

INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF EDUCATION  
IN NORTHERN IRELAND

**INTERIM REPORT**

OCTOBER 2022





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## INTRODUCTION FROM THE PANEL

The major issues facing education are global. For example, underachievement amongst more disadvantaged learners is a universal issue. So too, are common concerns regarding the development of the skills needed for the future workforce and for learners to make the most effective use of technology. Rises in the identification of special educational needs and concerns about mental health and wellbeing are also prevalent worldwide.

In response, most countries regularly review aspects of education. They may examine assessment, governance, workplace learning or the uses of new technology; but very few look at their system as a whole. Yet there are great advantages in taking a more comprehensive approach. If a review looks some distance into the future, it can encourage the development of a coherent vision where the totality is greater than its constituent parts.

Our extensive remit, therefore, presents a great opportunity. We have been invited to look at the learner's journey through life: to consider the development of the child in the early years of life and make suggestions to help older learners navigate the challenges of living in a time of rapid and accelerating change. It is important that education not only meets the needs of Northern Ireland's society and economy today, but that it also helps society progress to meet the challenges of the future.

At the heart of this review process are the needs of the learner. The focus is on making recommendations that will provide a truly excellent education experience for all learners in Northern Ireland; instilling in them a love of learning that continues throughout life. The aim is to offer a vision of what excellent education, at every level, might look like in the years leading up to the mid-century. At the same time, we recognise that the demands made on education are becoming more ambitious and that our educators are under significant pressure.

This Interim Report sets out the work undertaken to date and the key themes identified for further exploration and analysis. It does not, at this stage, offer solutions or recommendations. Further work is required to develop our thinking, analyse options and build support for delivery. Recommendations for change will be presented in the Final Report, which will suggest a direction of travel and recommend first steps.

It is already clear from the extensive engagement process that many people have strong views on education; on what works well, what works less well and what should be done. On some issues there is broad agreement, whilst on others there is divergence and debate. This is not unexpected and would be the same in every country worldwide. Whilst stakeholder opinion is important, it is vital that the recommendations are based solidly on evidence and centred on the learner.

Doing nothing is not an option. Continual improvement should be actively encouraged if education is to keep pace with the transformations in wider society. Reform is needed to provide excellent outcomes for all learners, for the system to be sustainable and to ensure that Northern Ireland is in a position to compete in the global marketplace.

## 1. BACKGROUND TO THE REVIEW

*‘The Executive will establish an external, independent review of education provision, with a focus on securing greater efficiency in delivery costs, raising standards, access to the curriculum for all pupils, and the prospects of moving towards a single education system.’*

[New Decade, New Approach \(2020\)](#)<sup>1</sup>

An independent review of education in Northern Ireland was a key commitment within New Decade, New Approach (NDNA).

The [Terms of Reference](#) (ToR) for the review were agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive and presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly in December 2020<sup>2</sup>.

In September 2021, Minister of Education, Michelle McIlveen MLA, appointed the following to undertake the review:

- [Dr Keir Bloomer \(Chairperson\)](#)
- [Sir Gerry Loughran \(Vice-Chairperson\)](#)
- [Marie Lindsay](#)
- [Robin McLoughlin OBE](#)
- [Isabel Nisbet](#)

The Panel’s work represents a fundamental review of the Northern Ireland education system with a focus on quality, equity and sustainability of the system.

It is also an opportunity to agree a vision for what a high-quality, innovative and inclusive education system will look like in the middle of the 21st century and how partners might work together to realise that vision – ensuring that education in

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1 [New Decade, New Approach \(January 2020\), p.7.](#)  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/856998/2020-01-08\\_a\\_new\\_decade\\_\\_a\\_new\\_approach.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade__a_new_approach.pdf)

2 [Independent Review of Education, \(2021\), Terms of Reference.](#)  
<https://www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk/key-documents>

Northern Ireland is internationally recognised as excellent. The ToR agreed for the Review make it clear that this vision should not be constrained by the existing policies and structures of education.

The purpose of this Interim Report is primarily to provide an update on the work to date. It will outline:

- The approach taken for evidence gathering.
- The principles for excellence in education.
- The major issues to be addressed in the Final Report and
- The Panel's next steps.

Evidence gathering, stakeholder engagement and analysis will continue. It is therefore important to note that this report does not set out any final conclusions.

## 2. EVIDENCE GATHERING

### 2.1 Approach

The work of the Independent Review Panel commenced in October 2021 with an extensive evidence-gathering process. This included:

- Direct engagement with education stakeholders by way of:
  - receipt of submissions from interested parties and
  - direct discussion with education stakeholders (including young people currently progressing through the education system).
- A public survey and
- Consideration of existing information and the commissioning of further investigation or research.

We are delighted with the level of participation thus far and are grateful to those who have taken time to engage, provide evidence, facilitate visits and give their views on the key issues to be considered.

This section explains the various processes used to gather evidence.

### 2.2 Direct Engagement

#### 2.2.1 Submissions

Submissions and oral evidence were sought from the full range of education stakeholders. These submissions raised numerous concerns and expressed varied opinions on the future of education in NI. They have been very helpful in assisting our consideration of the priority areas of inquiry for our work and in developing our thinking.

In total, 45 written submissions were received – a complete list of contributors is provided at **Annex I**. This does not include follow up correspondence or presentations provided by stakeholders during or following evidence sessions.

All of the written submissions are available to view on the [Independent Review of Education website](#).<sup>3</sup>

### 2.2.2 Evidence Sessions

Every effort was made to engage with a wide range of groups and individuals, ensuring people with a diverse range of opinions, as well as experts in specific areas, were given a voice. This work will continue, and where gaps in this engagement are identified, we will seek to fill them.

A full list of the organisations and individuals consulted as part of the evidence-gathering sessions is provided at **Annex II**. This includes children and young people, representatives of youth organisations, teachers/practitioners, academics, government and public sector officials, educational sectoral bodies, parent representatives and representatives of wider groups such as trade unions and political parties.

These sessions included the following:

- Workshops with the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly, the youth panel of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), the Secondary Students' Union Northern Ireland (SSUNI), Fóram na nÓg, other youth groups and university placement students working in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS).
- Visits to a further education (FE) college, schools (primary, post-primary and special) and an Education Other than at School (EOTAS) centre. These visits provided the opportunity to meet with learners, principals, lecturers, teachers, parents and governors.
- Meetings of a group of early years/primary and post-primary principals and practitioners, established in April 2022 to inform the Review and test ideas. The group has met twice to date.
- Meetings with the Special Schools Strategic Leadership group, the Further Education Colleges Principals' Group, the College for Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise, school principals working in the Dickson Plan area and Sure Start leaders.

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3 <https://www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk/key-documents>

- Meetings with the vice-chancellors of Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University, principals and senior leadership teams of St Mary’s University College and Stranmillis University College and the Universities’ Council for the Education of Teachers Northern Ireland (UCETNI). We also met with student teachers from St Mary’s and Stranmillis.
- Briefings with policy officials in relevant departments, including the Department of Education (DE), Department for the Economy (DfE), Department of Health (DoH), Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and The Executive Office (TEO), as well as the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).
- Meetings with key delivery and support bodies working in education. These included the senior management and board of the Education Authority (EA); the senior management and council of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS); and the senior management and council of the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). Evidence sessions were also held with delegations from the Catholic Schools’ Trustee Service (CSTS), Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG), the Controlled Schools’ Support Council (CSSC), the Governing Bodies Association NI (GBANI), the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), and the Transferor Representatives’ Council (TRC).
- Meetings with trade unions representing teachers, lecturers and support staff.
- Meetings with the Alliance Party, the Democratic Unionist Party, Sinn Féin, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, the Traditional Unionist Voice and the Ulster Unionist Party.<sup>4</sup> A [briefing session with the Education Committee](#) was held 15 December 2021.<sup>5</sup>
- Meetings with a number of other key education partners, including Koulla Yiasouma (NICCY), senior officials in the Department of Education in the Republic of Ireland, the expert panel on educational underachievement (chaired by Dr Noel Purdy), the Integrated Education

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4 All political parties represented in the Assembly at the time of our inception (October 2021) were invited to meet with the panel and provide written material.

5 Northern Ireland Assembly, Committee for Education Meeting (Wednesday, 15 December 2021). <https://niassembly.tv/committee-for-education-meeting-wednesday-15-december-2021/>

Fund (IEF), Professor Siobhan O'Neill (the Northern Ireland Mental Health Champion), Northern Ireland Audit Office, Northern Ireland Humanists, a range of employer and skills bodies and a roundtable discussion with local academics.

## 2.3 Survey

From 9 December 2021 to 4 February 2022, we ran a survey, which was open to responses from the public. Its purpose was to gather initial views on:

- a) What good education looks like.
- b) The strengths of education in Northern Ireland.
- c) The weaknesses of education in Northern Ireland.
- d) The priority issues for the Review.

The information obtained has helped shape our work plan and aid thinking on vision and key areas of inquiry.

The survey was available at the Independent Review of Education website and publicised via social media, letters and flyers to schools and colleges, correspondence with education stakeholders and the local media. In addition to the main survey, a shorter version targeted at children of primary school age was available. Surveys were available in the English and Irish languages.

In total the main survey received 1,234 responses and the children's version received 98 responses.

The results obtained have been published together with this report and are presented at **Annex III**.

## 2.4 Further Work

### 2.4.1 Research and Information Gathering

A wide range of research, briefing papers and other information has been considered as part of this Review.

In addition, the following additional pieces of work were commissioned:

- A literature review of previous reviews and existing research concerning educational provision in Northern Ireland (Roulston et al., 2021)
- *Country Policy Review and Analysis: United Kingdom (Northern Ireland)*, (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2021)
- *Impacts of academic selection in Northern Ireland – literature review for Independent Review of Education* (Pivotal, 2022).

All of the above are available on the [Independent Review of Education website](#).<sup>6</sup>

#### 2.4.2 Commissioned Engagement

Given the volume of stakeholders and limited timescales, we were acutely aware that we would be unable to engage directly with all stakeholders.

The Panel therefore commissioned the Education Authority Youth Service and Parenting NI to carry out additional engagement. The focus of this engagement was to gain a better understanding of the perceived strengths and weaknesses in education in Northern Ireland and assist in identifying priorities for the Review. The Education Authority report and the Parenting NI report are available on the [Independent Review of Education website](#).<sup>7</sup>

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6 <https://www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk/key-documents>

7 <https://www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk/key-documents>



### 3. PRINCIPLES

*‘The Review is also an opportunity to agree a vision for what a high quality, innovative and inclusive education system looks like in Northern Ireland in the 21st century and how relevant partners might work together to realise that vision – making Northern Ireland a truly excellent system internationally. This vision should not be constrained by the existing structure of education.’*

[Terms of Reference<sup>8</sup>](#)

A key deliverable of our ToR is to set out a clear vision of what high quality, innovative and inclusive education in Northern Ireland should look like in the 21st century.

To develop this vision, we wish to present a model of excellent education in Northern Ireland; what it should provide for the learner and how it should be designed. This has two aspects – what excellent education is and what outcomes it should deliver.

From the work done to date – including consideration of the responses to the public survey – we have developed the following core principles, which will inform the final recommendations and proposals for reform.

#### 3.1 Excellent Education

Excellent education should help us all develop as individuals, learners and citizens. It should:

- ensure individuals are healthy and confident; morally aware; emotionally and socially skilled; and are able to use their intellect and physical abilities to greatest advantage for themselves and society.
- inspire learners to be ambitious and capable, with a lifelong love of learning.

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8 *Terms of Reference, section 15*

- prepare citizens to aspire to a better future for themselves and others; to be ethical and informed; and make a contribution to society and the economy.

### 3.2 Excellent Education System

An excellent education system should bring benefits to individuals, society and the economy. It should:

- put the needs of learners first and ensure they are fully supported by a skilled and committed education workforce in well-resourced settings. It will protect and promote their wellbeing, respecting the reasonable rights of parents to ensure that children are educated in accordance with their religious and philosophical convictions.<sup>9</sup> Individuals will be treated fairly and the system will promote equity in society.
- promote community cohesion, respecting the culture, identity, language and values of learners, families and communities. It will be transparent and accountable to learners, families and stakeholders. Educational decision-making will be largely delegated to those responsible for delivery, thus helping ensure that the system inspires public confidence.
- equip learners at every stage of life with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to make a positive contribution to society and the economy. It will cultivate critical thinking, resilience, adaptability and the ability to thrive in times of change. At the same time, it will make efficient and effective use of resources.

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9 'In the exercise and performance of all powers and duties conferred or imposed on them by the Education Orders, the Department and boards shall have regard to the general principle that, so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure, pupils shall be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents.' from The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 (No. 594 (N.I. 3)), (1986), article 44. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1986/594/contents>

## 4. MAJOR ISSUES

The remit of the Independent Review is vast – the agreed Terms of Reference invite us to consider and comment on any aspect of the education system where reform would contribute to improved outcomes for the learner.

To ensure this task is deliverable, priority areas of inquiry have been identified, covering many of the most significant issues to be addressed. These have been developed based on stakeholder engagement, evidence gathering and data analysis. This Interim Report can offer only brief commentary on each issue, but the Final Report will offer a deeper analysis and clear recommendations. This list is not exhaustive – further issues are likely to be added as the work continues.

### 4.1 Early Years

Research indicates that children’s cognitive and physical development, wellbeing, later academic achievement, and even adult earnings can be boosted by good preschool provision. The very earliest years are a period of intensive brain development; they offer a unique opportunity to improve future learning. All children stand to benefit, but the impact on children from disadvantaged families can be transformative.

To achieve these benefits, families need access to high-quality services through the whole period from pre-birth to the beginning of school. These services must support all aspects of the child’s development. At the beginning of life, the most important support often comes from the health visitor. In the preschool years, the emphasis shifts to the development of speech, vocabulary and learning readiness.

Our future work will focus on the creation of an integrated, coherent and comprehensive service concerned with the physical, intellectual and personal development of the child from conception to the point of entry into primary education. At that point it will be important to ensure child-centred, play-based, age-appropriate education.

Over time, there should be an expansion in the universal service available to children. However, priority should be given to extending the service available to children from disadvantaged families and those experiencing developmental

difficulties. Early detection of emerging problems and effective intervention are vital and will bring huge benefits both to the individual and society.

Such a strategic approach will have significant costs (though implementation can be gradual) but it will offer a secure foundation for tackling educational underachievement while improving the learning of all young people.

## 4.2 Disadvantage and Underachievement

Most forms of disadvantage are strongly correlated. Young people who do not succeed at school are more likely to be unemployed. They are also more likely to suffer from poor health, to die young, to be a victim or a perpetrator of crime, to have to deal with addiction and so on. Disadvantage and underachievement are some of the most serious issues that this Review must confront.

Although many people from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve great success, there is nevertheless, throughout the world, a strong link between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background.

This is true of Northern Ireland, which contains many high-achieving schools yet experiences a significant tail of underachievement amongst the population as a whole. We have therefore considered, and endorse, the final report and action plan outlined by the DE's expert panel on educational underachievement in [A Fair Start](#) (2021).<sup>10</sup> As the remit of this Review is wider than theirs, there is opportunity to suggest even more far-reaching ways of tackling inequality and underachievement.

The Final Report will address these issues with the aim of raising standards, improving educational outcomes, wellbeing and resilience of learners of all ages, and enhancing the life chances of those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as learners who require greater support, such as children looked after and newcomer children and young people.

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10 Department of Education, *A Fair Start – Final Report & Action Plan*, (1 June 2021). <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/fair-start-final-report-action-plan>

### 4.3 Learner Support, Inclusion and Wellbeing

A wide range of stakeholders, as well as learners and staff in special schools/ units, provided feedback in relation to supporting learners with Special Education Needs (SEN). This is a key issue for many learners, parents/carers and educators and there is significant evidence on the matter, including reports by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC). In response the Department of Education commissioned '[The Independent Review of Special Education Needs](#)'.<sup>11</sup> This review is nearing completion and will inform our thinking in our final report.

Appropriate action is crucial if Northern Ireland is to deliver immediate improvement and longer-term reform to ensure that the needs of all those who require additional support are better served in the future. At the same time, it is essential that the service provided is financially sustainable, which is not the case at present.

We have concerns about current approaches meeting the needs of young people with SEN. Assessment and statementing processes are often unduly protracted. Families believe that their children's needs are not met fully or as early as possible. There is little evidence that the approaches adopted are as effective as society would wish. Both the apparent incidence and the cost of SEN support are rising exponentially in a manner that cannot be sustained. Given the rising costs, it is essential that funding is targeted effectively towards the learning needs of individual children. The present system has evolved out of the Warnock Report,<sup>12</sup> which was a pioneering report at the time but is now more than 40 years old. Since then, new thinking and evidence has become available on the benefits of more inclusive education, something that will be explored further in the Final Report.

Emotional health and wellbeing is consistently prioritised and highlighted by many stakeholders but specifically by learners, parents and educators – for instance, the impressive [Children & Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework](#) outlines the support needed for learners who may be at risk, or are showing signs of needing further help.<sup>13</sup> There is also growing evidence on the

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11 Department of Education, *Independent Review of Special Education Needs*. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/independent-review-special-education-needs>

12 Warnock, H.M. et al., *Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People* (1978).

13 Department of Education, *Children & Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework*, (26 February 2021). <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/emotional-health-and-wellbeing>

benefits of trauma-informed practice. We believe that it is important to help young people become resilient as well as intervening to help those in difficulty. However, there is a need for greater consistency in the delivery of these approaches and the role of pastoral care. These require adequate resources.

We recognise the important role of Youth Services, a key education partner due to its provision of formative experiences outside of the classroom. These experiences can support a range of education outcomes, improve wellbeing and ensure that more learners can remain engaged with education.

#### 4.4 Curriculum and Assessment

Discussion of educational reform often centres on systems and structures, however, the quality of an education service ultimately depends on what is taught and the quality of teaching. Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are, therefore, central to our current thinking.

Regular updating will always be required as curriculum and qualifications are overtaken by far-reaching economic and social change. At the same time, all educators must be able to rely on an expert and responsive support service, including good quality, career-long professional development.

The present school curriculum seeks to give effect to a set of objectives – that all learners should develop as individuals, contributors to society and contributors to the economy. We believe that such an approach is right, although to this should be added the aim of making young people successful and committed learners.

We will look at the relationship between curriculum and assessment and seek to ensure that what is measured is what is important. Assessment helps the learner to improve and recognises what has been learned; it is an important and valuable part of good education. However, an overemphasis on successive examinations currently distorts the educational experience, particularly in the later post-primary years.

It is essential that the curriculum should be coherent, continuous and learner centred. Abrupt transitions, such as the change that takes place from the largely unified curriculum of primary school to the subject-based arrangements in post-primary, should be minimised. Young people should be able to choose from a number of pathways, with academic and vocational education being accorded equal

esteem. Qualifications should meet the needs of learners and the Northern Ireland economy, now and in the future.

## 4.5 Transitions and Progression

The education journey is characterised by a series of transitions and pathways. We are of the view that it is essential that transitions are seamless and pathways remain open. The journey should enable progression, have no dead ends and last a lifetime. Opportunities for learning and relearning need to be available and accessible beyond the end of formal schooling and into adult life, building a culture of lifelong learning throughout society.

The transition from primary to post-primary schooling is surrounded by controversy; many stakeholders have highlighted strongly held views on the subject. The Final Report will not shirk these issues. We will make recommendations about the transition of very young learners into formal education and on the movement of teenage learners out of school and into further and higher education, training, employment and adult life. We will also make recommendations on how to address the issue of those young people who become disengaged from education and do not make a successful transition from school into further education, training or employment.

## 4.6 Further Education

Further education has a vital role in the education journey and in preparing learners to contribute to the economy and wider society. Colleges possess extensive expertise, particularly in the delivery of vocational education and professional and technical courses that meet the needs of employers.

However, the further education sector currently faces a number of significant challenges in relation to falling enrolments and increasing cost pressures. There are also issues regarding competition and duplication with other parts of the education system. We are of the view that all education providers need to work in a more collaborative manner with the learner at the centre.

The Department for the Economy has commissioned a [Review of the Further Education Delivery Model](#).<sup>14</sup> The first stage of this review is nearing completion and we will consider the findings when making recommendations on how to secure the future of the FE sector.

#### 4.7 Supporting the Education Workforce

Our practitioners – a definition that extends beyond teachers and lecturers to others involved in delivering education services – are central to the success of our education system. They need to be valued, supported, equipped and empowered. We must also address under-performance where it exists.

Excellent training, support and continuing professional development should be pre-requisites for educational improvement. We will consider options to ensure there is high-quality initial teacher education and continuing professional development for teachers and school leaders.

Promoting and enabling a culture of self-improvement is central to supporting our education workforce. Collaboration and mutual support among schools and the operation of professional networks have an important contribution to make. We will also consider measures to support wider career progression routes, including opportunities for mentorship, career breaks and secondments (including experience of industry and business).

#### 4.8 Structures and Single System

Whilst NDNA asks us to consider ‘the prospects of moving towards a single education system’, the term is not defined.<sup>15</sup> In our evidence sessions and consideration of papers, it is apparent that there is no agreed definition of what a ‘single system’ means in reality.

Many take the view that ‘a single system’ means increasing the provision of integrated education and reducing community and sectoral divisions. Others have

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14 Department for the Economy, *Review of the Further Education Delivery Model*.  
<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/topics/further-education/review-further-education-delivery-model>

15 *New Decade, New Approach*, p.7.

focussed on the difference between grammar and non-grammar in post-primary. Others again have highlighted the existence of unnecessary complexity and duplication in the administration of education.

There are many different partners involved in the delivery of education. They include early years centres, primary and post-primary schools, further and higher education, youth services, training and apprenticeship schemes, and EOTAS and special educational needs provision. There are also a number of key government departments concerned with education, as well as delivery bodies involved. All of these parts must cooperate to deliver a common vision. Education should be delivered in collaboration, not in competition – with the needs of the learner paramount.

Moving towards a ‘single system’ involves many complex and controversial issues which we continue to consider. The Final Report will include definite conclusions and recommendations.

#### 4.9 Institutional Governance

Departmental responsibility for education is primarily shared by DE and DfE – although DAERA and the Department of Justice (DoJ) provide specific services related to their jurisdiction; and DoH has a significant interest, particularly in early years. Therefore, close cross-departmental cooperation is essential. We have examined this in depth and concluded that the key interface is between DE and DfE in relation to post-16 education and skills provision. Significant change may be needed.

EA's role, the interface between EA and DE, and the contribution of sectoral bodies have also been considered. Our approach to further deliberations on these matters will be informed by our belief that increased delegation of decision-making to schools and other providers, along with appropriate support, will help to deliver our main objective: better outcomes for learners. Furthermore, we believe that all educational institutions need to see themselves as accountable to learners and to society. This may involve changes in governance arrangements, particularly in the case of small schools, to enable them to benefit from this kind of empowerment.

We have examined institutional arrangements for assessment and qualifications. Consideration of options for change in this area will be an integral part of the Final Report.

#### 4.10 Funding – Sufficiency, Efficiency and Impact

Education should be viewed as an investment; it equips individuals and society to face the future. Early and appropriate interventions can prevent learning difficulties developing. In turn, this can minimise longer-term costs and provide better outcomes for individuals, taxpayers and society as a whole.

On the basis of our work to date, we are of the view that the education system in Northern Ireland is not adequately funded.

The evidence of this can be seen in a number of ways:

- Spend per pupil in Northern Ireland has been the lowest of the four UK jurisdictions for over a decade and remains 5.5% less than the UK average<sup>16</sup>.
- Real terms spend per pupil reduced by 10% in the 7-year period prior to the Covid pandemic.<sup>17</sup>
- A significant decline in investment in education and skills including real terms reduction in spending on higher education, further education and industry skills of around one-third over the period between 2010/11 and 2019/20.
- Significant future challenges regarding funding for youth training and apprenticeships should adequate replacement funding for European Structural Fund (ESF) not be secured.

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16 According to research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) per pupil spend in 2021-22 was about £6,400 in Northern Ireland, £6,600 in Wales, £6,700 in England and £7,600 in Scotland, meaning that the per pupil spend in NI was £372 less than the weighted UK average ([Comparisons of school spending per pupil across the UK | Institute for Fiscal Studies \(ifs.org.uk\)](#)).

17 Figures from Department of Education. Figures from 2019/20 onwards have not been included due to the distorting effect of additional funding related to the Covid pandemic.

- The Department of Education has recently flagged an estimated £465m funding deficit in the current financial year;<sup>18</sup> this position continues to be monitored as the current financial year progresses.

In addition to the issue of underfunding, we are concerned that the ongoing reliance on in-year allocations to meet committed costs limits the ability of government departments and education bodies to plan and deliver services for learners.

We are also concerned that for some areas of significant investment, there is a lack of data to demonstrate the benefits and impact of the investment.

The combined effect of financial uncertainty and underfunding has a major impact on our learners. This is particularly concerning at a time when many families are struggling with the cost of living and the unseen costs of education, including school uniforms and school meals.

The Final Report will focus on three key concerns: securing sufficient funding for education; ensuring it is efficiently used; and ensuring that decision makers have a better understanding of the impact of funding.

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18 Response to Assembly question AQW414/22-27.  
<http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/printquestionssummary.aspx?docid=373883>



## 5. NEXT STEPS

### 5.1 Next Steps

We have been asked to deliver the Final Report within 18 months of our appointment, with scope for a short extension (of up to 6 months) to be secured if required.

Much of the work over the next few months will be assessing the information gathered, filling gaps where necessary and analysing options for reform. The Panel will then move to developing recommendations and suggesting means for their delivery.

### 5.2 Building Support

A key aspect of our considerations will be ensuring that the Final Report and its recommendations secure support from stakeholders, decision makers and delivery agents. We realise that this will be challenging. However, we are persuaded that doing nothing is not a responsible option.

To that end, we will discuss key policy issues with stakeholders to consider options and test ideas. It is important that, where possible, solutions are co-designed with those who will be most impacted.

### 5.3 Delivery

Education in Northern Ireland needs to change. However, resources are finite and the system has a limited capacity for change at any given time. Therefore, the Final Report will adopt a timescale of some 20-plus years into the future and seek not only to offer recommendations to deal with immediate problems but also to set a direction of travel for the longer term.

Recommendations for the immediate future will be practical, affordable and deliverable; those aimed at the longer term will be ambitious, comprehensive and more challenging.



## LIST OF ACRONYMS

CAFRE	College for Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise
CCEA	Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
CCMS	Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
CnaG	Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta
CSSC	Controlled Schools' Support Council
CSTS	Catholic Schools' Trustee Service
DAERA	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
DfE	Department for the Economy
DoH	Department of Health
DoJ	Department of Justice
EA	Education Authority
EOTAS	Education Other Than At School
ETI	Education and Training Inspectorate
FE	Further Education
GBANI	Governing Bodies Association (NI)
HE	Higher Education
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
NDNA	New Decade, New Approach
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
NICCY	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
NICIE	Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education
NICS	Northern Ireland Civil Service
PAC	Public Accounts Committee
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SSUNI	Secondary Students' Union Northern Ireland
TEO	The Executive Office
ToR	Terms of Reference for this Review
TRC	Transferor Representatives' Council
UCETNI	Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers Northern Ireland



## SUBMISSIONS RECEIVED

The following individuals and organisations prepared papers specifically for the Review and voluntarily submitted these to the Panel for consideration. These submissions are available on the [Independent Review of Education website](#).

The list below does not include presentations used during evidence sessions.

### Organisations

- Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School, Board of Governors
- Association of Controlled Grammar Schools
- Association of School and College Leaders
- Catholic Heads Association
- Catholic Schools' Trustee Service
- Children's Law Centre
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta
- Commission for Victims and Survivors
- Confederation of British Industry
- Controlled Schools' Support Council
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment
- Dyslexia Awareness NI
- Early Years
- Education Authority
- Federation of Small Businesses
- Further Education Colleges Principals Group
- Governing Bodies Association NI
- Institute of Directors
- Integrated Alumni

- Integrated Education Fund
- Irish National Teachers' Organisation
- Mental Health Champion, Professor Siobhan O'Neill
- National Association of Head Teachers
- NASUWT: The Teacher's Union
- National Education Union
- Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce
- Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People Youth Panel
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education
- Northern Ireland Humanists
- Oireachtas Joint Committee, Cathaoirleach
- Pivotal (Northern Ireland public policy forum)
- Presbyterian Church in Ireland
- St Joseph's Grammar School, Donaghmore
- Stranmillis University College
- Transferor Representatives' Council
- Ulster-Scots Community Network
- Ulster Teachers' Union
- Ulster Wildlife Youth Forum
- Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers NI

### Individuals

- Denis Rooney
- James Curran
- Martina Jordan
- Naomi Coupland
- Roisin O'Hare

## LIST OF EVIDENCE SESSIONS

Evidence sessions and meetings were held with a wide range of organisations and individuals.

Below is a list of those the Panel has consulted with since October 2021. For the most part, we have listed organisations rather than individuals. Representatives from some of these organisations have met with the Panel on several occasions.

Format of meetings have included one-to-one presentations/briefings; workshops or roundtable discussions with a number of individuals and organisations; and visits.

### Children and Young People Groups

- BUD Club
- Education Authority Youth Service
- Fóram na nÓg
- Long Tower Youth Club
- NICCY Youth Panel
- Northern Ireland Civil Service Students Group
- Northern Ireland Youth Assembly
- Secondary Students' Union Northern Ireland

### Children and Young People Sector

- Altram
- Ballymena & Little Steps (Antrim) Sure Start
- Barnardo's

- Children's Law Centre
- DOWN Sure Start
- Early Years
- Edenballymore Sure Start
- Gold Sure Start
- Mencap
- Millburn Community Playgroup
- Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
- Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health
- Save the Children

### Parenting Groups

- Parenting NI

### Education Practitioners

- Ballyclare High School
- Belfast Metropolitan College
- Bunscoil Phobal Feirste
- Castlereagh Alternative Education Provision
- Collaborate Northern Ireland
- College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise
- Dickson Plan area school principals
- Early Years / Primary School Principals Reference Group (established by Review Panel)
- Further Education Colleges Principals Group
- Lagan College

- Local education academics and researchers
- Model Primary School and Nursery, Derry/Londonderry
- Mitchell House School
- Post-primary (including FE) Principals Reference Group (established by Review Panel)
- Queen’s University Belfast
- Special Schools’ Strategic Leadership Forum
- St Cecilia’s College, Derry/Londonderry
- St Malachy’s Primary School & Nursery, Bangor
- St Mary’s University College, senior staff and student teachers
- St Pius X College
- St Teresa’s Nursery School, Belfast
- Shaftesbury Nursery School, Belfast
- Stranmillis University College, senior staff and student teachers
- Teconnaught Cross Community Preschool
- Ulster University
- Universities’ Council for the Education of Teachers NI

### Other Education Bodies

- Department of Education (Republic of Ireland)

### Political Parties

- Alliance Party
- Democratic Unionist Party
- Sinn Féin
- Socialist Democratic Labour Party

- Traditional Unionist Voice
- Ulster Unionist Party

### NI Government

- Department for Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs
- Department for the Economy
- Department of Education
- Department of Health
- Northern Ireland Audit Office
- The Executive Office

### Assembly Committees

- Education Committee

### Arm's Length Bodies

- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment
- Education Authority
- Middletown Centre for Autism
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education

### Sectoral Bodies

- Catholic Schools' Trustee Service
- Controlled Schools' Support Council

- Governing Bodies Association (NI)
- Transferor Representatives' Council

### Trade Unions – Teaching

- Association of School and College Leaders
- Irish National Teachers' Organisation
- National Association of Head Teachers
- NASUWT: The Teacher's Union
- National Education Union
- Ulster Teachers' Union

### Trade Unions – Support Staff

- GMB
- Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA)
- UNISON
- Unite the Union

### Employers and Skills Bodies

- CFM Ltd
- Civica
- Confederation of British Industry
- Construction Employers Federation, Northern Ireland
- Construction Industry Training Board
- Engineering Sectoral Partnership
- Federation of Small Businesses

- Independent Review of Careers Guidance, Dr Deirdre Hughes
- Institute of Directors
- Manufacturing Northern Ireland
- Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce
- Northern Ireland Electricity
- Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue
- Northern Ireland Skills Council
- Software Alliance
- Workforce Training
- Workplus

### Other

- Coalition for Inclusive Education
- Dyslexia Awareness NI
- Education and Skills Delivery Partnership, Community Planning, Derry City & Strabane District Council
- Expert Panel into Educational Underachievement
- Foyle Learning Community
- Goliath Trust
- Innovation Forum
- Integrated Education Fund
- Mental Health Champion, Professor Siobhan O'Neill
- Northern Ireland Humanists
- Northern Ireland Office
- Paul Sweeney, former DE Permanent Secretary
- Pivotal NI

- Post-Primary Taskforce
- Public Health Agency
- Review of Children's Social Care Services Northern Ireland,  
Professor Ray Jones
- Ulster University Economic Policy Centre



## SURVEY ANALYSIS REPORT

Analysis report appended separately.

<https://www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk/your-views>





# **INTERIM REPORT**

OCTOBER 2022



**Independent Review  
of Education**