emotional wellbeing (SBEW) needs.
- Page 9 **the EA Autism Advice and Intervention Service (EA AAIS)***
Supports the personal, social and educational development of pupils with a Special Educational Need (SEN) arising from Autism. The Service provides support for children in Early Years (from two years old), as well as support in Primary and Post-Primary settings.
- Page 9 **the Allied Health Professional (AHP) services***
AHPs provide system-wide care to assess, treat, diagnose, and discharge patients across all of health and social care including housing, education, Justice and independent and voluntary sectors. They include professions such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, art therapy, physiotherapy and music therapy.
- Page 19 **“reverse integration” or “reverse inclusion”***
Instead of having individuals with SEN included in the mainstream class, reverse integration or inclusion places the individuals without SEN in the SPiMS class.

Page 21 **the Regional Integrated Support for Education Northern Ireland (RISENI)***

A regional early intervention service which supports children in pre-school educational and mainstream primary school settings by working closely with parents and education staff to help children develop the foundation skills for learning i.e. speech, language, communication, sensory-motor, visual perception, social, emotional and behaviour skills.

Page 24 **moderate learning difficulties***

Moderate learning difficulties (MLD): A child or young person will take longer to learn skills than the majority of their peers and will be functioning and achieving several years behind others of the same age. Difficulties may be apparent in the early years and general development may be delayed. Children are likely to require a higher level of additional support in school. Some children and young people with moderate learning difficulties will have an Education, Health and Care plan.

Appendix 5: Education Authority's Guiding Principles


The EA will be:

- **Child-centred** – children with special educational needs have different and individual needs. Different types of provision will be required by different children to meet their individually assessed need, as part of our continuum of high quality provision and associated support; including their well-being and therapeutic needs. The best interests of the child is of paramount importance.
- **Inclusive** – ensure that children and young people with special educational needs can have opportunities for inclusion alongside mainstream peers as valued and equal members of the school community, encouraging and supporting them to reach their potential, participate and enjoy school life, alongside their peers. Community connections enrich the experiences of all children and young people and the whole school community in a range of different ways. Children and young people will be encouraged to fully participate and their views will be given serious consideration.
- **Outcomes focused** – evidence improved outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs as well as increased independence in preparation for life beyond school. There is therefore a need for clear local evidence in terms of what is working to meet need, based on how our children are responding to interventions provided by highly skilled, competent and empathetic staff.
- **Equitable** – bringing consistency to the nature and type of specialist provision in mainstream schools across NI for children and young people is essential.
- **Transparent** – bring increased clarity and transparency in terms of how children and young people, parents and professionals access the full range of special educational support and provision available.
- **Collaborative** – work in partnership with other key stakeholders including health and social care trusts to help meet the special educational needs of children and young people.

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