

EXPERT PANEL ON
EDUCATIONAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT
IN NORTHERN IRELAND



a fair start.

**FINAL REPORT &
ACTION PLAN
MAY 2021**

Foreword

The Minister of Education, Peter Weir appointed an Expert Panel from 1 September 2020 to examine the links between educational underachievement and socio-economic background. The panel members were:

- Dr Noel Purdy, Director of the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement, Stranmillis University College – Chair of the panel;
- Joyce Logue, Principal of Longtower Primary School, Derry/Londonderry;
- Mary Montgomery, Principal of Belfast Boys’ Model School;
- Kathleen O’Hare, former Principal of St Cecilia’s College, Derry/Londonderry and Hazelwood Integrated College, Belfast;
- Jackie Redpath, Chief Executive, Greater Shankill Partnership;
- (Professor Feyisa Demie, Honorary Professor, Durham University supported the panel in a research capacity).

The panel was formed under the New Decade, New Approach agreement which set out the requirement “to establish an expert group to examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background and draw up an action plan for change that will ensure all children and young people, regardless of background, are given the best start in life”. The specific objectives of the panel, as set out in the Terms of Reference¹, are to:

- examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background;
- give particular consideration to the long-standing issues facing working-class, Protestant boys, and specific actions to address this particular gap;
- produce an interim report;
- draw up an Action Plan for change that will ensure all children and young people, regardless of background are given the best start in life;
- estimate the cost of implementing the Action Plan.

The Expert Panel on educational underachievement conducted its work from September 2020 to May 2021 and during that time, heard from a wide range of stakeholders including educationalists, parents and families, children and young people, policy makers, political and business representatives and the voluntary and community sector. A broad range of views was expressed on the significant and long lasting issues affecting many learners and one cannot doubt the commitment, dedication and enthusiasm, which exists both inside and outside the education system to enable all learners to give of their best and to reach their full potential. We have heard

¹ Department of Education (2020) *Terms of Reference for Expert Panel to Examine and Propose Actions to Address Links between persistent Educational Underachievement and Socio-Economic Background*. Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Terms%20of%20Reference%20%28ToR%29%20-%20Expert%20Panel%20Persistent%20Educational%20Underachi....pdf>

consistent calls for improvements across numerous policy areas, which in many stakeholders' views, will make a significant difference to children and young peoples' outcomes.

During the oral evidence sessions, the Expert Panel met a total of 344 individuals across 24 days from September 2020 to February 2021. These sessions included the following:

- 61 school leaders from 59 schools across all regions of Northern Ireland, including preschools / nursery, primary schools, post-primary schools and special schools across all sectors (including EOTAS settings) in both urban and rural areas;
- 44 individuals from 33 voluntary and community groups across Northern Ireland;
- 29 parents from all regions of Northern Ireland;
- 57 Officials from 13 Government Departments and Agencies;
- 13 MLAs and officers from the 6 main Political Parties;
- Representatives from 7 ALBs/NDPBs; 10 Children's organisations/charities; 5 Youth Groups; 5 Teaching Unions; 4 University Experts; 6 FE Colleges; 2 Medical Experts; 11 other interested parties/organisations.
- Representatives from UK and Republic of Ireland government departments.

The above included six regional sessions (for the areas of Ballymena, Belfast, Cookstown, Derry/Londonderry, Enniskillen, Newry), which were conducted virtually due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

There has been almost unanimous agreement that addressing educational underachievement brought about as a consequence of social-economic disadvantage is wider than education alone and if we are serious about wanting to see fundamental change for the benefit of our most disadvantaged, everyone in Northern Ireland must prioritise education and learning as the route out of poverty. This means placing equality of opportunity at the core of everything we do. In doing so not only will all learners benefit, society as a whole will benefit.

As part of our work, we were asked to consider defining what the term "educational underachievement" meant. Consequently, the panel recommends the adoption of the following definition:

The term underachievement is used to describe the difference in the average educational attainment of different groups. Strictly speaking, underachievement "means that attainment is low, and lower than other comparison groups²"

As a consequence of our public engagement and professional experience, we have reflected and distilled the oral and written evidence into the following key areas:

² House of Commons Education Committee (2014) *Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children*. Available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmeduc/142/142.pdf>

1. Redirecting the focus to Early Years.
2. Championing Emotional Health and Wellbeing.
3. Ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of Curriculum and Assessment.
4. Promoting a whole community approach to education.
5. Maximising boys' potential.
6. Driving forward Teachers' Professional Learning (TPL).
7. Supporting the professional learning and wellbeing of school leadership.
8. Ensuring Interdepartmental collaboration and delivery.

In taking this Action Plan forward, children will get the support they need from birth and throughout their Early Years right up to and including the time they start school. This Action Plan intentionally spans the next five years and beyond because these are strategic issues which require long-term political commitment and financial support. This Action Plan prioritises investment in Early Years and gives prominence to emotional health and well-being, an issue which has affected so many of us over the past 18 months in particular. The curriculum has been in place since 2007 and whilst its design is broadly sound, the flexibility it provides to teachers means that delivery is not always in keeping with its original design intentions. We have proposed a number of important actions to address this including rationalising assessment from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 3 and looking afresh at how we assess English and maths at Key Stage 4.

We also believe there is considerable merit in the Department of Education taking forward its planned System Evaluation Framework. This will illustrate at system (Northern Ireland) level, the range of ways in which schools support learners as they progress through their education, providing additional information such as the context of the school, the challenges which learners attending face and the value-added which has been provided. This will tell a much broader story of success than attainment alone, which too often has focused solely on narrow measures of success at GCSE (or equivalent) level.

We have also heard unanimously about the central role of parents and families in supporting their child's learning before, during and after the fourteen years of formal education. However, parents and families need help to do this, particularly those whose confidence has been impacted by their own educational experience and/or those whose ability to support their children's learning is hindered by their own adverse circumstances. For these reasons, we believe the Department of Education should invest significantly more in its Extended Schools Programme in order to incentivise schools to work more collaboratively with the communities they serve. Providing more flexibility to both schools and communities as partners in education in what and how to deliver learning through a new place-based "Reducing Educational Disadvantage (RED)" programme will enable our children and young people to excel in their educational journey.

We have proposed specific interventions to help support boys in their learning. It is clear from the statistics both in school, Further Education and Higher Education that boys, especially those

entitled to Free School Meals (FSME) from both sides of the community divide, are underachieving. In line with our Terms of Reference, we have therefore proposed specific interventions to help support boys in their learning and to maximize their potential. Teachers and other education professionals also need significant and on-going support throughout their career, with clear pathways for them to follow, allowing them to excel at teaching and learning and also to develop appropriate leadership skills if they aspire to become middle and senior managers capable of leading multi-faceted teams.

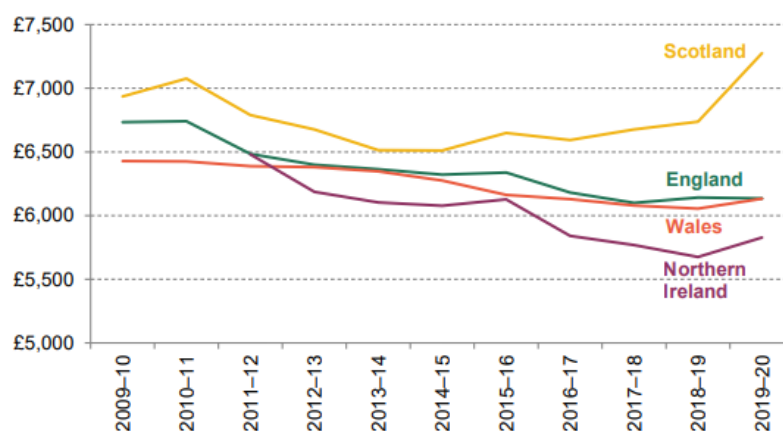
None of this is possible without effective collaboration across the public sector, breaking down departmental silos and co-designing policies with a child-centred focus and from the perspective of the family as a whole.

We believe the actions set out in this Action Plan are capable of making a significant, long-lasting impact on children’s learning now and for the foreseeable future however, this can only be achieved if we invest appropriately and significantly in education for the long term. We have seen the detrimental impact which a decade of austerity has had on education (and other) budgets and the socio-economic polarisation of our community has become even more apparent as a result of Covid-19. This is in a context where “...real-terms cuts in school spending per pupil since 2009–10 have been largest in Northern Ireland (10%) and England (9%). Both countries have seen fast growth in pupil numbers. In England, a small real-terms increase in the total budget translated into cuts in spending per pupil as a result of 11% growth in pupil numbers. In Northern Ireland, the total budget fell in real terms by 5%, meaning that population growth of 6% led to even larger cuts in spending per pupil”³.

Figure 1

Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies (2020)³

Figure 3.10. School spending per pupil across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (2020–21 prices)



³ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2020) *2020 Annual Report on Education Spending in England*. Available at <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/36712/1/R182-2020-annual-report-on-education-spending-in-England.pdf> page 77

We can only admire from a distance, the level of funding enjoyed through policies like the Pupil Premium in England (achieved through efficiency savings found there), or Scotland, where the level of spending per pupil in the 2010s rose by 5% to become £1,500 higher per pupil (£7,300 average) compared to Northern Ireland (£5,800 average); and the “Delivering Equality in Schools” Programme in the Republic of Ireland, where learners are performing increasingly well in comparison to their international counterparts.

Despite the significant financial challenges faced by schools over the past 10 years or more, the panel is acutely aware of the year-on-year improvements there have been in educational outcomes at level 2 (GCSE or equivalent) and level 3 (A level or equivalent) and the particular success of non-grammar schools in closing the gap between FSME and non-FSME pupils. Nevertheless, there remains significant challenges for a range of Section 75 groups, particularly where multiple S75 groups are involved such as gender, religion, race, sexual orientation and children looked after⁴. Children from the Traveller community, Roma children and children looked after have some of the lowest levels of attainment of all equality groups. A combination of early intervention, a whole-school approach to nurture and schools having the scope (and budget) to provide a differentiated curriculum bespoke to their pupils’ specific needs are essential in addressing these inequalities.

As we construct this Action Plan, we are mindful of the Department of Education’s statutory duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education (as defined by The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989) as well as its duty to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education (as set out in the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998). The Shared Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 also places a duty on the Department of Education and the Education Authority to encourage, facilitate and promote Shared Education.

In commending this Action Plan to the Northern Ireland Executive, we fully recognise the magnitude of the challenge in addressing the underlying causes of social disadvantage, the intractability of many of the issues facing families living in disadvantaged circumstances and the need for systemic change in education to be considered by the forthcoming Independent Review of Education, but we are also convinced that the impact of the actions proposed in this Action Plan will be significant, promoting equity, fostering greater collaboration between schools, families and communities, closing the achievement gap, and giving all of our children and young people ‘A Fair Start’.

Noel Purdy

Chair of the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement

⁴ Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2015) *Education Inequalities in Northern Ireland (final report)*. Available at <https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/EducationInequality-FullReportQUB.pdf>

Acknowledgements

As members of the Expert Panel we would like to thank the Department of Education (DE) for establishing the panel, and the members of the DE secretariat (Dale Heaney, Victoria Glenn and Patricia Nickell) for supporting the panel's work so professionally. Finally, a special thanks to everyone who contributed to the work of the panel, including those who responded to the written call for evidence, those who presented oral evidence to the panel, and the children, young people and parents⁵ who shared their perspectives on how to address educational underachievement⁶.

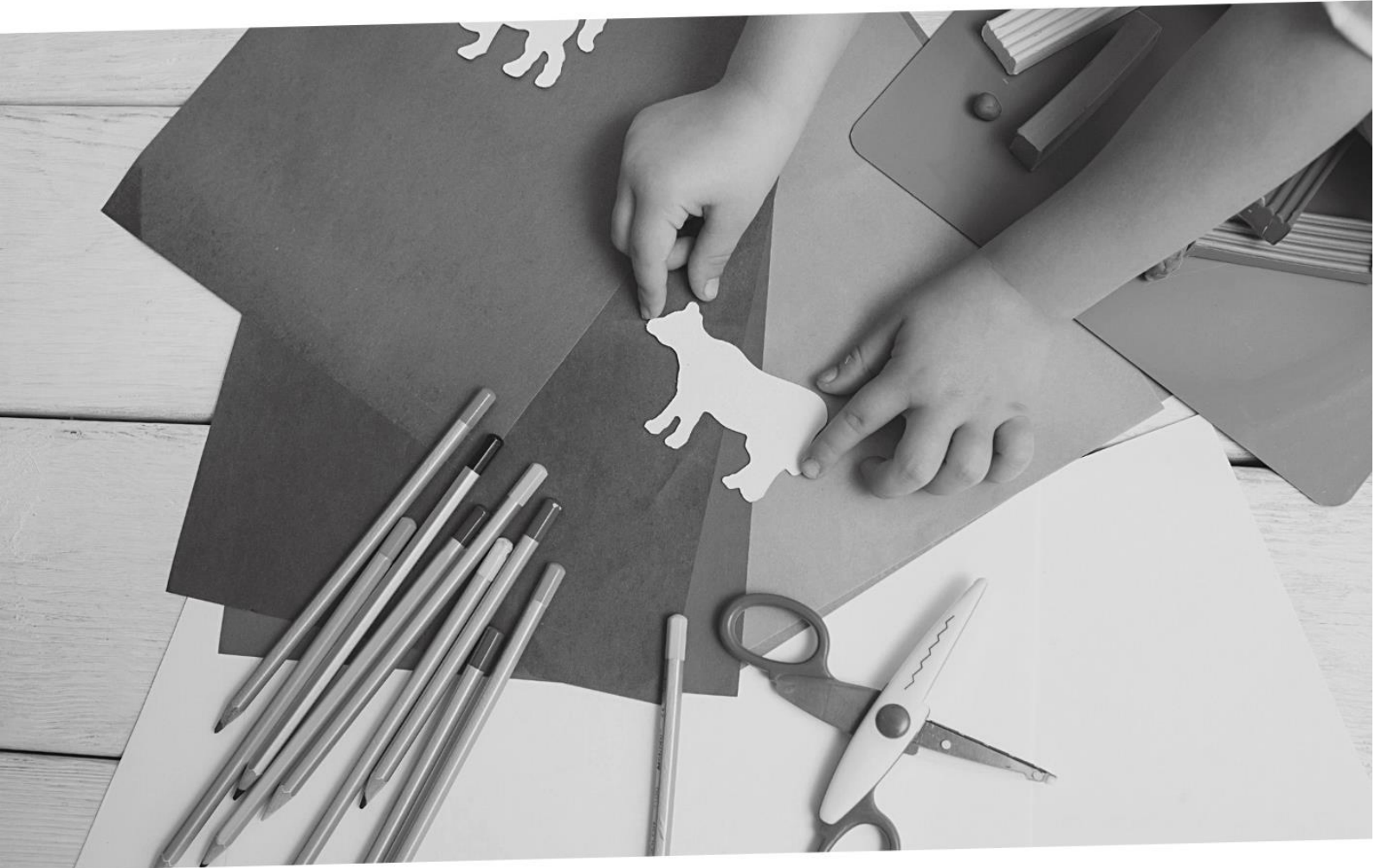
⁵ The term parent is used in its broadest sense to include parent / carer / family etc.

⁶ A full list of contributors can be found in Annex B.

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a fair start.



KEY AREA 1

REDIRECTING THE FOCUS TO EARLY YEARS

Key Area 1 - Redirecting the focus to Early Years

What do we want to achieve?

We want a seamless journey from pregnancy to pre-school, school and beyond, where every child is provided with the appropriate level of support needed in a timely and appropriate manner in order to realise their potential. Parents and families will also be supported in understanding the development stages of their child, especially in relation to the early language and motor skills required to give every child greater equality of opportunity and in so doing, facilitating their ability to start school better prepared to learn. It is imperative that early support is provided when underachievement is visible and before it becomes entrenched. Ensuring all children get a fair start, will lead to more equitable outcomes for all children, families and communities. The benefits of effective early intervention will be in terms of physical and mental well-being, educational attainment and longer term employment prospects.

How will we get there?

By implementing the actions outlined below, parents and families will have a greater understanding of their child's developmental milestones and where to seek support, if needed. Collaboration will be essential between the

“Ensuring all children get a fair start, will lead to more equitable outcomes for all children, families and communities. The benefits of effective early intervention will be in terms of physical and mental well-being, educational attainment and longer term employment prospects.”

Departments of Health and Education (and their Arms Length Bodies) throughout the journey of the child and support should be designed and delivered with the family in mind, at all times, and with the child at the heart of the decision making process.

Programmes such as Getting Ready for Baby (GRfB), Getting Ready for Toddler (GRfT) and Getting Ready to Learn (GRtL) will be reviewed to ensure they provide a continuum of active engagement with parents and families of children from pre-birth to age 4. Further investment in services to identify, assess and support our youngest children with special educational needs and/or additional needs will also be essential.

We are also convinced of the need for greater recognition of the Early Years workforce across all sectors, reflecting the importance of adequate training, relevant qualifications and an appropriate

pay structure. Given the complexity of Early Years provision in Northern Ireland, we would recommend that a collaborative approach is adopted to take this forward.

How will we know we have been successful?

- There will be a noticeable improvement in the number / percentage of children better prepared to start school (although this will require development of agreed measures).
- Parents and families will be more knowledgeable about their child's development and how to support it.
- Waiting times for SEN assessments will significantly reduce as support will be provided earlier and as appropriate in line with children's needs.
- There will be a clear and seamless supported developmental pathway available to all children from birth to four years old, which will provide the vital basis for the Foundation Stage of the Curriculum, an important element of Early Years provision.

Key Area 1: Redirecting the focus to Early Years

Evidence Gathered	Recommendations	Actions	Led by	Timing	Short	Medium	Long-Term
1.1 The proportion of investment in Early Years needs to change in order to properly reflect the extent to which Early Years can positively affect health, education and life outcomes. This is the case for all S75 groups as well as children with SEN and children from disadvantaged backgrounds.	a. There should be greater policy and investment focus on 0-6 age group, acknowledging the importance of prioritising children's learning and development from 0-6 years and in particular, the benefits of early intervention for children with special educational needs or at risk of educational underachievement. b. The panel supports DE's efforts to bring forward an Executive Childcare Strategy ⁷ which will include a focus on child development.	i. There should be greater support provided to children who are pre-term.	DoH	All 3	£0.5m ⁸	£0.5m	£0.5m
		ii. DE should undertake a review of the Sure Start staffing structure to ensure there is access to the necessary health professions including health visitors and midwives.	DE / DoH	All 3	£1.1m ⁹	£1.6m	£2.1m
		iii. DE and DoH should develop a NI wide targeted developmental programme for all 2 year olds at risk of poor educational outcomes. It should be appropriate to their stage of development and build on the learning from the Sure Start developmental programme for 2-3 year olds, with access to support from appropriate health professions.	DE	LT	Nil	Nil	£12m-£25m ¹⁰
		iv. DE should standardise the length of pre-school education day to at least 4.5 hours per day, including access to free school meals for eligible children, thereby improving equality of provision.	DE	MT-LT	Nil	£10m	£25m ¹¹
1.2 The panel heard evidence of the value and importance of the Early Years sector to improving the long term educational outcomes for children. The system must ensure skills and expertise are retained and enhanced.	c. The pay and qualifications of the Early Years workforce should reflect the significance of the age group they are working with by increasing qualifications at all levels. d. Proposed CPD framework should include meeting the needs of Roma, traveller, newcomer children and children looked after i.e. those groups whose educational outcomes tend to be lower than their peers.	v. DE and DoH should lead a process of co-design with key partners to develop an adequately resourced and supported training, qualifications and CPD strategy for the Early Years workforce, with consideration given to graduate-led provision.	DE / DoH	All 3	£0.5m	£2.6m ¹²	£2.6m
		vi. All DE-funded pre-school education settings should benefit from consistent high-quality advice and support on all aspects of pre-school curricular guidance, training, development and opportunities for sharing of good practice, to promote quality pre-school education.	DE	All 3	£2.8m	£2.8m	£2.8m
1.3 The panel heard evidence of the significance of the development of children up to age 3 and how this provides the foundation for future outcomes. Parents and families need supported to understand the child's developmental milestones and the importance of play based learning.	e. Speech and Language development should be an explicit part of the ante-natal and 0-3 space. f. The panel welcomes DoH plans to implement Delivering Care Phase 4 Health Visiting ¹³ . This will reduce health visitor workload from 250 cases to 180 cases per person.	vii. DoH and DE should enhance the 'Getting Ready' suite of programmes to provide a continuum of active engagement with parents and families of children from pre-birth to age 4, which address the gap between GRfB and GRfT (0-3 year olds / 1,001 days) in order to support them to be involved in their child's development and establish positive Home Learning Environments, with a specific focus on language development and self-regulation.	DoH / DE	All 3	£0.35m ¹⁴	£0.35m	£0.35m
		viii. DoH should expand the developmental role of the health visitor / community midwife to provide early support, education and sign posting.	DoH	All 3	£0.5m	£0.5m	£0.5m

Key Area 1: Redirecting the focus to Early Years

Evidence Gathered	Recommendations	Actions	Led by	Timing	Short	Medium	Long-Term
1.4 Challenges presented by the GDPR / Data Protection Act need to be overcome in order for data to be effectively shared between education and health practitioners, particularly at critical points of transition.	g. Data relating to the child should follow the child throughout his / her journey. The panel welcomes DoH plans to digitise the “Red Book” through the “Encompass” programme.	ix. DoH and DE should ensure appropriate and seamless sharing of information between health and education to ensure that practitioners can support children’s learning and development as they transition between Early Years services and into pre-school and primary school.	DoH / DE	TBA	TBA	TBA	TBA
1.5 The panel heard of concerns regarding the range of challenges now being encountered in this sector, and the difficulties in meeting the needs of individual children, especially those at risk of poor educational outcomes.	h. Consideration should be given as to how children in Early Years can be provided with the support they need from birth.	x. DE should review staff:child ratios across all pre-school education settings.	DE	ST	Nil	Nil	Nil
1.6 At present, legislation requires statutory pre-school settings with places left after admitting pre-school age children to fill places with any younger children age 2+ who have applied. This can lead to high numbers of underage children in pre-school education which is not age or stage appropriate.	i. Pre-school education programme should be appropriate to age and stage of children. Funded provision for younger children should be separate to that for children of pre-school age.	xi. DE, EA and DoH should work collaboratively to further develop, enhance, invest in and commission Early Years assessment, intervention and support services for younger children with developmental delay and/or SEN, including engaging with colleagues in the health service to identify children with additional needs prior to their pre-school year.	DE / EA / DoH	MT-LT	Nil	TBA	TBA
		xii. EA should expand and enhance their Early Years SEN Inclusion Service to ensure that pre-school settings have access to expertise to enable them to support children with additional needs / SEN in their pre-school education ¹⁵ ;	DE / EA	MT-LT	Nil	£3.8m	£3.8m
		xiii. DE to legislate to redefine pre-school age and focus attention on age appropriate pre-school education programme ¹⁶ .	DE	MT	Nil	£0.1m	Nil
Total			13		£5.8m	£22.3m	£49.7m

⁷ It is assumed that funding for the Childcare Strategy will be bid for separately.

⁸ 1 fte Band 7 SCPHN HV & 1 fte Band 3 Child Health Assistant per HSCT

⁹ DoH estimates include 21 fte SCPHN HV; 10 fte Band 6 Midwife; 1 fte Band 8a; and 10 fte Family Nurses = £2.1m phased in over time.

¹⁰ Depends on hours of attendance.

¹¹ Plus capital of £70m. MT is Estimate of ‘quick’ wins cost i.e. where no capital investment needed – many p/t settings may not have facilities to provide a meal so MT roll out may be quite small

¹² High level estimate for bursary fund to cover fees and sub cover costs (40 staff per year x £15K = £600K). Requires more discussion on cost per person and no of people per year – dependent on courses.

¹³ Department of Health (2017) Delivering Care Phase 4 Health Visiting. Available at https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/4.Delivering%20Care%20Summary%20Paper_Phase%204%20HV%20130117.pdf

¹⁴ This cost reflects an increase in the GRTL budget from £500K to £850K which will allow for additional staff, resources and capacity building. DoH to provide costs for further expansion of Getting Ready suite of programmes.

¹⁵ Implementation of proposed actions xii and xiii would require additional resource within DE’s Inclusion and Well-Being Division.

¹⁶ Minimal cost to legislation but needs to be aligned with development of 2-year old programme.

Explanatory Notes – Key Area 1: Redirecting the Focus to Early Years

1. Throughout the engagement process, the panel heard consistent messages from a range of education, health, family, community and research perspectives (including comments in the call for evidence and written submissions) about the importance of directing more focus to the early years. The panel found the evidence compelling that more investment is needed in quality early childhood education and care to give our youngest children the best and most equitable start in life, and to enable their parents and families to provide them with a healthy, supportive home learning environment. The panel acknowledges the many existing examples of effective practice across the sector and has proposed a range of actions which will build on this, extending that effective practice to reach even more children and their families, especially those living in disadvantaged circumstances.

2. This commitment to supporting our youngest children aligns with existing government policy commitments: our ability to support healthy development and to identify and address potential barriers to healthy development as early as possible is essential in delivering the high-level outcomes set out in the draft *Programme for Government (PfG)*¹⁷, and the *Children and Young People's Strategy* and Delivery Plan¹⁸. The draft PfG, which has been recently consulted upon, has within its Outcomes Framework “Our children and young people have the best start in life”. In addition, the *Children and Young People's Strategy* whose aim is “Working together to improve the well-being of children and young people living in Northern Ireland and to achieve positive, long-lasting outcomes” includes a consistent emphasis on early years provision including at the pre-natal stage, and recognises the particular challenges faced by children living in areas of deprivation.

3. There is a substantial body of research evidence which highlights that children's early experiences have a profound and lasting impact on their future learning and development¹⁹ and which confirms that investing in quality early childhood education for disadvantaged children has significant and long term benefits for individuals and society^{20,21}. The evidence suggests that investing in early childhood education, especially for at-risk young children, is a cost-effective strategy, where the short-term spend is more than offset by the immediate and long-term benefits “through reduction in the need for special education and remediation, better health outcomes,

¹⁷ Northern Ireland Executive (2021) *Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework Consultation Document*. Available at <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/newnigov/pfg-draft-outcomes-framework-consultation.pdf>

¹⁸ Department of Education (2020) *Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030*. Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/final-executive-children-and-young-people%27s-strategy-2020-2030.pdf>

¹⁹ OECD (2015), *Early Learning and Development: Common Understandings*, Available at [ECEC-Network-Common-Understandings-on-Early-Learning-and-Development.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/early-learning-and-development/Early-Learning-and-Development.pdf) (oecd.org)

²⁰ Andrews, J, Robinson D and Hutchinson, J (2017) *Closing the Gap? Trends in Educational Attainment and Disadvantage*, London: Education Policy Institute. Available at https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Closing-the-Gap_EPI-.pdf

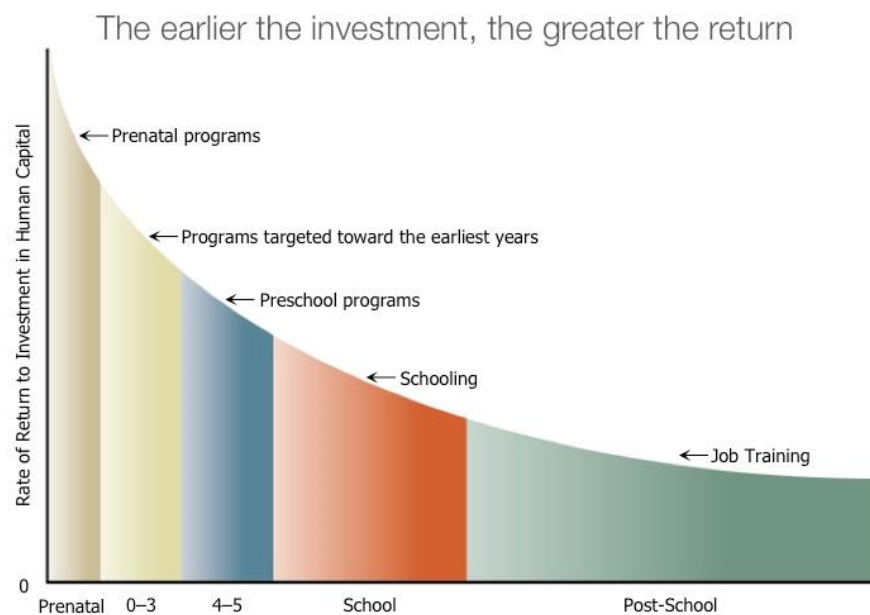
²¹ Haartsen, R., Jones, E., and Johnson, M. (2016) ‘Human Brain Development over the Early Years’ in *Current Opinion in Behavioural Sciences*, 10, 149-154. Available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352154616301164>

reduced need for social services, lower criminal justice costs and increased self-sufficiency and productivity among families²².”

4. The ‘Heckman Curve’²³ confirms the importance of early investment in children’s development:

“The highest rate of return in early childhood development comes from investing as early as possible, from birth through age five, in disadvantaged families. Starting at age three or four is too little too late, as it fails to recognize that skills beget skills in a complementary and dynamic way. Efforts should focus on the first years for the greatest efficiency and effectiveness. The best investment is in quality early childhood development from birth to five for disadvantaged children and their families.” (Heckman, 2012)

Heckman Curve (Figure 2)²⁴



5. Preventative approaches, which tackle problems early, can minimise costs in the long-run and provide enhanced outcomes for individuals, taxpayers and society as a whole.

²² The Heckman Equation (2012) Available at https://heckmanequation.org/www/assets/2013/07/F_HeckmanDeficitPieceCUSTOM-Generic_052714-3-1.pdf

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid

In their 2018 report the Early Intervention Foundation highlighted the significant impact to the public purse of failing to intervene early and found that Northern Ireland spends a total of £536 million per year on late interventions. This equates to £288 for every Northern Ireland resident, or £1,166 per child. The report argues that intervening early to identify and provide early support to children and young people at risk of poor outcomes has long-term benefits for children, young people and families, and that there is both a moral and a financial argument for such early investment²⁵.

6. The emphasis on investing in early development is echoed in a Save the Children's report²⁶ entitled *Tackling the Poverty-Related Gap Early Childhood Learning in Northern Ireland*:

“Early childhood, from birth to age five, is the most critical development stage of a child's life. The early years see rapid developments in a child's cognitive abilities. This also means the early years are a vulnerable time when children's experiences and environments can negatively influence their development. Save the Children research found that young children growing up in poverty are much less likely to do as well as their peers in meeting a range of early learning outcomes at age five, and that this early gap can persist right through school. Analysis of levels of child poverty in Northern Ireland highlights that the biggest proportion of children in low income households lives in families where the youngest child is under 5. This, coupled with the fact that child poverty is set to increase, means it's never been more urgent to redouble efforts to tackle the impact of poverty on children's early learning outcomes”.

7. Save the Children's latest report *Ten Years too long. A decade of Child Poverty in Northern Ireland*²⁷ found that one in four children in Northern Ireland were growing up in poverty before the pandemic but also suggested that there is a real risk of a long term post-covid rise in child poverty in Northern Ireland, therefore increasing the number of disadvantaged and at risk children who have most to gain from additional investment in the early years.

8. Research from other parts of the UK would indicate disparity in outcomes begins early and expands rapidly. Mathers *et al.* (2014)²⁸ estimate that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are developmentally 9 months behind children from wealthier backgrounds by age three. This extends to become a 19 month gap in school readiness between the most and least advantaged

²⁵ Fitzsimons, P. and Teager, W. (2018) *The Cost of Late Intervention in Northern Ireland*. London: Early Intervention Foundation. Available at <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/the-cost-of-late-intervention-in-northern-ireland>

²⁶ Save the Children (2017) *Tackling the Poverty Related Gap In Early Childhood Learning in Northern Ireland*, Available at <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/global/reports/education-and-child-protection/tackling-poverty-related-gap-ni.pdf>

²⁷ Save the Children (2021) *Ten Years too long. A decade of Child Poverty in Northern Ireland*. Available at:

https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/gb/reports/ten_years_too_long_a_decade_of_child_poverty_in_northern_ireland.pdf

²⁸ Mathers, S. et al. (2014) *Sound Foundations A Review of the Research Evidence on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care for Children Under Three Implications for Policy and Practice*. University of Oxford/Sutton Trust.

four and five-year-olds. Similarly, the Department for Education (2014)²⁹ reported that 36.2% of children eligible for free school meals in England were assessed as reaching ‘a good level of development’ upon school entry, compared to 55.2% of children not eligible. Butler and Rutter (2016)³⁰ report that this equates to a development gap of a year and a half between the most and least disadvantaged children by the time they enter compulsory education.

9. The panel has also proposed that the Departments of Education and Health work together to lead a process of co-design with key partners to develop an adequately resourced and supported training, qualifications and CPD strategy for the Early Years workforce, with consideration given to graduate-led provision. This acknowledges the complexity of the sector (involving statutory, voluntary and private early years settings) but also recognises the strength of evidence (especially the EPPE and EPPNI studies) which found that the quality of the curriculum, pedagogical practices and the quality of children's experiences that support development was associated with the qualification level of the staff^{31,32}. The quality of early years provision has also been shown to be associated with the qualification level of the leaders/managers of early years settings^{33, 34, 35}. Our proposed action aims to develop a new strategy for this diverse sector, to ensure a competent and confident well qualified workforce, which will better support the early development of all our young children, especially those most at risk. It also aims to address the finding of the most recent Chief Inspector’s report which noted that there is still “undue variation in the quality of provision and outcomes for particular groups of learners such as those with special educational needs, for free school meal entitlement pupils, newcomers, looked after children and boys”³⁶ though reference was made to the improved capacity of pre-school staff who have attained a degree-level qualification in early years education³⁷.

10. The panel also considered the evidence around the current inequitable half-day / full-day pre-school provision. Although it is acknowledged that the EPPNI study³⁸ found that at the start of primary school there were no differences in terms of *cognitive* development between children who had attended full-day or part-day pre-school settings, other more recent evidence³⁹ has found that full-day pre-school children had higher scores than part-day children on literacy, language, maths, socio-emotional development and physical health, had increased school readiness skills and

²⁹ Department for Education (2014) *Statistical First Release: Early Years Foundation Stage Profile results in England, 2013/14*.

³⁰ Butler A and Rutter J (2016) *Creating an anti-poverty childcare system*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

³¹ Sylva, K., Siraj-Blatchford, I., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., and Taggart, B. (1999a). *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project. Technical Paper 6A: Characteristics of Pre-school environments*, London.

³² Melhuish, E., Quinn, L., Hanna, K., Sylva, K., Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sammons, P., et al. (2006). *The Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland Project. Summary Report*. Belfast, NI: Department of Education.

³³ Mathers, S., Sylva, K., and Joshi, H. (2007). *Quality of Childcare Settings in the Millennium Cohort Study*. London.

³⁴ Roberts, F., Mathers, S., Joshi, H., Sylva, K., and Jones, E. (2010). ‘Childcare in the pre-school years’ in *Children of the 21st Century: The First Five Years*, eds K. Hansen, H. Joshi, and S. Dex (Bristol: The Policy Press), 131–151.

³⁵ Karemaker, A., Mathers, S., Hall, J., Sylva, K., and Clemens, S. (2011). *Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund: Factors Relating to Quality: Findings From the Baseline Study*. London: Department for Education.

³⁶ Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) (2018) *Chief Inspector’s Report*. Available at [cir-2016-2018_1.pdf \(eti.gov.uk\)](https://www.eti.gov.uk/cir-2016-2018_1.pdf), page 12.

³⁷ Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) (2018) *Chief Inspector’s Report*, *ibid*.

³⁸ Melhuish, E., Quinn, L., Hanna, K., Sylva, K., Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sammons, P., et al. (2006). *The Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland Project. Summary Report*. Belfast, NI: Department of Education.

³⁹ Reynolds, A. et al. (2015) ‘Association of a Full-Day versus Part-Day Preschool Intervention with School Readiness, Attendance, and Parent Involvement’. Available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4505551/>

reduced absences. The panel also felt that those children from disadvantaged homes were most likely to benefit from the provision of a hot meal at lunch-time both in terms of the nutritional benefit and also the experience of sitting down together to eat.

11. The panel heard consistent messages in support of the SureStart programme across disadvantaged communities in Northern Ireland. In terms of targeted early years provision, the Sure Start programme supports families in areas of greatest disadvantage to help promote children's development from pregnancy to their fourth birthday. The panel welcomes the provision of support from the health professions (e.g. speech and language therapy, health visitors, midwives) within SureStart centres and would wish to see this consolidated.

12. Additionally the Pathway Fund provides additional targeted support to children to age four in disadvantaged areas, who are at risk of not reaching their full potential within the school system. The Department also makes Extended Services funding available to non-statutory pre-school education settings with a high proportion of children from disadvantaged areas or with a Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) to help address barriers to learning. The panel notes Minister Weir's 19 April 2021 announcement regarding increased funding for the Pathway Fund which is very welcome⁴⁰.

13. The Early Intervention Transformation programme (EITP) co-funded by Atlantic Philanthropies and the Northern Ireland Executive, invested £30 million over a six-year period (2014-2020), to improve outcomes for specific groups of children, young people and families, focusing on three key stages and developing the three programmes: Getting Ready for Baby, Getting Ready for Toddler and Getting Ready to Learn. The panel acknowledges the value of these programmes but proposes that the suite of programmes should be enhanced to provide a continuum of active engagement with parents and families, and addressing in particular the gap between the Getting Ready for Baby and Getting Ready for Toddler programmes.

14. The panel heard consistently that staff in early years settings, especially pre-school settings, were struggling to cope with the number of children who had special educational needs or, more commonly, were awaiting assessment to confirm special educational needs. In particular the panel heard of the increasing number of children with speech and language difficulties, but also children with autism and children with behavioural difficulties. While acknowledging again the range and complexity of provision and staffing ratios across statutory and non-statutory settings, the panel have therefore recommended that DE should carry out a review of the evidence around staff: child ratios. However, more pressingly, the panel have proposed actions to develop and enhance the available support to identify and support children with special educational needs prior to and during their pre-school year, so that appropriate support is put in place earlier and more quickly.

⁴⁰ DE (2021) 'Weir provides additional Pathway funding for early years education'. Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/weir-provides-additional-pathway-funding-early-years-education>

15. Finally, having heard of the practice of underage / two-year old children filling places in pre-school settings, the panel supports the introduction of legislation which would redefine the pre-school age and focus attention on age appropriate pre-school education. Once again this action will support the staff in pre-school settings to focus on age-appropriate pedagogy for children of pre-school age.

a fair start.



KEY AREA 2

**CHAMPIONING EMOTIONAL HEALTH AND
WELL-BEING**

Key Area 2 – Championing Emotional Health and Well-Being

What do we want to achieve?

Investment in emotional health and wellbeing resources must reflect the level of need currently being experienced by our children, young people and education workforce and be available across all school sectors. Access to CAMHS services must be timely and appropriate to the level of need.

The on-going professional learning and development of teachers and support staff needs to enable the education workforce to recognise the signs of trauma and ACEs in order to facilitate early identification and targeted intervention, specific to the needs of each child.

“Investment in emotional health and wellbeing resources must reflect the level of need currently being experienced by our children, young people and education workforce and be available across all school sectors.”

How will we get there?

The panel welcomes and supports DE/DoH recently published Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework including planned revision and expansion of CAMHS services. This will include funding for much needed emotional health and wellbeing support for primary schools.

The panel also supports and commends the work of the Education Authority’s Health and Well-Being Strategy and associated training for the education workforce which has been very positively received to date within schools.

Shortcomings in the educational provision for children with SEN are well rehearsed and a number of high-profile reviews, signpost the necessary recommendations required in order to effect improvement. The panel welcomes the significant work being taken forward regarding Special Educational Needs⁴¹ by the Department of Education and the Education Authority, the level of support required and the substantial changes in train.

How will we know we have been successful?

- Children and young people will be provided with effective Emotional Health and Well-Being support in a more bespoke and timely manner than ever before.

⁴¹ DE (2021) *New SEN Framework*. Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/review-special-educational-needs-and-inclusion>

- Quality Assured resources will be made available to all schools to draw upon as required which are appropriate to the needs of staff and children within the individual setting.
- There will be a marked improvement in children's attitudes to their own emotional health and wellbeing.
- Significant progress will be made in respect of Special Educational Needs provision, including the full implementation of the new 3 Stage Code of Practice and EA's proposed SEN Framework (as outlined in March 2021⁴²)
- Needs-led Nurture provision will have a substantially positive impact on the schools, pupils and the families it serves.

⁴² DE (2021) *Recording Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Schools – New Guidance - Move to Three Stages of Special Educational Provision. Circular 2021/06*. Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/DE%20Circular%202021%2006%20-%20Three%20Stages%20of%20Special%20Educational%20Provision%20%28fin....pdf>

Key Area 2: Championing Emotional Health and Wellbeing

Evidence Gathered	Recommendations	Actions	Led by	Timing	Short	Medium	Long-Term
<p>2.1 The investment in emotional health and wellbeing should reflect the level of need and be available in primary and post-primary sectors.</p> <p>2.2 Access to CAMHS services is difficult with long waiting times.</p> <p>2.3 To date, there has been no strategic approach to the provision of emotional health and well-being support in primary schools.</p> <p>2.4 The appointment of a Mental Health Champion is in train and there are encouraging signs of co-operation between DE / DoH / PHA / HSCB.</p> <p>2.5 The panel recognises and welcomes DE's whole school approach to nurture.</p> <p>2.6 DE currently funds 46 Nurture Groups in primary schools. Feedback regarding Nurture Groups is very positive. More children with social, behavioural, emotional and wellbeing needs (SBEW) require nurture support than is currently available. Evidence shows investing in support at an early stage, will help prevent further impacts on the children's emotional and mental health, and support them to engage fully in learning.</p>	<p>a. We support and would encourage DE and DoH to progress and sufficiently resource the high-level actions outlined in the Emotional Health and Well-Being Framework for children and young people launched on 26 February 2021⁴³. The Framework will be supported by a number of initiatives including⁴⁴:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> REACH Programme which provides schools with support to promote good mental health; Pilot of counselling service in primary schools; the Text-a-Nurse service providing young people with a secure and confidential text messaging service to a school nurse, and Wellbeing strategy for school staff to help them take action and invest in their mental and physical wellbeing. <p>b. We support and would encourage the EA to progress, sufficiently resource and quality assure the Emotional Health and Well-Being Strategy for the education workforce.</p> <p>c. There should be whole school nurture approach adopted across all school sectors and the number of DE funded Nurture Groups should be expanded as part of wider Nurture in Education Programme.</p>	<p>i. DE should build on its existing 46 Nurture Groups by funding an additional 15 Nurture Groups per year over the next number of years to prevent further impacts on children's emotional and mental health, and support them to engage fully in learning.</p>	DE	MT-LT	Nil	£2m	£6m ⁴⁵
Total			1		Nil	£2m	£6m

⁴³ DE advised the panel that it needed an additional £10m p.a. on top of the £6.5m recently announced by the DE and DoH Ministers if schools are to provide effective support for emotional health and well-being.

⁴⁴ All programmes under the Framework should be subject to rigorous evaluation to determine their feasibility to move into the MT/LT category.

⁴⁵ Investment in Nurture units would increase by £2m p.a. in the medium term to £6m p.a. in the longer term

Explanatory Notes – Key Area 2: Championing Emotional Health and Well-being

16. The panel were very aware throughout the engagement process of the importance of addressing the emotional health and well-being of children and young people. The panel were conscious of the priority given to this within the Children and Young People's Strategy⁴⁶ (Outcome: Children and young people are physically and mentally healthy).

17. Emotional health and well-being emerged as a particularly strong theme in the engagement with children and young people. Support in school for mental health and well-being emerged consistently throughout the survey responses of the 11-21 year old young people as a key factor in their educational experience, and it was clear that the young people were able to draw the link between their emotional health and well-being and their ability to learn and achieve. Young people in the focus groups also spoke frequently of the need for additional support within the school setting. While this was less significant among the younger children's responses (primary school age), some of their parents spoke of the additional pressure on their children as a result of transfer tests.

18. The range of issues faced by young people in Northern Ireland has been well documented. A recent NICCY report⁴⁷ highlighted that more than 20% of young people are suffering significant mental health problems by the time they reach 18, that there is an increasing prevalence of mental ill health of children and young people in Northern Ireland in terms of the scale and complexity of problems, that rates of mental ill health are estimated to be 25% higher in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the UK, that Northern Ireland has disproportionately higher rates of suicide within under 18s compared to other parts the UK and that mental health services are inadequate to meet the demand.

19. The importance of emotional health and well-being for young people was highlighted too in the recent *Elephant in the Room* study⁴⁸ which found that 91% of the 1,268 14-17 year olds who responded to the survey felt that mental health was a "huge issue" for young people in Northern Ireland. They also felt that there was a need for greater and more consistent focus on this issue in education settings and a need for a more positive framing of the issues including language such as 'confidence, resilience, happiness and excitement'.

⁴⁶ Department of Education (2020) Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030. Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/final-executive-children-and-young-people%27s-strategy-2020-2030.pdf>

⁴⁷ NICCY (2017) *Child and Adolescent Mental Health in NI*. Available at <https://www.niccy.org/media/2810/niccy-scoping-paper-mental-health-review-apr-2017.pdf>

⁴⁸ Youth Forum/ Children's Law Centre (2018) *Elephant in the Room – exploring young people's awareness of mental health in Northern Ireland*. Available at http://www.niyf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/ELEPHANT-IN-THE-ROOM-A4-V2_.pdf

20. The Department of Education and the Public Health Agency commissioned the National Children's Bureau (NCB) to undertake a scoping report to establish what level of support for emotional health and wellbeing was currently being provided for children and young people through schools and in youth services, and the issues they were facing. The findings of this report, along with emerging research, informed the development of an emotional health and wellbeing framework for children and young people in education, developed collaboratively by Departments of Education and Health, Public Health Agency, Health and Social Care Board and the Education Authority.

21. The Education Minister, Peter Weir and Health Minister, Robin Swann jointly launched the *Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework* on 26 February 2021 including an investment of £6.5million annually which will be provided to support mental health and wellbeing within the education sector⁴⁹. The panel welcomes the publication of the *Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Well-being in Education Framework*⁵⁰. Within the framework it is noted that definitions can vary but the framework proposes the following positively framed definition of mental health:

'A state of wellbeing that allows children to develop and become aware of their own unique personality, to build their own identity, to fulfil their own potential, to cope with the challenges of growing up; to feel loved, secure and accepted as unique individuals and to be able to be happy, play, learn and to participate and contribute to family and community'

22. The new Framework proposes a three-level model of support: wellbeing for all (a universal whole-school promotion of well-being), early support (early identification and support for those showing early signs of needing some support through group or 1-1 programmes within the school setting, through a holistic, multi-disciplinary approach) and enhanced support (engagement with/referral to external services for children and young people with more complex needs). In particular the panel welcomed the promotion of the following initiatives in the Framework: the REACH Programme which provides schools with support to promote good mental health; the piloting of counselling service in primary schools; the Text-a-Nurse service providing young people with a secure and confidential text messaging service to a school nurse; and the well-being strategy for school staff to help them take action and invest in their mental and physical wellbeing. The panel welcomes the new framework and the recent announcements regarding additional investment. We understand that more financial support for schools in the region of £10m per annum would be welcome and necessary to meet demand however we are aware of the significant budget pressures faced by the Departments of Education and Health and the Northern Ireland Executive as a whole. Whilst we are happy to endorse the need for further investment, we have stopped short of including this within our Action Plan because of the need to prioritise the actions within it.

⁴⁹ DE (2021) *Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework launched*. Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/children-and-young-peoples-emotional-health-and-wellbeing-education-framework-launched>

⁵⁰ DE/DoH (2021) *Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Well-being in Education Framework*. Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/emotional-health-and-wellbeing>

23. The importance of children and young people's emotional health and well-being has been underlined especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the panel was aware that this has exacerbated the existing challenges faced by many children and young people. A recent study⁵¹ asked parents across Northern Ireland about their experiences of home-schooling during the extended period of lockdown from January 2021 and compared it to their experiences during the first lockdown (March to June 2020). The study found that the impact on children's mental health and wellbeing, social skills, and behaviour was much more negative in 2021 than during the first lockdown of 2020. The majority of parents/carers felt that the 2021 lockdown/school closures had resulted in their child/ren's mental health and wellbeing becoming 'worse' or 'much worse' (51% in 2021 vs 31% in 2020). While 20% of parents in 2020 felt that their child's mental health had become 'better' or 'much better', by 2021 this figure had fallen to just 7%. The more negative experiences in 2021 can also be seen in relation to parent/carers' estimation of the impact of lockdown on their child's social skills (49% 'worse' or 'much worse' in 2021 vs 29% in 2020), and level of behaviour (35% 'worse' or 'much worse' in 2021 vs 29% in 2020). In the 2021 survey parents/carers were asked about the impact on their child's physical health and wellbeing and found that 47% felt that this was now 'worse' or 'much worse' than pre-lockdown with only 8% believing that it was 'better' or 'much better'. Reported outcomes were worse for all factors for those from low-income homes. The survey did reveal, encouragingly, that where schools placed importance or high importance on nurture, safety and well-being (according to parents/carers) this had a highly significant, positive impact on reported levels of motivation, mental health and wellbeing, social skills, and physical health and wellbeing, compared to those schools who were not reported to value these approaches.

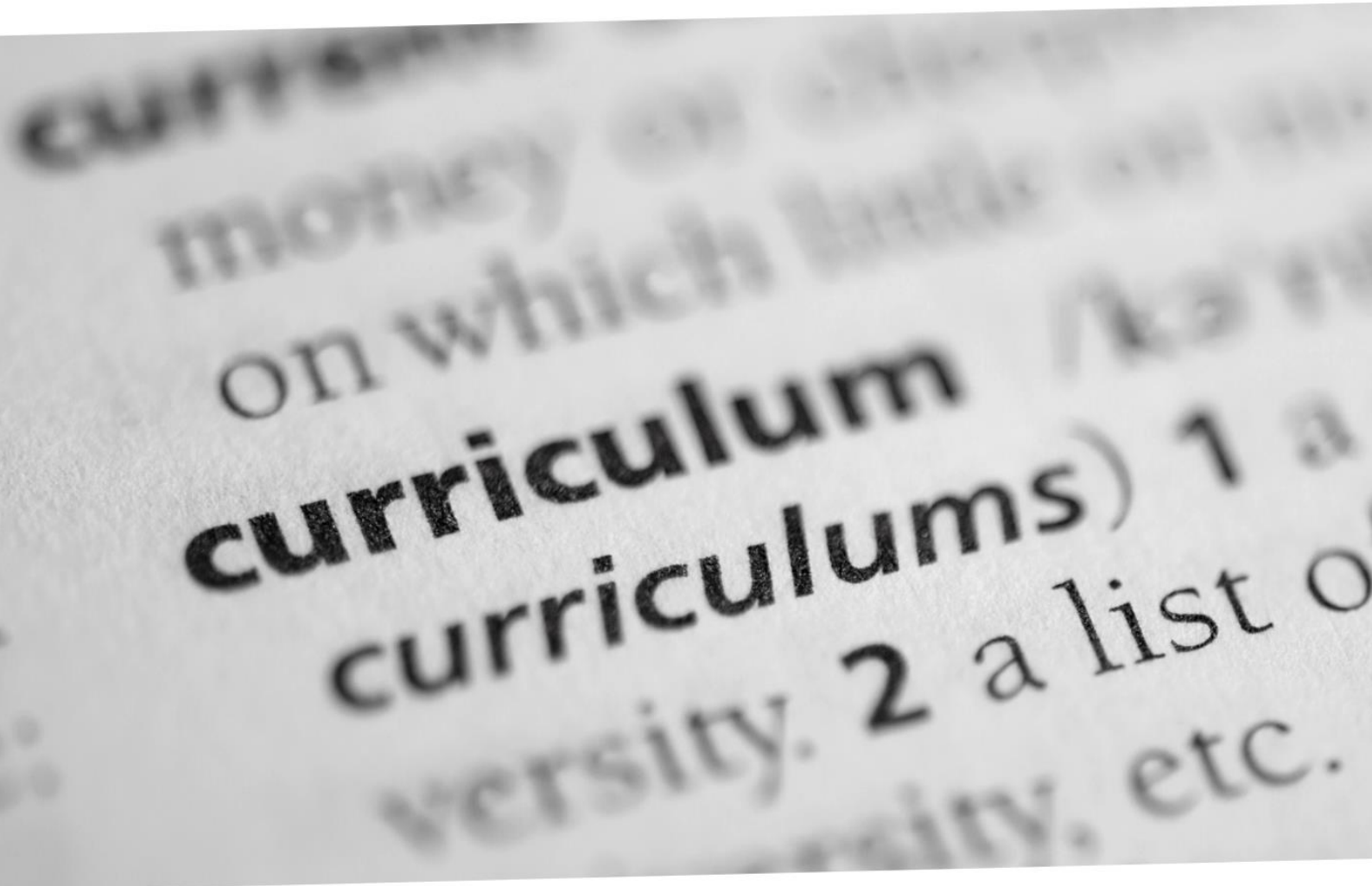
24. The importance of emotional wellbeing for successful learning is recognised in the Northern Ireland Curriculum. Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (at primary level) and Learning for Life and Work (at post-primary level) provide discrete areas of learning designed to encourage pupils to explore and improve their self-esteem, confidence and resilience, manage factors that influence emotional health, be attuned to the feelings of others, and to lead healthy lives. Interventions to support the social and emotional development of the school-age population are important to help them develop into mentally healthy and socially skilled adults. The panel appreciates the importance of consistent, age-appropriate approaches across and between schools in terms of curricular input around emotional health and well-being, and is supportive of the recommendations included within the new *Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework* that there should be a trauma informed compassionate approach, ensuring an emotionally secure and safe environment and that relationships (teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil) are crucial for wellbeing.

⁵¹ Purdy, N., Harris, J., Dunn, J., Gibson, K., Jones, S., McKee, B., McMullen, J., Walsh, G., and Ballentine, M. (2021) *Northern Ireland Survey of Parents/Carers on Home-Schooling during the Covid-19 Crisis: 2021*, Belfast: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement. Available at: <https://www.stran.ac.uk/research-paper/northern-ireland-survey-of-parents-carers-on-home-schooling-during-the-Covid-19-crisis-2021/>

25. The panel recognises and welcomes DE's whole-school approach to nurture, and heard consistently positive feedback about the value of embedding the approach. The panel also heard directly from leaders of nurture groups (short-term, focused intervention for children with particular social, emotional and behavioural difficulties) about the significant benefits of the approach. A recent evaluation⁵² found clear evidence that nurture groups are having a consistent, significant and large effect in improving social, emotional and behavioural outcomes among children who previously had difficulty learning within a mainstream class. The same effects were not evident among children in similar circumstances attending a school without a nurture group. The report also found that nurture groups are cost effective with the potential to deliver significant savings to the education system. The panel has therefore recommended that DE should build on its existing 46 Nurture Groups by funding an additional 15 Nurture Groups per year over the next number of years to prevent further impacts on children's emotional and mental health, and support them to engage fully in learning.

⁵² Sloan, S., Winter, K., Lynn, F., Gildea, A., Connolly, P. (2016) *The impact and cost effectiveness of Nurture Groups in Primary Schools in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Centre for Effective Education, Queen's University Belfast.

a fair start.



KEY AREA 3

**ENSURING THE RELEVANCE AND
APPROPRIATENESS OF CURRICULUM AND
ASSESSMENT**

Key Area 3 – Ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of Curriculum and Assessment

What do we want to achieve?

The NI Curriculum introduced in 2007 retained the best of current practice while seeking to give greater emphasis to important elements, such as children’s Personal Development and Mutual Understanding and the explicit development of Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities. The Curriculum sets out the minimum requirement that should be taught at each Key Stage. Within these requirements, schools have a responsibility to provide a broad and balanced curriculum for all children and schools should aim to give every child the opportunity to experience success in learning and to achieve as high a standard as possible. Teachers, however, have considerable flexibility to make decisions about how best to interpret and combine the requirements in order to prepare young people for a rapidly changing world.

We have heard consistently from stakeholders and learned from research evidence, of the significance of a play-based curriculum and that sufficient time must be given within the Foundation Stage to enable a high quality play-based approach to teaching and learning which focuses on young children’s holistic development rather than rushing to teach the more formal aspects of the curriculum too soon. This is replicated throughout the highest performing countries across the world. The transition from pre-school to Year 1 in the Foundation Stage and then from Foundation Stage into Key Stage 1 can be difficult for both children and teachers to navigate, and so the importance of the Foundation Stage acting as a pedagogic bridge to enable a seamless flow is clear. We acknowledge the review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum conducted by CCEA in 2019/20 which found the curriculum to be broadly sound but that implementation could sometimes vary and practitioners should be supported to deliver both the curriculum content and assessment principles of the Northern Ireland Curriculum as originally envisaged.

While academic selection is not mentioned specifically within our Terms of Reference, we expected to hear a lot about this issue and its impact. However, although there were some very clear voices in opposition to selection at 11, it dominated neither the on-line consultation nor the oral evidence sessions. Nonetheless evidence emerged that academic selection skews teaching at Key Stage 2 (prioritising literacy and numeracy at the expense of other Areas of Learning), and that transfer outcomes for FSME pupils are significantly lower than for non-FSME pupils, leading to significantly lower percentages of FSME pupils attending grammar schools. OECD’s Review of Evaluation and

Assessment in 2012⁵³ criticised our system of transfer testing as socially divisive and warned of the social imbalance “as some parents and families are better able to support and prepare their children for these tests” (p.69). As a panel, we feel that addressing this systemic inequality should be a priority going forward and we welcome the explicit inclusion of a review of transfer arrangements in the Terms of Reference of the wider Department of Education *Independent Review of Education*⁵⁴.

Curriculum and Assessment is a significant area in its own right and any changes need to be considered carefully and in the context of portability and comparability across the UK and beyond. The majority of our young people remain in education and training until 18 and attention needs to be given to how they progress on this pathway making sure that transition points are designed and delivered in the interests of individual pupils. The current competition for pupils post-16 between Further Education and post-primary schools is not in the best interests of our young people.

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to different methods of teaching, learning and assessment – many of these have increasingly involved the use of technology. Great strides in online and blended learning have been made, however the panel heard from many rural communities where broadband access is poor or non-existent and consequently, fully supports the Northern Ireland Executive’s Project Stratum⁵⁵ plans to deliver improved broadband access for every region of Northern Ireland.

How will we get there?

We have made a number of recommendations / actions specific to curriculum and assessment which will have a significant and long lasting impact on educational underachievement. We also welcome the *Independent Review of Education* and would encourage it to look at issues which we feel are beyond the reach of this panel, due to the time constraints we faced. These include post-primary admissions criteria and the use of streaming within school. DE’s Independent Review of Education should also consider the lack of social mixing within schools and what steps can be taken to address this.

How will we know we have been successful?

- There will be support for teachers on an on-going basis to deliver the curriculum as originally intended.

⁵³ OECD (2012) *Northern Ireland, United Kingdom - OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education*. Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/oecd-evaluation-and-assessment.pdf>

⁵⁴ DE (2021) *Independent Review of Education*. Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/independent-review-education>

⁵⁵ Northern Ireland Executive (2021) ‘Check where and when broadband improvement scheme will be rolled out’ Available at: <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/node/49098>

- Teachers will have the necessary skills, resources and confidence to deliver a play-based curriculum at Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 teachers will be ready for the children they receive, building on children's needs and interests.
- The recommendations made regarding assessment arrangements from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 4 are significant and have the capacity to facilitate essential early identification and, in so doing, help to close the gap in educational achievements as well as providing schools and employing authorities with much needed data to identify issues on a consistent basis across schools.
- The implementation of a Northern Ireland System Evaluation Framework (appropriately funded to ensure implementation as soon as possible), will help to overcome previous concerns regarding how data is used by separating data used by schools from data used on a sample basis for system measurement purposes. This System Evaluation Framework will illustrate at system (Northern Ireland) level the range of ways in which schools support learners as they progress through their education, providing additional information such as the context of the school, the challenges which learners face and the value-added which has been provided. The Framework is intended to contribute to school and system improvement by:
 - describing our education system;
 - providing clarity about what is valued taking account of the school, the challenges which learners attending face and the value-added which has been provided;
 - demonstrating the range of contributors and contributions to success; and
 - monitoring system performance;
- Improvements in the 14-19 policy and 6th form policy will help to accelerate much needed changes in this very complex and competitive policy space.

“This System Evaluation Framework will illustrate at system (Northern Ireland) level the range of ways in which schools support learners as they progress through their education, providing additional information such as the context of the school, the challenges which learners face and the value-added which has been provided.”

Key Area 3: Ensuring relevance and appropriateness of Curriculum and Assessment

Evidence Gathered	Recommendations	Actions	Led by	Timing	Short	Medium	Long-Term
3.1 GCSE and A level achievement are very narrow measures of success. The education system as well as schools need to illustrate more clearly, the breadth and depth of learning and achievements that are happening in schools every day. The development and publication of a System Evaluation Framework will demonstrate the breadth of education and learning taking place across NI.	a. DE should take forward a System Evaluation Framework in collaboration with stakeholders and outline the benefits for all. This will build on the existing work on a Dashboard of Measures. Such data should be shared as appropriate with other departments.	i. DE should progress its work to put in place a System Evaluation Framework by September 2022.	DE / EA	All 3	£0.25m ⁵⁶	£0.25m	£0.25m
3.2 GCSEs are a narrow measure of success and when comparable standards are applied, it is impossible for every learner to demonstrate that they meet the core skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT at level 2.	b. DE should commission CCEA to take forward its development of diagnostic assessment at KS 1 to 3. This will save the education system significant budget each year and will provide consistency in both policy and practice. This will complement the development of a System Evaluation Framework.	ii. DE to commission CCEA to progress development of its own diagnostic assessment tools for use in all schools (including Irish Medium) from KS1 to KS3 for schools; this should be co-designed in partnership with educationalists and in consultation with teaching unions with sample data to be used for system level measures including an agreed “value added” measure. Such a significant change will require training and support for staff.	DE / CCEA	MT-LT	Nil	£1m	£1m
3.3 Schools are currently investing significantly in commercial assessments (tests) in the absence of a NI curriculum-specific standardised test at KS1-3. This is leading to varying practice in the purpose and timing of assessments and use of data, adding pressure to already overstretched school budgets.	c. English, maths and digital skills are skills for life as reflected in the cross-curricular skills of Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT which learners should study throughout their education irrespective of the setting. The functional skills developed from KS1 to KS3 should help inform policy development at KS4 and beyond.	iii. DE should capitalise on the opportunities presented by Covid-19 to fundamentally consider assessment at KS4. This would be an opportunity to look afresh at the assessment of skills and knowledge in English, maths and ICT in a way which supports subsequent progression.	DE / CCEA	MT-LT	Nil	£0.5m	£0.5m
3.4 The NI Curriculum has been in place for more than 10 years and whilst its design is broadly sound, there can be issues regarding how the curriculum is delivered, including a narrowing of the curriculum at KS1, KS2 and assessment driving practice at KS4.	d. The NI Curriculum was established in 2007 and should be reviewed periodically to ensure that it is current, relevant and is capable of meeting NI’s economic requirements.	iv. CCEA should provide refresher training for teachers in the design principles behind the NI curriculum. In particular, the benefits of play-based approaches at Foundation Stage and development approaches in the Early Years. This should include advice for parents.	CCEA	All 3	£0.5m	£0.5m	£0.5m
3.5 Foundation Stage parents need to be upskilled to recognise the significance of a	e. The importance of a play-based pedagogy for young learners needs to be recognised at a whole-school level, therefore refresher training around the benefits of a play-based	v. The Foundation Stage workforce (i.e. teachers and classroom assistants (CAs)) need to receive appropriate training and					

⁵⁶ £0.25m per year assumes some support will be required within DE and EA to take this work forward and for the data to be maintained on an on-going basis.

Key Area 3: Ensuring relevance and appropriateness of Curriculum and Assessment

Evidence Gathered	Recommendations	Actions	Led by	Timing	Short	Medium	Long-Term
play-based pedagogy for their child's learning and development.	pedagogy is needed at a whole-school level.	support to enable them to embrace a more play-based pedagogy. vi. A review of the current state of play in Foundation Stage (FS) classes is needed to determine the most appropriate support required for FS teachers and their CAs.					
3.1 Rapid progress needs to be made on DE/DfE 14-19 strategy in the interests of learners.	f. DE and DfE should lead a conversation about the role and purpose of post-16 education with a focus on developing a cohesive skills strategy across schools, FE and HEIs.	vii. DE / DfE to consider the development of a common, coherent Sixth Form policy which would address the inconsistencies / duplication in provision at Post-16 in schools / FE. This should include a focus on skills development.	DE / DfE	ST	£0.25m	Nil	Nil
3.2 There is a lack of parity of esteem (and understanding) between academic and vocational pathways and future job opportunities amongst pupils and parents and families.	g. There should be increased collaboration between public, private and 3 rd sectors to maximise opportunities for young people enabling them to be better informed about their education, training and employment pathways. Young people should be at the centre of this.	viii. DE and DfE should work together to improve communications surrounding the pathways available for learners at 16+ including improved careers information and guidance to help learners make the most appropriate decisions when choosing from the qualifications and pathways available.	DE / CCEA	ST	£0.1m	Nil	Nil
3.3 Disadvantaged children are more likely to drop out of school (post-16) and are more likely to have a limited curriculum offer, which in turn limits progression with the risk of duplicating the level of study ⁵⁷ .		ix. DfE should continue to progress its Widening Participation strategy ⁵⁸ which includes reference to both Higher Education and Further Education with a view to ensuring that the retention and progression of learners and the support they are provided with is consistent and effective.	DfE	ST	Nil	Nil	Nil
3.4 A cultural change is needed in NI which recognises the benefits of both academic and vocational pathways.							
3.5 Funding of pathways within school and FE sector needs to be simplified to ensure that the interests of learners are prioritised over those of the institution.							
3.6 Covid-19 has highlighted the disparity between families who can easily access curriculum resources and families who cannot.	h. We support the efforts of the NI Executive to address poverty which includes efforts to address digital poverty (Project Stratum ⁵⁹)	x. Learning from the lessons of Covid-19, DE should expand and accelerate its delivery of digital devices / broadband to learners so that there is equitable access to learning. An investment of £1m per annum would mean c.3,000 pupils per year would have access to such devices.	DE	All 3	£1m	£1m	£1m
3.7 There are issues of rural isolation and lack of available services.							
Total			10		£2.1m	£3.25m	£3.25m

⁵⁷ Gov.uk (2019) 'Education Secretary: Do more for disadvantaged students'. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/education-secretary-do-more-for-disadvantaged-students>

⁵⁸ DfE (2012) *Higher Education Widening Participation*. Available at <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/higher-education-widening-participation>

⁵⁹ Northern Ireland Executive (2021) 'Check where and when broadband improvement scheme will be rolled out' Available at: <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/node/49098>

Explanatory Notes – Key Area 3: Ensuring the Relevance and Appropriateness of Curriculum and Assessment

26. The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in significant, unprecedented and at times relentless change over the last eighteen months in education and none more so than in the policy realm of Curriculum and Assessment. The latter policy area spans what is taught from the Foundation Stage (years 1 and 2) through primary to post-primary and onwards to post-16 education. However it is Key Stage 4 and post-16 which have attracted the most media attention because of the importance given to external examinations.

27. The idea that teachers' professional judgement would be used (in its entirety) in preference to end of year examinations to determine outcomes at Level 2 (GCSE and equivalent) and Level 3 (A level and equivalent) would have been unthinkable previously. Yet that is what has happened along with an assurance from all those involved that the outcomes provided will continue to ensure the essential portability and comparability that pupils, parents / families, schools, FE, HE, apprenticeships, training and employers agree is so important.

28. Northern Ireland has a statutory curriculum that ensures a balance of skills, knowledge and understanding; learners have an entitlement to be able to access a broad and balanced curriculum at Key Stage 4 and post-16; and learners have access to a reliable and respected range of qualifications which are recognised by employers and institutions of further and higher education. We have very many highly-qualified teachers and committed and capable school leaders. Taking a global perspective, we have the features of a good education system, and many features of a great one.

29. Evidence brought before the panel would suggest that the design of the Northern Ireland Curriculum which was introduced in 2007 has stood the test of time and it is reassuring to note that Wales has introduced a curriculum which closely resembles Northern Ireland's skills and knowledge based curriculum in January 2020⁶⁰.

30. The panel heard that it is the inconsistency of implementation of the Northern Ireland Curriculum which is, at times, a cause for concern. The curriculum design provides significant flexibility for schools which is welcome, however, with that flexibility also comes risk. Risks such as:

- a. The play-based curriculum at Foundation Stage gives way at times to more formal learning too early, due in part to the pressure felt by schools to report on outcomes;

⁶⁰ HWB (2020) Curriculum for Wales. Available at <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales>

- b. Pressure to prepare for transfer tests in year 7 can also lead to a skewing of the Key Stage 2 curriculum from year 6, focusing on literacy and numeracy at the expense of other Areas of Learning;
- c. The delivery of the Key Stage 3 curriculum can also be compromised in some post-primary schools, where starting GCSE courses a year early can mean a narrower curriculum offer for pupils;
- d. The use of private sector assessments in preference to Department of Education assessments means that already stretched school budgets are stretched even further. Such assessments are not designed to suit the Northern Ireland Curriculum and consequently, the curriculum can be skewed towards delivery of those assessments, which is not always in the best interests of learners;
- e. The curriculum at Key Stage 4 and post-16 can be rather narrow and traditional, not always designed with the child at the centre of the decision-making process;
- f. The absence of an understanding of the benefits of youth work pedagogy means that opportunities are often missed to engage and motivate boys.

31. The importance of curricular choice was also a key theme that emerged from the commissioned engagement with young people (led by Barnardo's NI). When asked what they liked about learning and education, the second most popular answer focused on good curriculum content and range of subjects. Boys in particular enjoyed doing practical or interactive work in class. Interestingly, when asked what they would change about education and school, the two most popular answers were 'less work and pressure on exam performance, therefore less stress' and 'more choice and selection with the subjects they are offered in school, including more practical classes and life skills content'. As one young person explained:

"School should be an enjoyable part of growing up but unfortunately, many schools are too focused on league tables and statistics than caring for their students' wellbeing and ensuring that their time in education is enjoyable and rewarding"

32. In the focus groups, young people also frequently spoke of the pressure to perform well in external examinations and spoke of the importance of a good range of relevant subjects, their preference for coursework over exams and their desire to learn more practical life skills such as budgeting, paying bills, applying for jobs and writing a CV.

33. The panel has therefore proposed that CCEA should provide refresher training for teachers in the design principles behind the Northern Ireland Curriculum. Rather than calling for major revisions to the curriculum, the panel believes that the approach and underlying principles remain appropriate, but as mentioned above, there is a need to re-emphasise the importance of delivering the curriculum as originally intended, including the importance of a play-based pedagogy at Foundation Stage, the need to ensure full curricular breadth across all Areas of Learning at Key

Stages 2 and 3, and a fresh look at assessment at Key Stage 4 (especially English, maths and ICT) to support subsequent progression.

34. The Chief Inspector's Report 2016-18⁶¹ highlights a number of areas where progress has been very positive and highlights where further improvements can be made. Things that were considered to be going well included:

- a. In nearly all pre-school settings children's personal, social and emotional development is promoted effectively.
- b. In primary schools, more purposeful application of the children's thinking skills, personal capabilities and self-assessment leads to better quality work.
- c. In public examinations in 2016-2017, the outcomes for learners continue to show incremental year-on-year improvement from the previous reporting period.
- d. In the more effective practice, post-primary schools co-operate to implement a more flexible, learner-focused approach, sometimes using action-based research.

35. Going forward:

- a. While most pre-school children make very good progress, there is a growing trend to introduce, prematurely, learning that is too formal and not age and stage appropriate.
- b. The provision of a broad and balanced primary curriculum which nurtures the children's creative and physical talents is more essential than ever.
- c. The assessment and examination culture, post-14, can have consequences for learners, including stress, a narrowing of the curriculum and restricted pathways.
- d. Good results can mask underachievement in schools, with an intake of more able pupils, but where the curriculum design may be traditional and lacking in flexibility.
- e. FSME pupils continue to underperform in relation to those not entitled to FSME; boys are still significantly underperforming girls.
- f. The development of literacy and the use of mathematics across the curriculum continue to be areas that require further improvement.

36. Published 12 years ago (April 2009), the Department of Education's central policy and principles underpinning school improvement *Every School a Good School* (ESaGS)⁶², still holds true today in terms of the four characteristics of a successful school as:

- a. Child-centred provision;
- b. High quality teaching and learning;
- c. Effective leadership;
- d. A school connected to its community.

⁶¹ ETI (2018) *Chief Inspector's Report 2016-18*. Available at https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/cir-2016-2018_1.pdf (Page 20)

⁶² DE (2009) *Every School a Good School*. Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/every-school-good-school-esags>

37. The *Every School a Good School* policy centres on six key areas:
- a. effective leadership and an ethos of aspiration and high achievement;
 - b. high quality teaching and learning;
 - c. tackling the barriers to learning that many young people face;
 - d. embedding a culture of self-evaluation and self-assessment and of using performance and other information to effect improvement;
 - e. focusing clearly on support to help schools improve – with clarity too about the place of more formal interventions where there is a risk that the quality of education offered in a school is not as high as it should be; and
 - f. increasing engagement between schools, parents and families, recognising the powerful influence they and local communities exercise on educational outcomes.
38. In January 2020, the Department of Education published *Tackling Educational Disadvantage - 10 Features of Effective Schools “Star” Case Studies Paper*⁶³. DE officials visited a range of post-primary schools to identify and capture the policies, programmes and interventions being deployed within schools to help reduce educational disadvantage. The findings align with the principles outlined in DE’s *Every School a Good School* policy. One of the challenges within it is to turn policy into action - “action that supports teachers in the classroom; that acknowledges and celebrates good practice where it exists in our schools; and that is fearless in championing the educational and other needs of young people”.
39. The list of common features identified are:
1. Strong, committed and visible leadership
 2. Committed teachers and staff
 3. High expectations of and aspirations for all pupils
 4. Effective pastoral care and positive behavioural management
 5. Broad and balanced curriculum with a focus on literacy and numeracy
 6. Skilled use of data to track pupil performance
 7. Cross-phase links to support transition and to identify, apply and share best practice
 8. Effective use of outside interventions
 9. Good links with parents, communities and employers
 10. A well-informed and skilled Board of Governors committed to supporting the school.
40. Where schools get this right and on a consistent basis, the likelihood of success is significantly increased.

⁶³ DE (2020) Tackling Educational Disadvantage – 10 Features of Effective Schools. Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/10%20Features%20of%20Effective%20Schools.pdf>

41. The Chief Inspector's Report 2016-18⁶⁴ highlights a number of areas where progress has been very positive and highlights where further improvements can be made. Things that were considered to be going well included:

- a. Transition is effective where there is meaningful collaboration across the phases to inform an accurate assessment of the learner's individual needs.
- b. Good opportunities within the Training for Success (TfS) provision exist where the trainees are enabled to complete their training and essential skills successfully.
- c. A high level of commitment is shown by the European Social Fund (ESF) providers to support the marginalised in society.
- d. Positive signs of improvement are evident in the learning and skills provision in Northern Ireland's prisons.

42. Going forward:

- a. For many young people the decision to remain in school is undermined by a limited curriculum offer which is not well informed by pertinent labour market information.
- b. With more males than females registered on the Training for Success programme there is a need to increase the number of females entering a wider range of occupational areas.
- c. While most children have an understanding of online safety and appropriate online behaviour, they are still at an unacceptable risk from the abuse of social media.
- d. Given the constant advancement of technology more teachers need to develop their digital skills.
- e. Across 14-19 provision generally, teachers and learners need a better understanding of business knowledge, local and national industry and the needs of the economy

43. The panel has recommended that DE should progress its work to put in place a System Evaluation Framework by September 2022. A recurrent theme brought before the panel was that the current focus on measuring school performance by the percentage of pupils achieving 5+ GCSEs at A*-C including English and maths was too narrow, did not take into account the very diverse intakes of different schools (e.g. percentage of pupils on the SEN register and/or in receipt of Free School Meals), and provided a crude measurement tool often to the detriment of non-selective schools. In also recommending DE to commission CCEA to progress development of its own diagnostic assessment tools for use in all schools (including Irish Medium) from KS1 to KS3 for schools, the panel would like to see the development of an agreed value added measure.

44. A further consistent message brought to the panel was the low value often given to vocational courses/ pathways and/or the need for effective information and advice to be given to

⁶⁴ ETI (2018) *Chief Inspector's Report 2016-18*. Available at https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/cir-2016-2018_1.pdf (Page 38)

young people about the range of courses available post-16. There were reports of unhealthy competition between schools and Further Education Colleges and calls for more support to help improve retention rates for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in Further and Higher Education. The actions proposed by the panel in this regard focus on placing the young person at the centre, and consequently on improved communication, careers advice and support strategies to ensure that young people are able to choose the most appropriate post-16 courses for their abilities.

45. The panel led a session with school leaders from rural areas which highlighted the persistent issue of poor broadband coverage in some rural areas. While school leaders and parents explained that this has been a problem for some years, the move to remote and blended learning since March 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation, impacting on the ability of children to access online resources, and leading to an even greater sense of rural isolation and inequality. This was confirmed in two studies in 2020⁶⁵ and 2021⁶⁶ carried out by the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement into parents' experiences of home-schooling both of which highlighted the incidence of digital poverty (where children from poorer backgrounds were less likely to have access to digital devices, broadband and printers) but also the issue of inadequate rural connectivity:

“Digital accessibility at home is strongly related to household income: although there was a slight increase from 2020 in the number of digital devices available to children, and a reduction in the percentage of parents reporting that they had no printer (18% in 2021, compared to 23% in 2020), children from households in the lowest income band were three times more likely to have no printer than children from households in the highest income band (30% vs 11%) and their parents/carers were considerably more likely to feel that the costs of printing (in terms of paper and ink) prevented them from using their printer (25% vs 3%). Children from low-income homes were also more likely to have to share a digital device and/or wait to be able to go online, and were less likely to report fast internet speeds. The geographical analysis also revealed that internet connectivity was worst in rural areas”⁶⁷.

⁶⁵ Walsh, G., Purdy, N., Dunn, J., Jones, S., Harris, J., and Ballentine, M. (2020) *Homeschooling in Northern Ireland during the COVID-19 crisis: the experiences of parents and carers*. Belfast: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement/Stranmillis University College. Available at <https://www.stran.ac.uk/research-paper/creu-home-schooling-during-covid/>

⁶⁶ Purdy, N., Harris, J., Dunn, J., Gibson, K., Jones, S., McKee, B., McMullen, J., Walsh, G., and Ballentine, M. (2021) *Northern Ireland Survey of Parents/Carers on Home-Schooling during the Covid-19 Crisis: 2021*, Belfast: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement. Available at: <https://www.stran.ac.uk/research-paper/northern-ireland-survey-of-parents-carers-on-home-schooling-during-the-Covid-19-crisis-2021/>

⁶⁷ Purdy, N., Harris, J., Dunn, J., Gibson, K., Jones, S., McKee, B., McMullen, J., Walsh, G., and Ballentine, M. (2021) *Northern Ireland Survey of Parents/Carers on Home-Schooling during the Covid-19 Crisis: 2021*, Belfast: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement. Available at: <https://www.stran.ac.uk/research-paper/northern-ireland-survey-of-parents-carers-on-home-schooling-during-the-Covid-19-crisis-2021/>

46. The panel has therefore proposed that in learning from the lessons of Covid-19, DE should expand and accelerate its delivery of digital devices / broadband to learners so that there is equitable access to learning. An investment of £1m per annum would mean c.3,000 pupils per year would have access to such devices.

a fair start.



KEY AREA 4

**PROMOTING A WHOLE COMMUNITY
APPROACH TO EDUCATION**

Key Area 4 – Promoting a whole community approach to education

What do we want to achieve?

A ‘whole community approach to education’ has a ‘place-based’ focus that coheres the greatest concentration of effort in those localities with the greatest concentration of educational underachievement. At a minimum such approaches promise more integrated working practices at local level but they also have the potential to shift the focus to how sources of support for children and young people can be configured strategically, creating greater collective impact.

The panel is proposing that there should be a focus on communities and families in the most disadvantaged areas. Place-based partnerships should be developed as part of a proposed new “Reducing Educational Disadvantage” (RED) programme. This should provide opportunities for co-design between community partners and schools to develop and implement a strategic plan and actions relevant to each context in which all children and young people learn and develop. The approach should have interdepartmental endorsement and support. Such an approach will build on and learn from effective practice of place-based approaches in Northern Ireland⁶⁸, Wales⁶⁹, Scotland⁷⁰, England⁷¹, Republic of Ireland^{72,73} and internationally⁷⁴.

How will we get there?

Drawing on experiences from England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland, we believe levels of investment need to be much more ambitious than current funding levels allow. The Extended Schools Programme is a very effective programme and has been in place for 15 years. We want DE and other departments to invest in a much more comprehensive “Reducing Educational Disadvantage” (RED) programme of interventions, reflecting, for example, the effective practices within the “Delivering Equality in Schools” (DEIS) Programme⁷⁵ in the Republic of Ireland,

⁶⁸ DE (2021) *Tackling Educational Disadvantage*. Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/tackling-educational-disadvantage>

⁶⁹ Welsh Government (2017) *Flying Start Health Programme Guidance* Available at <https://gov.wales/flying-start-guidance>

⁷⁰ Scottish Government (2021) *Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation*. Available at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/attainment-scotland-fund-evaluation-fourth-interim-report-year-5/>

⁷¹ Gov.uk (2018) *Social Mobility and Opportunity Areas*. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-and-opportunity-areas>

⁷² Educational Research Centre (2020) *Reading, mathematics and science achievement in DEIS schools: Evidence from PISA 2018*. Available at https://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ERC-DEIS-Report_Sept-2020_A4_Website.pdf

⁷³ Educational Research Centre (2018) *Partnership in DEIS schools: A survey of Home-School-Community Liaison coordinators in primary and post-primary schools in Ireland*. Available at <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/DEIS-Delivering-Equality-of-Opportunity-in-Schools-/DEIS-Supporting-Information/partnership-in-deis-schools-survey-of-hscl-coordinators.pdf>

⁷⁴ Harlem Children’s Zone (2021) Available at <https://hcz.org/>

⁷⁵ Educational Research Centre (2018) *The evaluation of DEIS at post-primary level: closing the achievement and attainment gaps*. Available at <https://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Weir-Kavanagh-2018-DEIS-post-primary.pdf>

the “Flying Start⁷⁶” programme in Wales, the “Scottish Attainment Challenge⁷⁷” in Scotland or the Children’s Zones in West London or Harlem, New York, USA. In doing so, the interventions will be more targeted than before, encouraging partnership with the voluntary and community sector, particularly in areas which currently lack capacity, as well as between schools. This will enable schools

“In doing so, the interventions will be more targeted than before, encouraging partnership with the voluntary and community sector, particularly in areas which currently lack capacity, as well as between schools.”

and communities working together to decide what is appropriate for their learners and their context, enabling them to plan and deliver more effectively.

How will we know we have been successful?

- The development of strategic level programmes with funding to match will provide more certainty for delivery agents and will make reporting against targets and sharing effective practice, much more straight-forward and effective.
- The panel also heard about the benefits of a youth work pedagogy. Schools will be encouraged to look at new and innovative methods of curriculum delivery which motivate and encourage learners at risk of underachievement to continue to engage in their learning and identify pathways which are most appropriate for them.
- Other alternatives to FSME will be explored and reported upon in the first year to ensure that all schools are given due consideration in terms of how eligibility to particular programmes is determined.
- Children and young people will be supported in all contexts in which their lives are lived.
- Waiting times for SEN assessments will significantly reduce as effective support will be provided earlier and as appropriate in line with children’s needs.
- Seamless pathways will be created for children from Early Years to young adulthood, bespoke to the area in which they live.
- There will be greater alignment and synergy between services in these areas, e.g. between education, health, family, youth and social services.
- There will be an authentic partnership between those involved in the lives of children and young people.
- Existing services and resources will be reconfigured and new resources will be secured.
- Families will be more involved in their children’s learning.
- Children and young people’s potential will be more fully developed and their attainment increased.

⁷⁶ Welsh Government (2017) *Flying Start Health Programme Guidance* Available at <https://gov.wales/flying-start-guidance>

⁷⁷ Education Scotland (2021) *Scottish Attainment Challenge*. Available at <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/scottish-attainment-challenge/>

- Learning will be shared across and beyond the communities.
- The approach will be quality assured and the impact measured.

Key Area 4: Promoting a whole community approach to education

Evidence Gathered	Recommendations	Actions	Led by	Timing	Short	Medium	Long-Term
4.1 There have been consistent concerns amongst schools trying to manage their budgets about whether FSME is an accurate measure of (education) deprivation given the perception of low levels of uptake of FSME in some areas and amongst some communities.	a. DE should commission a review of the Free School Meal Entitlement measure. This should consider the pros and cons of other potential measures of deprivation that could be used for resource allocation purposes.	i. DE should review its measurement of deprivation by commissioning an independent research project regarding alternative deprivation measures to FSME in the 2021/22 academic year. Report to be published.	DE	ST	£0.1m	Nil	Nil
4.2 Targeting Social Need (TSN) is distributed equitably to all schools but not all schools are reporting upon impact.	b. TSN reporting should be mandatory for all schools.	ii. TSN reporting should be mandatory for all schools with a particular focus on children from low socio-economic backgrounds ⁷⁸ .	DE	All 3	Nil	Nil	Nil
4.3 There are a number of national and international programmes with a track record of success. DE should draw from the best features of these programmes to support children from disadvantaged backgrounds more effectively.	c. DE should bring an end to short term funding and develop a 'whole community approach' for the most deprived / disadvantaged communities with weak community infrastructure, across all the contexts in which children and young people learn and develop; bringing together and supporting authentic partnerships to create collective and positive impact. This approach should have interdepartmental support.	iii. DE should co-design a specification for a whole community, partnership approach entitled the "Reducing Educational Disadvantage" (RED) programme. This should be strategic in scale and collaborative in nature, mandating co-design and the building of authentic partnerships between schools and communities using a place-based approach.	DE (with input from all relevant depts)	All 3	£10m ⁷⁹	£10m	£10m
4.4 There are major influences on children and young people 'beyond the school gates' - in society, communities, families, peer groups and all the contexts in which they spend their lives. These contexts have positive or negative influences on a child/young person's development.	d. The above should include consideration of the benefits of features such as Opportunity Areas, Children's Zones, Home-school liaison officers for schools in the most disadvantaged areas.						
4.5 Schools need to make parent / family engagement part and parcel of their school development plan and should work together to promote the importance of education to future success.	e. All schools should be required to demonstrate to DE how they partner meaningfully with parents and families and community (and this should be subject to greater scrutiny by ETI inspection).	iv. Schools should be required to demonstrate a "whole community approach" regarding the extent to which they have a partnership with families / communities and successfully engage to improve delivery of the curriculum as part of the above Reducing Educational	Schools / ETI	All 3	Nil	Nil	Nil

⁷⁸ Mandatory reporting of TSN is subject to discussions with teaching unions.

⁷⁹ This assumes that £9.1m would be found from the Extended Schools Programme to which an additional £10m would be needed

Key Area 4: Promoting a whole community approach to education

Evidence Gathered	Recommendations	Actions	Led by	Timing	Short	Medium	Long-Term
	f. School leaders should work in partnership with the community to raise aspiration of children and young people.	Disadvantage (RED) programme. This should be a greater focus of ETI inspection.					
4.6 Young people who are at the periphery of education generally respond positively to youth work pedagogy.	g. The Regional Youth Development Plan should determine how youth service will support educational underachievement based on assessed need.	v. EA should develop an agreed action plan (with adequate funding) which implements effective collaborative models for curriculum delivery in schools and in addition, develops effective initiatives / programmes of wraparound support (including mentoring and counselling) across both school and youth settings, to facilitate more holistic benefit for young people ⁸⁰ . ETI to oversee quality of delivery.	EA	All 3	£0.75m	£0.8m	£0.8m
4.7 The involvement of the voluntary and statutory youth sector in school can be valuable and should be encouraged.	h. EA should identify and develop effective practice, collaborative working between Youth Services and schools settings (incl EOTAS) in disadvantaged areas, including joint professional learning opportunities without reducing existing community interventions.	vi. Exemplars of effective practice should be identified by EA youth Sector and voluntary sector teams.	EA	All 3	Nil	Nil	Nil
4.8 The benefits of youth sector provision are not widely recognised by schools or the wider education system.	i. Effective practice should be identified to help promote the benefits of using youth sector support within the formal education sector.	vii. EA should establish a formal mechanism through which Area Learning Communities (ALCs) and Youth Service Local Area Groups (LAGs) and Youth Service Regional Area Groups (RAGs) can form strategic links and share effective practice.	EA	All 3	£0.1m	£0.1m	£0.1m
4.9 The panel notes that the Youth Service Engagement and Outcomes Framework provides an effective measure of the personal and social development of young people.	j. Area Learning Communities (ALCs) and Local Area Groups (LAGs) and Regional Area Groups (RAGs) should form strategic links and share effective practice.						
Total			7		£11m	£10.9m	£10.9m

⁸⁰ The figures illustrated are for 40 schools for a pilot project. If successful, the cost would increase relative to the number of schools involved.

Explanatory Notes – Key Area 4: Promoting a Whole-Community Approach to Education

47. The on-line consultation and oral evidence sessions conducted by the panel both consistently illustrated how important parent / family and community engagement is in helping to address the issues associated with educational underachievement.

48. In the on-line consultation, when asked to identify the main causes of educational underachievement, the most commonly cited responses was “Lack of family / parent support / lack of role models” scored highest (16.4%). When asked to suggest effective responses to educational underachievement, the top two responses were “Greater family engagement” (14.6%) and “Raising aspirations” (11.6%). When invited to specify what has worked in addressing educational underachievement, the top answer was “Positive relationship between teachers and parents / Breaking down barriers / high aspirations” (15.6%).

49. Clearly there is a lot of potential for effective relationships to be developed between families and communities for the benefit of all learners. Those who could benefit the most tend to be children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some parents may lack the confidence of other families due to their own negative experiences of education and when that is passed on to their children, outcomes tend to reduce as a consequence. These issues also tend to be cyclical⁸¹.

50. A substantial body of research⁸² has indicated that parenting and children’s activities in the early years have a strong influence on cognitive development, and that features of an effective home-learning environment such as reading to children, using complex language, warmth in interactions and responsiveness are all associated with better developmental outcomes⁸³. It has been argued that the increased likelihood of higher SES parents using developmentally enhancing activities helps to explain the links between social background and developmental outcomes⁸⁴. See Figure 3 below: Effects upon Age 11, literacy and numeracy⁸⁵

⁸¹ Goodman, A. and Gregg, P. (2010) *Poorer children’s educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour?* Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available at <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poorer-children%E2%80%99s-educational-attainment-how-important-are-attitudes-and-behaviour>

⁸² Melhuish, E. (2010) Impact of the Home Learning Environment on Child Cognitive Development: Secondary Analysis of Data from 'Growing Up in Scotland'. Available at <https://digital.nls.uk/pubs/scotgov/2010/impactofthehomelearningenvironment.pdf>

⁸³ Bradley, R. (2002). Environment and Parenting. In M. Bornstein (Ed.) *Handbook of Parenting*, 2nd Ed. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

⁸⁴ Hess R.D., Holloway S., Price G., & Dickson W.P. (1982). Family environments and the acquisition of reading skills. In L.M. Laosa, & I.E. Sigel, (Eds.). *Families as Learning Environments of Children*. (pp. 87–113). New York: Plenum.

⁸⁵ Early Childhood Education and Care and longer-term Outcomes: Evidence from the UK - Ted Melhuish, Professor of Human Development, University of Oxford

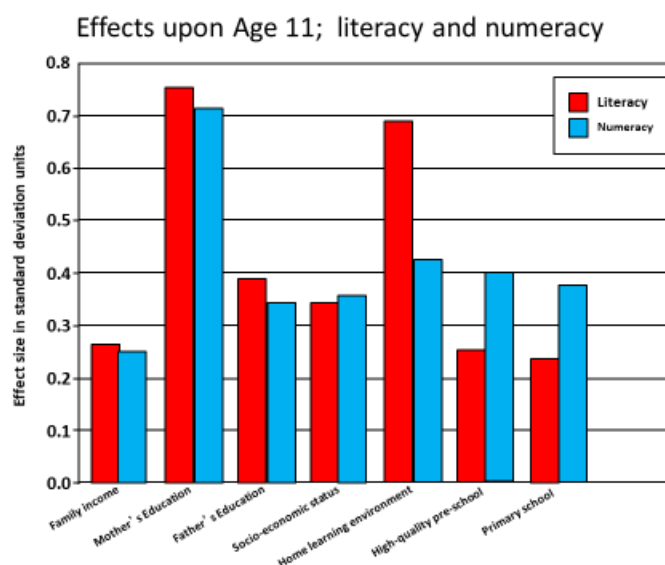


Figure 3

51. The panel has proposed a new place-based “Reducing Educational Disadvantage” (RED) programme available across Northern Ireland, intended to be strategic in scale and collaborative in nature, mandating the building of authentic and sustainable partnerships between schools and communities. While the existing Extended Schools programme has been effective over the past 15 years, and having met with colleagues from across the UK and the Republic of Ireland, the panel has recommended that DE and other departments invest more substantially in the “Reducing Educational Disadvantage” (RED) programme, allowing greater flexibility within local communities to direct the nature of the spend.

52. Evidence⁸⁶ would suggest that schools alone cannot overcome the impact of social and educational disadvantage grounded in specific local contexts. The rationale behind the whole community approach to education is therefore centred on two conceptualisations of community: first, the community of all those who are relevant to and impact positively on the development of children and young people (e.g. families, schools, youth groups, churches, uniformed organisations, statutory services etc.); and, second, geographical communities of place, focusing on communities where the educational deficit is most acute. Where this works effectively, the model is ‘doubly holistic’, both in terms of linking schools with families and communities to improve outcomes for children, and in sustaining ‘cradle to career’ support across the childhood years.

⁸⁶ Dyson, A., Kerr, K., Raffo, C and Migelsworth, M. (2012) *Developing Children's Zones for England*. London: Save the Children. Available at https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/files/32802787/FULL_TEXT.PDF

53. Such an approach also enables more integrated and wide-ranging practices to be developed at a local level, meeting specific local needs. While there are some encouraging emerging examples of multi-agency approaches in Northern Ireland where parents, schools, community and voluntary organisations and statutory bodies are working together, these are currently very much the exception and have too often been subject to the uncertainties of short-term funding. The “Reducing Educational Disadvantage” (RED) programme must instead commit to sustainable funding and involve a co-participatory approach, building on local strengths and on-the-ground knowledge of context, and creating a seamless, supported developmental pathway from early years to adulthood.

54. The panel heard from many school leaders, parents, voluntary and community organisations of the value of youth work pedagogy in raising aspiration and promoting positive engagement, especially working with young people at risk of underachievement. There is a need however for an agreed action plan (with adequate funding) to implement effective collaborative models for curriculum delivery in schools and in addition, to develop effective initiatives / programmes of wraparound support (including mentoring and counselling) across both school and youth settings, to facilitate more holistic benefit for young people. The panel is aware that there is a need to share effective practice by way of examples of effective collaboration between schools and the voluntary and/or statutory youth sectors.

55. The Department of Education currently provides more than £70m+ of Targeting Social Need (TSN) funding to schools each year. This is allocated as part of core school budgets, in recognition of the additional challenges and costs involved in supporting children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds as well as those at risk of educational underachievement. A new TSN Planner has been developed to help schools capture a range of information about the use and impact of TSN funding which will assist schools in planning their teaching and learning for the year ahead as well as helping to promote and disseminate good practice. However, the panel is aware that not all schools have chosen to report how their TSN funding has been spent and is conscious that many schools have had to use TSN funding to support core functions as a result of significant budgetary pressures facing schools in recent years. While cognisant of the financial pressures facing schools, the panel recommends that DE enter discussions with the teaching unions to ensure consistent reporting and that this £70m+ p.a. is being spent as intended to support children and young people and to address educational underachievement.

56. Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) is a proxy rather than a direct measure often used in educational research and policy. A report published by the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2010⁸⁷ noted the strengths of the measure including that it is linked to the children in the school; is readily understood; is readily available; is updated annually; and is income based. However the panel is conscious that there are limitations to the accuracy of FSME as a measure of disadvantage, based

⁸⁷ Perry, C. (2010) *Free School Meal Entitlement as a measure of deprivation* – Briefing Paper 191/10. Belfast: Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Library Service.

on reports of low levels of uptake in some areas and among some communities. The binary measure also fails to take account of families whose income is just above the threshold. Other challenges to the measure include the fact that it relates to income alone and ignores other aspects of deprivation. Alternatives to using FSME include an ‘ever FSME’ measure (which would address fluctuating eligibility) and measures of deprivation on a geographical basis, for instance, using the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (NIMDM), which provides information across a spectrum of deprivation (for example: income deprivation, education deprivation, employment deprivation and living environment deprivation) and census data. Given the dependence on FSME in Northern Ireland to determine allocation of significant additional funding, the panel believes that DE should commission research to provide a current assessment of the validity of the measure against other options.

57. The panel is conscious that any whole-community approach to education must address a wide range of inequalities, and promote equality of opportunity across and between all of the Section 75 equality categories. In 2017 the Equality Commission’s *Key Inequalities in Education*⁸⁸ identified 6 key inequalities:

- Bullying, including prejudice-based bullying, in schools is a persistent problem.
- Males continue to have lower levels of attainment than females, beginning in primary school and continuing throughout schooling to GCSE and A Level. Fewer male school leavers enter higher education than do females.
- Protestants continue to have lower levels of attainment than Catholics at GCSE, GCSEs including English and Maths, and A Level. Fewer Protestant school leavers enter higher education than do Catholics.
- There is persistent underachievement and lack of progression to further and higher education of school leavers entitled to free school meals, particularly Protestants, notably Protestants males.
- Children from the Traveller community and Roma children have some of the lowest levels of attainment of all equality groups.
- Students with SEN or a disability have lower attainment levels than students without any SEN or disability, and are less likely to go on to higher education.

58. In terms of actions to address these key inequalities, the Expert Panel welcomes Minister Weir’s announcement that legislation to address bullying in schools will come into operation in Northern Ireland on 1 September 2021. The *Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (NI) 2016* will bring renewed focus for schools to this very important issue and deliver greater consistency and impact in how schools respond to all forms of bullying. The legislation provides a legal definition of bullying; introduces a requirement for schools to record all incidents of bullying; and requires Boards of

⁸⁸ Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2017) *Key Inequalities in Education*. Available at: <https://www.equalityni.org/KeyInequalities-Education>

Governors to take direct responsibility for developing and monitoring the effectiveness of Anti-Bullying policy and practice within schools.

59. Key Area 5 *Maximising Boys' Potential* seeks to deal with the issues which the Equality Commission NI highlights regarding the performance of boys, Protestant boys and children in receipt of free school meals.

60. The Equality Commission's report on "Family and Community Engagement in Education - Learning from the pandemic"⁸⁹ will also be of interest. "This publication provides a snapshot of time, when family and school and supporting organisations have had to be more reliant upon each other than ever before. It outlines their experiences, expertise and thoughts on what we all can learn from the pandemic about family and community engagement in education".

61. The Department of Education supports traveller children and families through its "Traveller Child in Education Framework" and support is delivered through the EA's Intercultural Education Service (IES) Traveller Education. The service provides advice, guidance and focused support to schools and to parents and pupils from the Traveller community as part of the Children & Young People's Services main aim "to help improve pupil outcomes and ultimately their life chances." The Traveller Education Support service produces a comprehensive annual delivery plan which sets out how it delivers a range of activities aimed at helping to meet the service delivery objectives set out above. Undoubtedly Covid-19 has impacted to a certain extent on all children and young people and this has been particularly the case for traveller children. Gillespie⁹⁰ notes that staff employed in the Toybox early childhood programme funded by DE to improve the educational outcomes for Traveller and Roma families had to adapt quickly to find new ways to link with families and to support them during an anxious period.

62. The Schools of Sanctuary programme is also relevant to traveller and newcomer families. This programme is an award scheme piloted in the Urban Villages areas of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry with support from the Northern Ireland Executive's Urban Villages Initiative, the Belfast City of Sanctuary Group and the Education Authority's Intercultural Education Service⁹¹.

63. The Schools of Sanctuary award is aimed at helping schools to develop further the concept that schools are welcoming places for pupils and their families, where every child feels safe, where they are fully accepted. These schools will become beacons in the community as places where cultural diversity is valued and celebrated. The Intercultural Education Service and Urban Villages have worked closely with the City of Sanctuary group to develop a customised Schools of Sanctuary resource pack and a promotional leaflet for schools.

⁸⁹ Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2021) *Family and Community Engagement in Education*. Available at: <https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/Education-LearningFromPandemic.pdf>

⁹⁰ Gillespie, S. (2021) 'Toybox – the Early Years Organisation' in *Key Inequalities in Education* (ECNI). Available at: <https://www.equalityni.org/KeyInequalities-Education>

⁹¹ Education Authority (2021) *Schools of Sanctuary*. Available at: <https://www.eani.org.uk/school-management/intercultural-education-service-ies/schools-of-sanctuary>

64. Remaining challenges in relation to supporting traveller children include:

- Schools do not always have the scope, capacity or experience to provide a differentiated curriculum for traveller children in a way which is bespoke to their specific needs which is why the sharing of good practice is so important;
- Schools with small numbers of traveller children can struggle to meet the specific demands of children where budgets are constrained however a whole school nurture approach can help in this regard and Minister Weir's greater investment in Nurture Units is helpful;
- Early intervention is important but this can be challenging to achieve.

65. The Expert Panel took a particular interest in the area of special educational needs and was very aware of several recent reports^{92, 93} which have been highly critical of SEN provision in Northern Ireland. The panel sought updates from a variety of stakeholders ranging from policy officials in the Department of Education, the Education Authority, Special School leaders and teachers as well as a range of parents right across Northern Ireland in six different geographical locations (conducted virtually).

66. Those updates were particularly useful as it became clear that the Department in partnership with the Education Authority is taking forward a wide body of work in this area including Children Looked After. These include the new SEN Framework which includes three elements:

- Primary Legislation - Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 (the 2016 Act)
- Secondary Legislation - New SEN Regulations
- Guidance - a new statutory Code of Practice

67. Consultation on the new statutory Code of Practice closed on 2 March 2021. One of the overriding requests which stakeholders made to the panel was the need for timely interventions and for issues to be identified as early as possible so that support could be put in place to provide maximum impact.

68. The panel heard accounts from many parents and school leaders that the SEN system in Northern Ireland is under extreme pressure. We heard that the level of SEN support is simply not adequate in terms of difficulty accessing diagnostic assessments and the imposition of school quotas, failure to meet the statutory timeframes in the statementing process and subsequent delays in the provision of appropriate support to children, as well as some reports of inconsistent knowledge and expertise among mainstream teachers. The panel was also made aware of the

⁹² Northern Ireland Audit Office (2020) *Impact Review of Special Educational Needs*, Belfast: Northern Ireland Audit Office; NICCY (2020) *Too Little, Too Late: A rights based review of special educational needs provision in mainstream schools*. Belfast: NICCY; Purdy, N., Beck, G., McClelland, D., O'Hagan, C., Totton, L. and Harris, J. (2020) *Too Little, Too Late: The Views of Parents/Carers on Their Child's Experiences of the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Process in Mainstream Schools*. Belfast, NICCY

rising number of children with SEN over recent years in mainstream and special schools, and the financial constraints on the SEN system.

69. While acknowledging that DE and the Education Authority have begun to tackle the many challenges facing the SEN system in Northern Ireland, the panel would wish to emphasise the importance of timely system reform to address the recommendations of recent reports such as the NIAO *Impact Review of Special Educational Needs*⁹⁴ and NICCY's *Too Little Too Late* report⁹⁵, and to create a transparent system which prioritises timely assessment and intervention; values the knowledge of parents and communicates more effectively with them; builds knowledge, skills and capacity among school staff; listens to the voice of the child (where possible); facilitates more effective multi-disciplinary working; and, crucially, provides support that is appropriate, effective and child-centred.

70. The panel was pleased to note publication on 19 February 2021, the Department of Health / Department of Education publication of "A Life Deserved - Caring for Children & Young People in Northern Ireland Strategy"⁹⁶.

71. The development of work in these areas will help to drive forward progress for other Section 75 categories identified by the Equality Commission and the panel would recommend keeping progress under continuous review.

⁹⁴ Northern Ireland Audit Office (2020) *Impact Review of Special Educational Needs*, Belfast: Northern Ireland Audit Office.

⁹⁵ NICCY (2020) *Too Little, Too Late: A rights based review of special educational needs provision in mainstream schools*. Belfast: NICCY.

⁹⁶ DoH & DE (2021) *A life deserved: Caring for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland*. Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/A%20Life%20Deserved%20%20%20Caring%20%20for%20Children%20%26%20Young%20People%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%20Strategy.PDF>

a fair start.



KEY AREA 5

MAXIMISING BOYS' POTENTIAL

Key Area 5 – Maximising boys’ potential

What do we want to achieve?

The panel recognises that the barriers to academic attainment which exist as a result of economic deprivation affect boys across all communities. This is reflective of the current situation across the UK, Ireland and further afield. The panel notes that there are particular issues facing working-class Protestant boys which have been well documented⁹⁷ and are highlighted specifically within the New Decade, New Approach agreement and the Terms of Reference of this Expert Panel. However, while the percentage of Protestant FSME boys not achieving 5+ A*-C grades at GCSE including English and maths is higher than the percentage of Catholic FSME boys, it is acknowledged that this is not a problem which affects only one community. For instance, although representing a lower overall percentage, the number of FSME Catholic boys not achieving 5+ A*-C grades at GCSE including English and maths is higher than the number of Protestant FSME boys⁹⁸. Furthermore, while there are persistent attainment differences by religion and gender, the most significant differences are between the GCSE attainment of FMSE and non-FSME pupils, irrespective of religion, gender or ethnicity.

Factors that concern educators of boys include academic attainment, a lack of interest in studying, higher incidence of behavioural issues, bullying and exclusion, fewer accessing Higher Education as well as increased mental health and anxiety issues in boys; however we acknowledge that a number of these factors can also be a

“We want an education system in NI that recognises and caters for boys as well as girls and which meaningfully addresses the very specific barriers to learning facing working-class boys, who are at risk of underachievement because of issues which are largely beyond their control.”

cause of concern for girls. There is evidence also regarding a lack of males entering certain professions where there is perceived gender stereotyping of the workforce⁹⁹. We want an education system in NI that recognises and caters for boys as well as girls and which meaningfully addresses the very specific barriers to learning facing working-class boys, who are at risk of underachievement because of issues which are largely beyond their control.

⁹⁷ See <https://www.equalityni.org/KeyInequalities-Education> and Leitch, R., et al.. (2017). 'Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation' The ILiAD study. Final Report. Belfast: The Executive Office. Retrieved from <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execoffice/iliad-report-sept-17.pdf>

⁹⁸ DE (2020) *Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers* (Tables 7 to 9). Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Qualifications%20and%20destinations%20of%20Northern%20Ireland%20school%20leavers%202018-....pdf>

⁹⁹ DEL (2013) *Addressing Gender Balance – Reaping the Gender Dividend*. Available at <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/del/STEM-Report-Addressing-gender-balance-in-STEM.pdf>

How will we get there?

By implementing the actions outlined, we will develop and empower our educational workforce and community to understand and meet the very particular developmental and learning needs of boys. There will be appropriate support and guidance to ensure boys see education as relevant, beneficial and achievable. There will be effective collaboration with community and other statutory and voluntary partners to raise aspiration and facilitate the reach of our most vulnerable young people. By encouraging and engaging powerful role models in school and the community, as well as peer mentoring programmes, we will address some of the cultural deficit affecting FSME boys.

How will we know we have been successful?

- The attainment gap between girls and boys will be narrowed.
- The attainment gap between FSME and non-FSME boys will be narrowed.
- Fewer boys will be excluded from school.
- More FSME boys will go on to higher levels of education including the teaching profession.
- A toolkit on educating and engaging boys will be produced and disseminated in conjunction with appropriate training for schools.
- The implementation of a System Evaluation Framework (referred to in Key Area 3) will provide a wider range of measures of success for the benefit of both the system and learners.
- Working class Protestant boys will receive appropriate support, relevant to their needs, enabling them to excel throughout primary and post-primary school.

Key Area 5: Maximising Boys' Potential

Evidence Gathered	Recommendations	Actions	Led by	Timing	Short	Medium	Long-Term
5.1 Despite some improvement in 2018/19, boys underperform girls at every stage of formal education, with a gap of almost 10% by GCSE. This is also replicated in end of key assessments from KS1 to KS3 although the difference is more pronounced in Communication than Using Maths ¹⁰⁰ .	a. Schools should be supported to recognise how boys can benefit from tailored approaches to teaching and learning. Teachers should be challenged and supported to have high expectations and employ strategies designed to challenge and engage boys.	i. DE should produce an 'Educating and Engaging Boys' Toolkit for school leaders on addressing the factors limiting boys' progress. It should contain case studies of effective practice in schools and the community to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early intervention based on sound use of data; • Use of peer¹⁰⁴, business, community and alumni mentoring and role modelling; • Effective Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG); • Suggested approaches for schools' pastoral care teams to develop agile and dynamic community networks, which assist in delivering a preventative curriculum, facilitate access to statutory / voluntary support services and develop effective links with primary schools to support smooth transition. 	DE / EA	ST	£0.1m	Nil	Nil
5.2 FSME boys do less well than non-FSME boys. There is a 33.8% point gap in GCSE performance between FSME and non-FSME Protestant boys ¹⁰¹ . There is a 30.0% point gap in performance between FSME and non-FSME Catholic boys.	b. Boys at risk of underachievement and / or disengagement should be identified early, and appropriate, evidenced-based interventions implemented ¹⁰³ .	ii. The School Development Plan (SDP) should have a focus on raising boys' attainment (where appropriate).	Schools	All 3	Nil	Nil	Nil
5.3 Boys can face barriers to learning as a result of limited access to services, lack of role models, alienation from school systems and a lack of sense of belonging.	c. Personalised Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) should take account of the labour market and include meaningful targets for boys, shared with their parents and families. This must facilitate smooth transition to purposeful progression routes.	iii. As part of the Learning Leaders Strategy, within the key area of Building Professional Learning Communities, DE should commission the EA to develop effective practice and co-design Teachers Professional Learning (TPL) around understanding boys, to include effective pedagogy, relational learning, a growth mind-set and high challenge. Initial Teacher Education (ITE) should address classroom practice that suits boys.	DE / EA	All 3	Nil	Nil	Nil
5.4 Boys at risk of underachieving respond well to strong relationships/attachments and in particular benefit from youth work pedagogy.	d. Boys' needs should be met through effective networks with the local community and should be reflected in curriculum and pastoral support as outlined in Key Area 4.						
5.5 FSME Protestant boys have disproportionately lower achievement at GCSE and A level ¹⁰² .	e. Boys should have the opportunity to experience positive male role						
5.6 Youth work infrastructure in Protestant working class communities requires sustained investment.							

¹⁰⁰ See Professor Feyisa Demie's research report 2021 - Annex G.

¹⁰¹ DE (2020) *Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers* (Tables 7 to 9). Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Qualifications%20and%20destinations%20of%20Northern%20Ireland%20school%20leavers%202018-....pdf>

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ E.g. avoid streaming, have mixed ability classes. Evidence from OECD suggests that underperforming boys can benefit from being around better performing pupils. See: [OECD Ten steps to Equity](#).

¹⁰⁴ E.g. Peer mentoring at post-primary could involve Year 13 pupils mentoring Year 10 pupils regarding subject choice etc.

Key Area 5: Maximising Boys' Potential

Evidence Gathered	Recommendations	Actions	Led by	Timing	Short	Medium	Long-Term
	<p>models in school and the community.</p> <p>f. Boys need to develop good emotional regulation and the ability to reason and resolve conflict through effective restorative practice in schools.</p> <p>g. FSME Protestant boys in key areas of deprivation at risk of not achieving 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) inc equivalents inc English and maths should be identified and supported through a new pilot programme providing wrap-around support.</p>	<p>iv. EA should facilitate access to high quality training on restorative practice in schools. EA Behaviour Support Team (BST) should effectively support schools to facilitate alternative approaches to suspension and exclusion.</p> <p>v. DE should in consultation with community and young people (especially boys), develop a communication strategy to promote education focused on those most at risk of underachievement.</p> <p>vi. EA should take forward a collaborative pilot (based on Children's Zones methodology) between statutory and voluntary youth services and schools in the most disadvantaged, Protestant working class areas in NI¹⁰⁵. This should adequately and sustainably fund wraparound support (much wider than literacy and numeracy alone) for KS2, KS3 and KS4 pupils, with a view to a wider NI rollout if successful.</p>	<p>EA</p> <p>DE</p> <p>EA</p>	<p>All 3</p> <p>All 3</p> <p>All 3</p>	<p>£0.2m</p> <p>Nil¹⁰⁶</p> <p>£0.5m</p>	<p>£0.2m</p> <p>Nil</p> <p>£1.0m</p>	<p>£0.2m</p> <p>Nil</p> <p>£1.5m</p>
5.7 In areas of deprivation, boys can lack cultural capital and 'reach'. As a result of socio-economic disadvantage, boys can lack opportunity to engage in enriching or extra-curricular activities.	h. Boys should be provided with experiences and opportunities which develop their self-efficacy, as well as wider skills and dispositions, through enrichment and extra-curricular activities provided during the school day.	vii. Schools in deprived areas (Band 3 schools) should be funded (through the proposed "RED" programme) to deliver a new programme of enrichment and extra-curricular activities which include leadership opportunities, volunteering, health and wellbeing activities, sport and peer mentoring.	DE / Schools	All 3	Nil	Nil	Nil
5.8 Working class boys are less likely than their female counterparts to progress to Higher Education ¹⁰⁷ . There is a general lack of preparedness for the next steps ¹⁰⁸ .	i. HE, FE and the teaching profession needs to be more diverse, and encouragement needs to be given to recruiting male teachers particularly into Early Years and lower primary.	viii. DfE / DE in collaboration with HEIs including ITE providers and other stakeholders should consider ways in which to encourage males into higher Education including the teaching profession using, e.g. an advertising campaign to encourage high-calibre male applicants and / or bursaries.	DfE / DE / HEIs / ITE / CCEA	MT- LT	Nil	Nil	Nil

¹⁰⁵ As measured by NI Multiple Deprivation Measures.

¹⁰⁶ DE already has access to an advertising budget and is progressing a new Hope / Aspiration campaign.

¹⁰⁷ DE (2020) *Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers* (Table 14). Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Qualifications%20and%20destinations%20of%20Northern%20Ireland%20school%20leavers%202018-....pdf>

¹⁰⁸ See DE (2020) *Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers* Table 5 Gender Differences. Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Qualifications%20and%20destinations%20of%20Northern%20Ireland%20school%20leavers%202018-....pdf>

Key Area 5: Maximising Boys' Potential

Evidence Gathered	Recommendations	Actions	Led by	Timing	Short	Medium	Long-Term
5.9 Boys can experience difficulty transitioning to FE / HE. 5.10 There is a lack of male staff throughout the profession and particularly in Early Years and lower primary ¹⁰⁹ .	j. Key Area 3 Action is also relevant here re DfE's Widening Participation Programme to ensure that it addresses the aspiration of working class boys.	Initial Teacher Education (ITE) should focus on recruitment practices to encourage boys to follow a career in teaching.					
Total			8		£0.8m	£1.2m	£1.7m

¹⁰⁹ Percentage female: Nursery 100%; Primary & Prep 84.4%; Non-Grammar 71.5%; Grammar 67.2%; Special 79.9%; Total 77.2%

Explanatory Notes – Key Area 5: Maximising Boys’ Potential

72. The *New Decade, New Approach*¹¹⁰ deal agreed by the main Northern Ireland political parties on 10 January 2020 included the following commitment as an immediate priority for the restored Executive: “The Executive will establish an expert group to examine and propose an action plan to address links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background, including the long-standing issues facing working-class, Protestant boys”.

73. The panel is mindful of the sensitivities regarding being seen to give preferential treatment to one side of the community over another and we are acutely aware that improvements in outcomes for all genders are needed across all communities. We refer to the latest statistical data, as taken from Prof. Feyisa Demie’s research report which can be found at Annex G:

Table 16 and Figure 10 shows that Catholic attainment was consistently higher than that found for Protestant pupils using the key 5+ GCSEs (A-C) including English and maths outcome, albeit by a small margin. Both groups made strong gains between 2006 and 2019, with Catholic attainment improving by 19.9 percentage points, and Protestant attainment improving by 17.4 percentage points, thus the gap widened slightly over the period. In 2019, 72.5% of Catholic pupils, and 69.3% of Protestant pupils met the expected standard, a gap of 3.2 percentage points.*

Table 16: Religious status difference and attainment of 5+ GCSEs (A-C) in English and Maths*

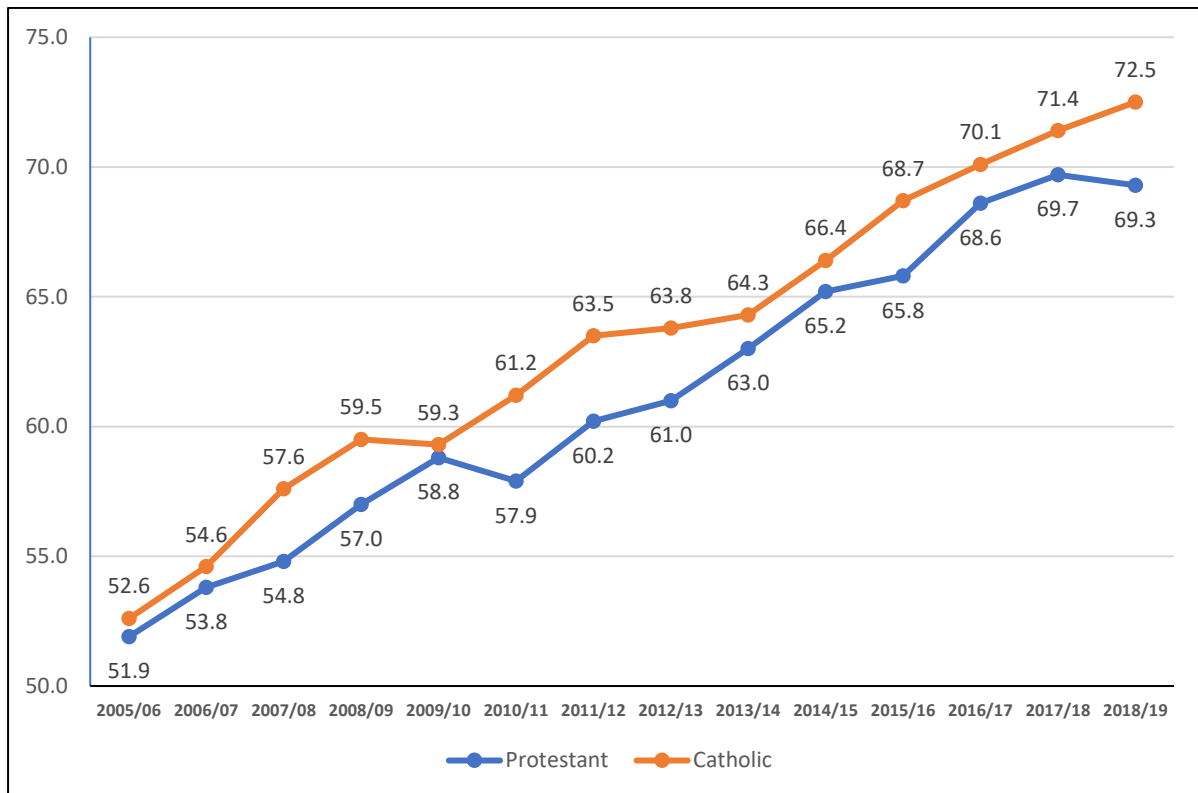
	Protestant	Catholic	Other	Gap between Protestant and Catholic pupils
2005/06	51.9	52.6	55.9	0.7
2006/07	53.8	54.6	53.1	0.8
2007/08	54.8	57.6	56.4	2.8
2008/09	57.0	59.5	58.5	2.5
2009/10	58.8	59.3	58.5	0.5
2010/11	57.9	61.2	57.7	3.3
2011/12	60.2	63.5	61.5	3.3

¹¹⁰ Smith, J. and Coveney, S. (2020) *New Decade, New Approach*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Office.

	Protestant	Catholic	Other	Gap between Protestant and Catholic pupils
2012/13	61.0	63.8	58.9	2.8
2013/14	63.0	64.3	61.8	1.3
2014/15	65.2	66.4	66.9	1.2
2015/16	65.8	68.7	69.1	2.9
2016/17	68.6	70.1	70.8	1.5
2017/18	69.7	71.4	70.0	1.7
2018/19	69.3	72.5	68.1	3.2

Source: Department of Education (School Leavers Survey)

Figure 10: 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) including English and maths by Religion



Source: Department of Education (School Leavers Survey)

Table 17: School leavers achieving at least 5+ GCSEs⁽²⁾ A*-C including English and GCSE maths

		Boys			Girls		
		FSME	Non FSME	Gap	FSME	Non FSME	Gap
2015/16	Protestant	34	67.8	33.8	42.5	78.6	36.1
	Catholic	43.6	74.7	31.1	53.1	81.3	28.2
	Gap	9.6	6.9		10.6	2.7	
2016/17	Protestant	36.6	71.1	34.5	48.9	80.4	31.5
	Catholic	45	73.7	28.7	55.6	84.1	28.5
	Gap	8.4	2.6		6.7	3.7	
2017/18	Protestant	37.2	71.6	34.4	49.1	82.1	33.0
	Catholic	46.7	76.4	29.7	57	83.3	26.3
	Gap	9.5	4.8		7.9	1.2	
2018/19	Protestant	37.9	71.7	33.8	49.0	81.8	32.8
	Catholic	46.7	76.7	30.0	59.4	85.3	25.9
	Gap	8.8	5.0		10.4	3.5	

Source: Department of Education (School Leavers Survey)

Table 17 (above) illustrates that Catholic pupils were slightly more likely than Protestant pupils to get 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) including English and maths, but this masks the effect of multiple factors that can affect attainment. Table 17 breaks down the data by gender and FSME status and some more disturbing results emerge.

In each of the last three years, Protestant FSME boys had the lowest rates of attainment, less than half of that found for Catholic non-FSME girls. In 2019, just 37.9% of Protestant FSME boys gained 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) including English and maths, while 85.3% of Catholic non-FSME girls met this standard. In contrast, the gap between non-FSME Catholic girls and non-FSME Protestant girls was 3.5 percentage points.

The gap in attainment between Catholic and Protestant non-FSME boys was smaller (5.0 percentage points) than that of Catholic and Protestant FSME boys (8.8 percentage points).

Table 18: GCSE attainment gap by religion between % non-FSME school leavers and % FSME school leavers 5+A*-C including English and Maths

Catholic			Protestant			Other			
	FSME	non-FSME	Gap	FSME	non-FSME	Gap	FSME	non-FSME	Gap
2005/06	28.9	60.4	31.6	20.9	56.2	35.3	23.0	59.9	36.8
2006/07	31.4	61.5	30.1	18.6	58.8	40.3	20.9	57.4	36.5
2007/08	31.8	64.2	32.4	18.9	59.1	40.2	24.8	60.4	35.6
2008/09	33.7	66.1	32.5	22.1	61.1	39.0	20.7	62.5	41.8
2009/10	35.0	65.7	30.7	23.5	63.1	39.6	26.7	62.5	35.8
2010/11	35.9	68.0	32.1	23.3	62.6	39.3	27.3	61.9	34.6
2011/12	38.5	70.6	32.1	25.9	65.2	39.3	28.3	66.7	38.4
2012/13	38.3	71.6	33.3	29.1	65.9	36.8	29.2	64.5	35.3
2013/14	38.7	71.5	32.8	27.2	68.3	41.1	32.0	67.5	35.4
2014/15	44.7	75.5	30.8	33.2	71.9	38.7	43.6	72.7	29.1
2015/16	48.4	78.0	29.6	37.9	73.1	35.2	43.8	76.3	32.5
2016/17	50.2	78.8	28.6	42.7	75.8	33.1	47.4	78.0	30.6
2017/18	51.6	79.7	28.2	42.8	76.8	34.0	48.9	76.1	27.1
2018/19	53.2	81.0	27.8	43.5	76.6	33.1	46.8	75.1	28.3
Change b/w 05/06 and 18/19	24.3	20.6		22.6	20.4		23.8	15.2	

Source: Department of Education (School Leavers Survey)

Notes:

1. Data excludes special and independent schools.
2. There was an increase in the number of FSME pupils from 2014/15, which coincided with an extension of the eligibility for free school meals under the Working Tax Credit free school meal criterion, which was extended to post-primary pupils from September 2014.
3. 'Other' includes Other Christian, No religion, and Non-Christian.
4. The percentage points (ppts) Gap is calculated based on unrounded figures. It is not the difference between the rounded FSME, and non-FSME figures presented.

There is also a substantial gap in attainment between FSME and non-FSME pupils when broken down by religious background. In 2019, the gap in attainment between FSME and non-FSME was 27.8 percentage points for Catholic pupils, and 33.1 points for Protestant pupils, although this gap had narrowed slightly over the last 14 years for both groups.

In 2019, 43.5% of Protestant FSME pupils gained 5+ A-C including English and maths, while the figure for non-FSME pupils was 76.6%. For Catholic pupils, the figures were 53.2% and 81% respectively (see table 18).*

When FSME attainment is broken down by religion it can be seen that Catholic pupils consistently had higher rates of attainment than Protestant pupils, with a gap of between 7.5 and 11.5 percentage points since 2014. This was also true of non-FSME pupils, although the gap was smaller each year, averaging about 4 percentage points. Protestant FSME pupils consistently had the lowest levels of attainment of these particular groups although ethnic minorities such as Traveller children are known to have lower levels of achievement.

74. This long term trend in outcomes for boys, whilst improving over time, has implications for boys in particular seeking to go to university. A recent report by the Higher Education Policy Institute¹¹¹ has highlighted that young women are now 35 per cent more likely to go to university than men, and argues that the underperformance of boys must be tackled urgently through specific initiatives including additional widening participation funding to encourage more young men, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, to enter higher education, and target setting for male recruitment by Higher Education Institutions.

75. The panel recognises that the barriers to academic attainment which exist as a result of economic deprivation affect boys across all communities. This is reflective of the current situation across the UK, Ireland and further afield. The panel notes that there are particular issues facing working class Protestant boys which have been well documented¹¹² and are highlighted specifically within the *New Decade, New Approach* agreement (page 7) and the Terms of Reference¹¹³ of this Expert Panel. However, while the percentage of Protestant FSME boys not achieving 5+ A*-C grades at GCSE including English and maths is higher than the percentage of Catholic FSME boys, it is acknowledged that this is not a problem which affects only one community. For instance, although representing a lower overall percentage, the number of FSME Catholic boys not achieving 5+ A*-C grades at GCSE including English and maths is higher than the number of Protestant FSME boys¹¹⁴ as the following table illustrates.

¹¹¹ Hillman, N. & Robinson, N. (2016) *Boys to Men: The underachievement of young men in higher education – and how to start tackling it*. Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Boys-to-Men.pdf>

¹¹² Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2017) *Key Inequalities in Education*. Available at: <https://www.equalityni.org/KeyInequalities-Education>; and Leitch, R. et al. (2017) *Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation (the ILiAD study). Final Report*. Available at: <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execoffice/iliad-report-sept-17.pdf>

¹¹³ DE (2020) *Terms of Reference for Expert Panel to Examine and Propose Actions to Address Links between persistent Educational Underachievement and Socio-Economic Background*. Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Terms%20of%20Reference%20%28ToR%29%20-%20Expert%20Panel%20Persistent%20Educational%20Underachi....pdf>

¹¹⁴ DE (2020) *Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers*. Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Qualifications%20and%20destinations%20of%20Northern%20Ireland%20school%20leavers%202018-....pdf>

Table 7

School leavers *not entitled* to free school meals achieving at least 5 GCSEs⁽²⁾ A*-C inc. GCSE English and GCSE maths by gender and religion of pupil 2018/2019⁽¹⁾

	BOYS		GIRLS		TOTAL	
	Numbers	%	Numbers	%	Numbers	%
PROTESTANT	2285	71.7	2494	81.8	4779	76.6
Total	3189		3050		6239	
CATHOLIC	2936	76.7	3255	85.3	6191	81.0
Total	3830		3815		7645	
OTHER ⁽³⁾	749	71.3	708	79.6	1457	75.1
Total	1051		890		1941	
ALL RELIGIONS	5970	74.0	6457	83.3	12427	78.5
Total	8070		7755		15825	

Table 8

School leavers *entitled* to free school meals achieving at least 5 GCSEs⁽²⁾ A*-C inc. GCSE English and GCSE maths by gender and religion of pupil 2018/2019⁽¹⁾

	BOYS		GIRLS		TOTAL	
	Numbers	%	Numbers	%	Numbers	%
PROTESTANT	331	37.9	445	49.0	776	43.5
Total	874		908		1782	
CATHOLIC	775	46.7	1012	59.4	1787	53.2
Total	1658		1703		3361	
OTHER ⁽³⁾	138	40.7	158	53.7	296	46.8
Total	339		294		633	
ALL RELIGIONS	1244	43.3	1615	55.6	2859	49.5
Total	2871		2905		5776	

Table 9

School leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs⁽²⁾ A*-C inc. GCSE English and GCSE maths by gender and religion of pupil 2018/2019⁽¹⁾

	BOYS		GIRLS		TOTAL	
	Numbers	%	Numbers	%	Numbers	%
PROTESTANT	2616	64.4	2939	74.3	5555	69.3
Total	4063		3958		8021	
CATHOLIC	3711	67.6	4267	77.3	7978	72.5
Total	5488		5518		11006	
OTHER ⁽³⁾	887	63.8	866	73.1	1753	68.1
Total	1390		1184		2574	
ALL RELIGIONS	7214	65.9	8072	75.7	15286	70.8
Total	10941		10660		21601	

NOTES

1. Excludes special and independent schools.
2. Includes equivalent qualifications.
3. Other includes Other Christian, No religion and Non-Christian.

Please see Notes to Readers point 8 for an explanation on how these figures are calculated.

76. Furthermore, while there are persistent attainment differences by religion and gender, the most significant differences are between the GCSE attainment of FSME and non-FSME pupils, irrespective of religion, gender or ethnicity. Factors that concern educators of boys include academic results, a lack of interest in studying, higher incidents of behavioural issues, bullying and exclusion, accessing Higher Education as well as increased mental health and anxiety issues in boys. We want an education system in Northern Ireland that recognises and caters for boys as well as girls and which meaningfully addresses the very specific barriers to learning facing working-class boys, who are at risk of underachievement because of issues which are largely beyond their control.

77. Using the differences in 2018/19 GCSE achievement for FSME protestant boys and girls and FSME Other boys and girls and comparing them with FSME catholic boys and girls, the numbers required to match improvement are very small. The tables below also highlight that by far the widest disparities are between FSME and non-FSME pupils irrespective of religion or gender.

Number / Percentage who achieved 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) incl English and maths 2018/19

FSME Protestant Pupils compared with FSME Catholic Pupils – How many more Protestant FSME pupils would be needed to match FSME Catholic pupil performance?

	Protestant FSME	Catholic FSME	Equivalent Figure	Difference (No.)
Boys	331 / 37.9% Total pupils: 874	775 / 46.7%	46.7% of 874 = 408	77 boys
Girls	445 / 49.0% Total pupils: 908	1012 / 59.4%	59.4% of 908 pupils = 539	94 girls
Total	776 pupils	1,787 pupils	947 pupils	171 pupils

FSME Protestant Pupils compared with non-FSME Protestant Pupils – How many more Protestant FSME pupils would be needed to match Protestant non-FSME pupil performance?

	Protestant FSME	Protestant non-FSME	Equivalent Figure	Difference (No.)
Boys	331 / 37.9% Total pupils: 874	2,285 / 71.7%	71.7% of 874 = 627	296 boys
Girls	445 / 49.0% Total pupils: 908	2,494 / 81.8%	81.8% of 908 = 742	297 girls
Total	776 pupils	4,779 pupils	1,369 pupils	593 pupils

FSME Catholic Pupils compared with non-FSME Catholic Pupils - How many more Catholic FSME Pupils would be needed to match Catholic non-FSME pupil performance?

	Catholic FSME	Catholic non-FSME	Equivalent Figure	Difference (No.)
Boys	775 / 46.7% Total pupils: 1,658	2,936 / 76.7%	76.7% of 1,658 = 1,272	497 pupils
Girls	1,012 / 59.4% Total pupils: 1,703	3,255 / 85.3%	85.3% of 1,703 = 1,452	441 pupils
Total	1,787 pupils	6,191 pupils	2,724 pupils	937 pupils

FSME Other Pupils compared with FSME Catholic Pupils - How many more Other FSME pupils would be needed to match Catholic FSME pupil performance?

	Other FSME	Catholic FSME	Equivalent Figure	Difference (No.)
Boys	138 / 40.7% Total pupils: 339	775 / 46.7%	46.7% of 339 = 158	20 pupils
Girls	158 / 53.7% Total pupils: 294	1,012 / 59.4%	59.4% of 294 = 174	16 pupils
Total	296 pupils	1,787 pupils	332 pupils	36 pupils

FSME Other Pupils compared with non-FSME Other Pupils - How many more Other FSME pupils would be needed to match Other non-FSME pupil performance?

	Other FSME	Other non-FSME	Equivalent Figure	Difference (No.)
Boys	138 / 40.7% Total pupils: 339	749 / 71.3%	71.3% of 339 = 242	104 pupils
Girls	158 / 59.7% Total pupils: 294	708 / 79.6%	79.6% of 294 = 234	76 pupils
Total	296 pupils	1,457 pupils	476 pupils	180 pupils

78. One of the most challenging factors in addressing these disparities is in continuing to improve attainment overall for all learners whilst simultaneously closing the gap. It is this dual (competing) challenge which every country in the world is seeking to address. This is why, in Key Area 3, the panel has recommended that: “DE should capitalise on the opportunities presented by Covid-19 to fundamentally consider assessment at KS4. This would be an opportunity to look afresh at the assessment of skills and knowledge in English, maths and ICT in a way which supports subsequent progression”.

79. In responding to the objective stated within its Terms of Reference¹¹⁵ to “give particular consideration to the long-standing issues facing working-class, Protestant boys, and specific actions to address this particular gap” the panel considered the vital role of youth work in Protestant, working-class communities. A clear message to emerge from conversations with school and community leaders within Protestant, working-class communities was that more sustained investment was required to develop the youth work infrastructure. This corresponds to the findings of the ILiAD study which reported evidence of “levels of ‘fracturing’ and a lack of cohesion in the predominantly-Protestant Wards that contrasts with the positive psycho-social connections which were seen as a feature of the predominantly-Catholic Wards” (p.58). Further evidence of the need for investment in youth work provision is provided by the Communities in Transition Field Work Reports by Cooperation Ireland on Protestant working-class areas which consistently highlight the need to engage disaffected young people, to develop more youth clubs and programmes, and to engage with children and young people at a younger age, to help raise educational aspiration, promote positive engagement and lawfulness, and avoid involvement in anti-social behaviour, drug addiction, gangs, organised criminality and paramilitarism.¹¹⁶

80. The panel has therefore recommended that the Education Authority should take forward a collaborative pilot between statutory and voluntary youth services and schools in the

¹¹⁵ Department of Education (2020) *Terms of Reference for Expert Panel to Examine and Propose Actions to Address Links between persistent Educational Underachievement and Socio-Economic Background*. Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Terms%20of%20Reference%20%28ToR%29%20-%20Expert%20Panel%20Persistent%20Educational%20Underachi....pdf>

¹¹⁶ Cooperation Ireland (2018) *Phase 1 Fieldwork Reports*. Available at: <https://cooperationireland.org/communities-in-transition/reports/>.

most disadvantaged, Protestant working class areas in Northern Ireland. This should adequately and sustainably fund wraparound support for KS2, KS3 and KS4 pupils, with a view to a wider rollout if successful.

a fair start.



KEY AREA 6

DRIVING FORWARD TEACHER
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING (TPL)

Key Area 6 – Driving forward Teacher Professional Learning (TPL)

What do we want to achieve?

It is important to recognise the central role played by education in enabling Northern Ireland to develop into a more inclusive, peaceful society with a prosperous, vibrant 21st century economy. In such a society, education must be recognised as the route out of poverty for families and communities, improving the life chances of all our children and young people. The role of teachers and others within education must be highly valued and continuous investment made in the development of a highly skilled, knowledgeable and professional workforce.

“The role of teachers and others within education must be highly valued and continuous investment made in the development of a highly skilled, knowledgeable and professional workforce.”

How will we get there?

There needs to be an increase in the level of teachers’ professional learning and development, commensurate with the demands of the profession in meeting the increasingly diverse needs of all children and young people. The Learning Leaders strategy should be provided with a ring-fenced budget, safeguarding the learning and development of the workforce from future budget cuts. The panel also welcomes the review of teacher competences by the General Teaching Council of Northern Ireland (GTCNI).

How will we know we have been successful?

- The progression and career paths available to teachers will be clear and concise, containing reference to the core competences required depending upon the career path chosen.
- The content of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes will reflect the range of content and experiences needed to work as a teacher in a range of diverse settings.
- Schools will be encouraged to work even more closely with ITE providers in the development of newly qualified teachers, furnishing them with the skills to address educational underachievement.
- The Irish Medium sector will continue to be supported to train and develop its teachers as the size of the sector expands.

Key Area 6: Driving forward Teacher Professional Learning (TPL)

Evidence Gathered	Recommendations	Actions	Led by	Timing	Short	Medium	Long-Term
6.1 Effective teaching and learning is critical to improving outcomes for children and young people and to create equal opportunities for lifelong learning for every individual.	a. In line with the Learning Leaders Strategy, all teachers should reflect routinely on their practice and identify opportunities for improvement throughout their careers.	i. DE's Learning Leaders Strategy should facilitate investment in a high-quality TPL framework across ITE, Induction and TPL for all teachers providing a continuum of opportunities to develop specialist knowledge and skills in tackling underachievement. This should be bespoke to each setting and include areas such as trauma-informed practice; ACEs; SEN; supporting children most at risk of underachievement including children looked after, traveller, Roma and newcomer children; engaging with parents and families, communities; lawfulness; restorative practice. This should include the identifying and consolidation of effective practice, leading to "next" practice, led by ETI, supported by EA and quality assured.	DE / ETI / EA	All 3	£0.5m	£0.5m	£0.5m
6.2 Relational pedagogy / ethos - the development of positive relationships between teachers and children is essential.	b. Linked to (a) above, teaching and learning supported by effective practice e.g. as outlined by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is central to addressing educational underachievement.						
6.3 More investment is needed in on-going TPL.	c. Initial Teacher Education should include more focus on addressing educational underachievement and seek to ensure all students gain relevant practical experience as part of their teaching placements.						
6.4 Initial Teacher Education courses provide limited content in respect of addressing educational underachievement.							
6.5 There is a growing shortage of subject specialists in NI Schools. This is particularly the case in Irish medium schools for what is a growing sector.	d. Irish Medium - Greater provision for Irish Medium sector at pre-school / primary / post-primary level to include more investment in additional ITE places, subject specialists and TPL provision.	ii. DE should provide additional focused support for the Irish Medium sector in the form of educational resources, Initial Teacher Education, TPL and leadership training.	DE	All 3	£0.4m	£0.4m	£0.4m
6.6 Building on the investment already in place for the Irish Medium sector, more support is needed in Initial Teacher Education (ITE), subject specialists at post-primary level, and examinations at KS4 and post-16.	e. The panel welcomes recent investment by DE / EA in "Just2Easy" learning resources which provide free access to all (primary and special) schools including IM schools in the medium of English or Irish. f. CCEA's work to develop an Irish Language Framework and production of two Irish language text books at KS4 is also welcome.	iii. ITE providers and CnaG to work together to promote teaching within the Irish Medium sector as a career path in post-primary schools.	ITE/ CnaG	All 3	£0.1m	£0.1m	£0.1m
Total			3		£1.0m	£1.0m	£1.0m

Explanatory Notes – Key Area 6: Driving forward Teacher Professional Learning (TPL)

81. It is important to recognise the central role played by education in enabling Northern Ireland to develop into a more inclusive, peaceful society with a prosperous, vibrant 21st century economy. In such a society, education must be recognised as the route out of poverty for families and communities, improving the life chances of all our children and young people.

82. Teachers play a key role in developing the minds, attitudes and dispositions of hundreds of thousands of children and young people. Being a teacher is an incredibly challenging, often undervalued but incredibly rewarding career.

83. The on-line consultation conducted by the panel in September / October 2020 revealed the extent to which effective teaching and learning and school leadership is valued and needed if educational underachievement is to be addressed. When invited to select their top 5 interventions considered to have an impact on raising educational achievement, “Effective classroom teaching” and “Effective school leadership” were among the most popular interventions chosen (“Effective classroom teaching” 4th most popular: 10.1%; “Effective school leadership” 5th most popular: 9.3%). When asked to identify what has worked to address educational underachievement, the quality of teaching featured highly again with “raising aspirations/ high expectations / extra support for underachievers…” second most popular (14.2%) and “Dedicated / Fantastic Teachers / School Leaders…” ranking 4th on 10.8%.

84. In the engagement led by Barnardo’s NI, the young people were asked to outline what they saw as the reasons behind their positive experiences of school. The most common response (46.2%) was to cite the importance of good relationships with their teachers. As one young person explained: “*My favourite teacher made an impact on me because she believed I could achieve more than I thought myself.*” Conversely, when asked to give reasons for negative school experiences, almost a quarter (22.9%) of the young people surveyed referred to poor relationships with teachers or poor teaching style, as another young person commented: “*Some teachers cannot help you at all and it feels like they don't actually care*”. The Barnardo’s NI research found that the importance of the relationship with teachers and the level of support young people receive with their learning appears in the top three reasons for both a positive and negative education experience.

85. Similar findings emerged from the engagement with the younger primary-aged children led by the National Children’s Bureau (NCB). Here the children spoke of the importance of strong relationships with teachers, and of enjoying learning when teachers made the experience fun and engaging. As one child remarked: “*Putting your hand up and asking for help helps you to learn.*” By contrast, they spoke of negative relationships as a major challenge and mentioned the

challenges of teachers who don't listen, don't have time to support them, or who are perceived to be too strict: *"If all the teachers could help you more than shout at you"*.

86. The Chief Inspector's Report 2016-18 has also identified some enduring challenges in terms of the quality of teaching and learning, including the need to *"reduce inconsistencies in the quality of learning and teaching within and between institutions, especially matching it more closely to the needs of individuals; improve outcomes for specific groups of learners; ensure that the safeguarding of children and young people is paramount; engage more closely with parents/carers as the 'first educators'; extend curricular and teaching links which ease transitions; and improve the breadth and coherence of the creative and expressive provision"*.

87. The panel also met with teachers and school leaders throughout the process of engagement, and heard consistently of the importance of ongoing professional development to meet the diverse needs of children and young people. However, many teachers and school leaders also spoke of the pressures of workload and the challenge of accessing high-quality professional development courses, whether as a result of high cost (related to school budgetary pressure), lack of time, lack of availability of relevant, high-quality courses, or inaccessibility (for those living in rural areas).

88. The panel is aware of the potential for DE's *Learning Leaders Strategy*¹¹⁷ to deliver high-quality Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) and to create greater continuity and consistency of approaches in all phases of teacher professional learning. The panel welcomes the vision of the strategy to place schools and teachers at the centre of professional learning and to provide a coherent and flexible framework that is career long and based on collaboration and effective practice. The panel supports the ultimate aim of the strategy to ensure that every child has access to a high-quality teacher every day in every classroom in Northern Ireland. However, the panel is also conscious that five years have passed since the publication of the *Learning Leaders Strategy*, and have therefore called for additional ring-fenced investment in the TPL framework in the short, medium and long-term to ensure that the potential of the strategy is realised.

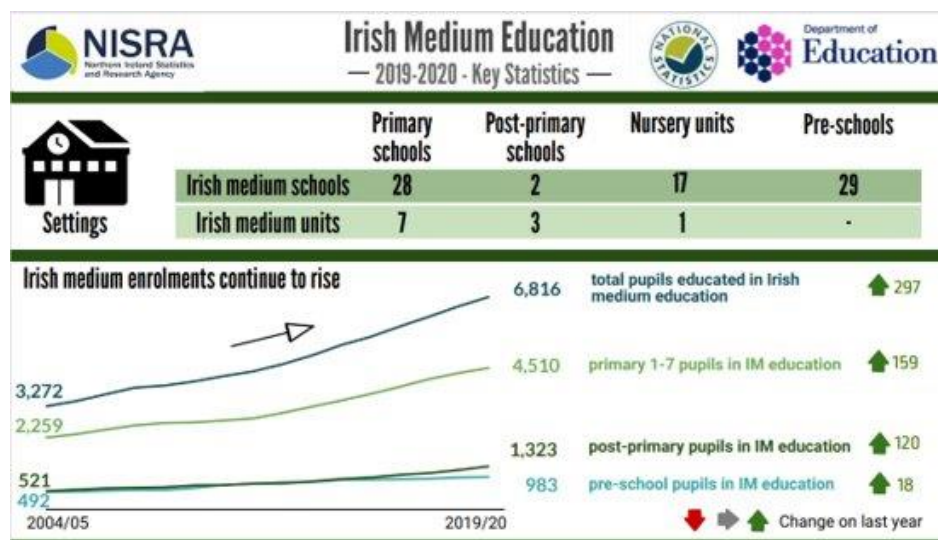
89. The panel acknowledges the diverse range of skills required by teachers and so, in line with the recommended place-based approach, has not been prescriptive in terms of which areas of TPL to focus on. However, throughout the process of engagement, the panel has heard repeated calls for teachers to be upskilled in areas such as trauma-informed practice; Adverse Childhood Experiences; Special Educational Needs; supporting children most at risk of underachievement including children looked after, traveller, Roma and newcomer children; engaging with parents and families, communities; lawfulness; and restorative practice.

¹¹⁷ DE (2016) *Learning Leaders - A Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning*. Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/strategy-document-english.pdf>

90. Concerns were voiced about the need to quality assure TPL, and so the panel has recommended that ETI collaborate with the Education Authority to identify and consolidate effective practice.

91. The panel met with representatives of Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and is cognisant of the statutory duty of the Department of Education under the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998¹¹⁸ to “encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education”. The panel acknowledges that this is a fast growing sector totalling almost 7,000 pupils across 28 primary schools, 2 post-primary schools, 17 nursery units and 29 pre-schools, as well as 11 Irish medium units. There is also clear evidence that the Irish Medium sector has a disproportionately high number of socially and educationally disadvantaged pupils: around a third of Irish Medium primary schools are located in the top 100 most deprived SOAs; Free School Meal entitlement is higher than in English Medium schools at both primary (36% vs 28%) and post-primary (46.5% vs 27%) level; and there are more children on the SEN register in Irish Medium schools (22.4%) than in English Medium schools (19.3%). As the sector grows, there is a need to ensure that high quality resources and TPL opportunities are made available for the sector, and that there is greater focus on encouraging more Irish speakers to enter Initial Teacher Education, to ensure that the needs of children at risk of underachievement within the Irish Medium sector are fully met.

Figure 4



¹¹⁸ Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 (para 89) Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1998/1759/article/89>

a fair start.



KEY AREA 7

SUPPORTING THE PROFESSIONAL
LEARNING AND WELL-BEING OF SCHOOL
LEADERSHIP

Key Area 7 - Supporting the professional learning and wellbeing of school leadership

What do we want to achieve?

There are many inspirational leaders throughout the education system in Northern Ireland with many instances of significant success in challenging circumstances. Much of this is due to individual leadership, teamwork, self-belief and self-reliance. However the pressure of leading a school, particularly at times of turbulent change or in areas of significant disadvantage can take its toll.

We recognise and welcome the role of the Education Authority in delivering support to school leaders including the provision of on-going emotional health and wellbeing support, the “Achieve” Leadership Programme and the “Coaching Service for School Principals” programme.

School governance plays a key role in the strategic direction and improvement journey of a school. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on the professionalism of governors and their ongoing training.

How will we get there?

The support which school leaders receive must be quality assured and sufficiently agile to meet the needs of the system and stakeholders they serve. The Department of Education, Education Authority, school principals and governors must work together more closely than ever to provide the level of support needed for school

“There should be increased investment in professional learning and development for school leaders including new leadership qualifications.”

leaders to carry out their role. School Principals must also be empowered to do what is needed to bring about improvement in their own schools. There should be increased investment in professional learning and development for school leaders including new leadership qualifications.

How will we know we have been successful?

- School leaders will feel better supported than ever before.

- As part of a specialised TPL framework, there will be an expert team across DE and the Education Authority, dedicated to addressing educational underachievement, available for school leaders to draw upon for support and guidance.
- The number and quality of leadership applications will improve and grow in number over time.
- The growing professionalism and training required for the job will mean increased recognition by the public as to the importance of teaching and learning.
- School leadership as a career choice and vocation will be universally recognised for the benefits it brings to our children, young people and Northern Ireland's future economic growth.

Key Area 7: Supporting the professional learning and wellbeing of school leadership

Evidence Gathered	Recommendations	Actions	Led by	Timing	Short	Medium	Long-Term
<p>7.1 Due to the significant pressure on school principals, fewer candidates are willing to put themselves forward for senior leadership posts, while serving principals highlight the growing workload with subsequent impact on their work/life balance and wellbeing. This is leading to burnout and many school principals feeling overwhelmed.</p> <p>7.2 School leaders report that there is limited preparation or on-going support for them in terms of addressing educational underachievement.</p>	<p>a. School principals and senior leaders require expert and contextual advice, support and guidance to enhance their capacity to effectively address educational underachievement.</p> <p>b. The panel welcomes the EA's Leadership Matters 'Achieve' Programme, Steps and Pathways leadership programmes, and 'Coaching Service for School Principals' and supports efforts to provide funded time allocation for all school principals who wish to coach / mentor or be coached / mentored.</p>	<p>i. As part of the Learning Leaders Strategy's commitment to building leadership capacity at all levels, DE, EA and ETI should act swiftly to develop a collaborative co-designed model with school principals to share effective practice on tackling educational underachievement, and to challenge and support school leaders to identify and effectively intervene to address underachievement, providing long term guidance and pastoral care to school leaders.</p>	DE / EA / ETI	All 3	£0.25m	£0.25m	£0.25m
<p>7.3 There is a lack of clear development pathways for teachers as they progress through their career.</p>	<p>c. There is a need for middle and senior leadership preparation and on-going support which is high quality and delivered by practitioners who have the necessary experience.</p> <p>d. DE / EA to consider revising and relaunching a professional qualification and pathway for leadership.</p>	<p>ii. Drawing on the work that is already in train which will replace the former PQH, DE / EA to develop new professional qualifications for leadership which reflect the Learning Leaders Strategy commitment to a wide range of competences that are now required at leadership level.</p>	EA	MT-LT	Nil	£0.25m	£0.25m
<p>7.4 Training for Boards of Governors needs to include how governors have an accountability function and the vital role which Boards of Governors can play in school improvement.</p>	<p>e. The panel welcomes DE's planned review of school boards of governors and the opportunities it should provide to allow more effective decision-making and better support to schools.</p>	<p>iii. Employing Authorities should work with Governing Bodies to improve the efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of the recruitment and selection of school principals.</p>	Emp Auth / Gov Bodies	All 3	Nil	Nil	Nil
Total			3		£0.25m	£0.5m	£0.5m

Explanatory Notes – Key Area 7: Supporting the Professional Learning and Well-being of School Leadership

92. The panel heard from a wide range of school teachers and leaders from across Northern Ireland and we were consistently struck by the passion they have for their job, their single-minded desire to do their best for the children and young people in their respective settings, but also the pressure they face on a daily basis, trying to balance their role as leader, educator, manager, accountant, counsellor, motivator and role model (with many serving as teaching principals).

93. Inevitably, the role of school leader brings significant pressure for many and in support of that role, school leaders need to know they will be supported by their colleagues in school, by colleagues in other schools, by DE in terms of the policies it sets and by the Education Authority in terms of how those policies are delivered to support learners of all ages.

94. The panel heard about the absence of opportunities to prepare for their role as school leaders, particularly in dealing with children and young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Without exception, no-one we spoke to had received any specific training on this issue. Rather, school principals were expected to learn as they developed in the role. Given the pressure which school leaders now face, the panel felt strongly that significant additional support is needed to help school leaders do their job without it overwhelming them. This will encourage effective leaders to stay in post as they will be supported and encouraged to lead their school. Additionally, teachers who aspire to be school leaders will know that they will be given the support they need when they undertake that key leadership role.

95. The panel also heard from principals and teaching unions of the particular challenges faced by school leaders over the past year since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, as they struggled to respond quickly to unprecedented circumstances, interpreting guidance from DE, managing staff concerns, leading professional development of their staff in the move to remote/blended learning, while also dealing with their own personal circumstances (health, caring responsibilities, home-schooling).

96. The strain on school leaders is reflected in a recent NAHT poll¹¹⁹ which found that school leaders were stressed and exhausted as a result of dealing with the impact of the pandemic. Almost half (47%) of respondents said they were likely to leave their jobs prematurely, once they had steered their schools through the Covid crisis, while more than two thirds (70%) said that they were less or much less satisfied in their role than a year earlier. However, there is evidence that,

¹¹⁹ Weale, S. (2020) 'Exodus of exhausted headteachers predicted in England after pandemic' (Guardian 18 November). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/nov/18/exodus-of-exhausted-headteachers-predicted-in-england-after-pandemic>

even before the current pandemic, school leaders were struggling with the impact of their workload. Data from Education Support's 2019 Teacher Wellbeing Index¹²⁰ highlights that 84% of senior leaders responded they were stressed, compared to 73% of teachers and 61% of people working in other roles; senior leaders work much longer hours than they are contracted to do – only 3% are contracted to work 51+ hours per week and yet 68% do so; and senior leaders were more likely to have experienced behavioural, physical and psychological symptoms, compared with teachers and staff working in other roles.

97. The panel welcomes the development of the Learning Leadership Lens, created by a working group convened by the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI), which is premised on the notion of a Continuum of Developing Professional Practice, along which teachers progress in their leadership competence at different phases of their professional career and in a range of different contexts.

98. The actions proposed by the panel reflect the Learning Leaders Strategy's commitment to build leadership capacity at all levels, and require DE, EA and ETI to develop a collaborative co-designed model with school principals to ensure the sharing of effective practice and to challenge and support school leaders to intervene effectively in their particular context. The high importance of appropriate support through pastoral care and guidance is recognised. The panel is supportive of EAs 'Achieve' Leadership Programme, Steps programme, Pathways Leadership programme and 'Coaching Service for School Principals' and supports efforts to provide funded time allocation for all school principals who wish to coach / mentor or be coached / mentored.

99. The panel heard many school leaders speak highly of the PQH qualification and training, and have recommended that DE and EA continue their work to develop high-quality professional qualifications for leadership.

¹²⁰ Education Support (2019) *Teacher Wellbeing Index 2019*. Available at <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/resources/research-reports/teacher-wellbeing-index-2019>

a fair start.



KEY AREA 8

**ENSURING INTERDEPARTMENTAL
COLLABORATION AND DELIVERY**

Key Area 8 - Ensuring Interdepartmental collaboration and delivery

What do we want to achieve?

Government departments' policies and programmes tend to be developed in silos with limited collaboration happening at initiation or design stage.

There was considerable consensus amongst stakeholders about the need for government departments, local government and voluntary and community sectors to be more joined-up in terms of how they approach issues associated with educational underachievement.

The panel's analysis of the levels of existing spend in this area illustrates how much work is happening from year to year, all of which is well intentioned and many parts of which are highly effective. However, there are opportunities for resources to be implemented more effectively than at present and in a way which involves more collaboration.

How will we get there?

All government departments must implement the Children's Services Cooperation Act (CSCA) in policy and practice. Collaboration should form part of the Government policy development cycle and be reflected in the Programme for Government (PfG), Departmental

"...there are opportunities for resources to be implemented more effectively than at present and in a way which involves more collaboration."

Business Plans and policies flowing therefrom. Achieving cross party political support and momentum is key to the outworking of this Action Plan in the short, medium and long-term.

How will we know we have been successful?

- This Action Plan should be monitored at the highest level of government involving First Minister and deputy First Minister, thereby requiring all relevant departments to report in a complete, timely and accurate manner on its outworkings.
- The prioritisation of this Action Plan will result in immediate benefits for learners.
- There should be explicit links to this Action Plan within the next Programme for Government (PfG).

Key Area 8: Ensuring Interdepartmental collaboration and delivery

Evidence Gathered	Recommendations	Actions	Led by	Timing	Short	Medium	Long-Term
8.1 Government departments' policies and programmes tend to be developed in silos with limited collaboration happening at initiation or design stage. 8.2 Consequently, there is a high likelihood that government departments will pay lip service to the Children's Services Cooperation Act (CSCA) and Children and Young People's Strategy.	<p>a. Collaboration should be explicit at macro (policy development), meso (school) and micro (pupil) level.</p> <p>b. Through their design, all cross-cutting projects should be collaborative in nature and draw budgets from a range of sectors where there are common interests at stake.</p>		All Depts	All 3	Nil	Nil	Nil
	c. This Action Plan requires an Implementation Committee chaired at Ministerial or Senior Civil Servant level.	<p>i. Delivery of this Action Plan should be subject to oversight by an Implementation Committee (chaired by First Minister / deputy First Minister) (meeting bi-annually).</p> <p>ii. This Action Plan should be explicitly referenced within the next Programme for Government (PfG)</p>	DE / TEO	All 3	Nil	Nil	Nil
			DE	All 3	Nil	Nil	Nil
Total			2		Nil	Nil	Nil

Explanatory Notes – Key Area 8: Ensuring Interdepartmental Collaboration and Delivery

100. The panel spent some time considering how it might ensure that its recommendations / actions would be taken forward following agreement with the Education Minister and Northern Ireland Executive. Part of that challenge is to ensure that an appropriate level of funding is made available to implement the Action Plan. We have endeavoured to be as realistic as possible regarding the estimated level of spend required to deliver on this wide-ranging and cross-cutting initiative.

101. The proposed actions are directly linked to three key Northern Ireland Executive policies / legislation:

- Programme for Government (PfG) (draft)¹²¹
- Children and Young People’s Cooperation Act 2015¹²²; and
- Children and Young People’s Strategy 2020-2030¹²³

102. A draft PfG consultation closed on 22 March 2021. It could be argued that in addressing educational underachievement across Northern Ireland, this Action Plan is relevant to and contributes to all of the proposed Outcomes:

- Our children and young people have the best start in life.
- We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment
- We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect.
- We all enjoy long, healthy, active lives.
- Everyone can reach their potential.
- Our economy is globally competitive, regionally balanced and carbon-neutral.
- Everyone feels safe – we all respect the law and each other.
- We have a caring society that supports people throughout their lives.
- People want to live, work and visit here.

103. The Children’s Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 places a duty on named children’s authorities to work together to improve the well-being of children and young people. Children’s authorities include all government departments, local councils, the Education Authority, Health and Social Care organisations and others. The Act also requires the Executive to publish a Children and Young People’s Strategy. This is the strategic framework through which departments will improve the well-being of our children and young people and deliver the Programme for Government Outcome(s) (as outlined above).

¹²¹ Northern Ireland Executive (2021) *Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework Consultation Document*. Available at <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/newnigov/pfg-draft-outcomes-framework-consultation.pdf>

¹²² Children’s Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2015/10/contents/enacted>

¹²³ Department of Education (2020) *Children and Young People’s Strategy 2020-2030*. Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/final-executive-children-and-young-people%27s-strategy-2020-2030.pdf>

104. The Northern Ireland Executive adopted the Children and Young People's Strategy on 10 December 2020. The Executive's Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030 supersedes the Cross-departmental Children and Young People's Strategy 2019-2029. This sets out the framework for progressing children's issues. The Strategy is designed to provide an overarching holistic structure to drive forward and monitor how departments are progressing the eight outcomes to improve the well-being of children and young people. A wide range of government policies, strategies, programmes and services more specific to different aspects of children and young people's lives underpin and work to deliver on the strategy; these are either currently in place in departments or under development.

105. The panel believes that our Action Plan forms an important part of Northern Ireland's educational and economic future and consequently, we have recommended that it should be monitored and reported at the highest level of government.

106. For that reason, the panel has recommended that delivery should be subject to oversight by an Implementation Committee chaired by First Minister / deputy First Minister and meeting bi-annually, and that the Action Plan should be explicitly referenced within the next Programme for Government (PfG).

Summary of Costs within each Key Area

No.	Key Area	No. of Actions	Short Term (1-2 years) (£m per annum)		Medium Term (3-4 years) (£m per annum)		Long Term (5+ years) (£m per annum)	
			2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27 and beyond
1	Redirecting the focus to Early Years.	13	£5.8	£5.8	£22.3	£22.3	£49.7	£49.7
2	Championing Emotional Health and Wellbeing.	1	£0.0	£0.0	£2.0	£2.0	£6.0	£6.0
3	Ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of Curriculum and Assessment.	10	£2.1	£2.1	£3.3	£3.3	£3.3	£3.3
4	Promoting a whole community approach to education ¹	7	£1.0	£11.0	£10.9	£10.9	£10.9	£10.9
5	Maximising boys' potential.	8	£0.8	£0.8	£1.2	£1.2	£1.7	£1.7
6	Driving forward Teachers Professional Learning (TPL).	3	£1.0	£1.0	£1.0	£1.0	£1.0	£1.0
7	Supporting the professional learning and wellbeing of school principals.	3	£0.3	£0.3	£0.5	£0.5	£0.5	£0.5
8	Ensuring Interdepartmental collaboration and delivery.	2	£0.0	£0.0	£0.0	£0.0	£0.0	£0.0
Total		47	£10.9	£21.0	£41.2	£41.2	£73.1	£73.1

Note 1: Work on the proposed new RED strategy is unlikely to impact in 2021/22 financial year.

Note 2: Figures may be impacted by roundings

Glossary of Terms

Abbreviation	Description
ACE	Adverse Childhood Experience
ALB	Arm's Length Body
ALC	Area Learning Communities
BST	Behaviour Support Team
CA	Classroom Assistant
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CCEA	Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment
CEIAG	Careers Education Information Advice and Guidance
CSCA	Children's Services Co-Operation Act
DE	Department of Education
DEIS	Delivering Equality in Schools
DfC	Department for Communities
DfE	Department for the Economy
DoH	Department of Health
EA	Education Authority
EEF	Education Endowment Foundation
EH and WB	Emotional Health and Well-Being
EITP	Early Intervention Transformation Programme
EOTAS	Education Other Than At School
EPPE	Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project
EPPNI	Effective Pre-School Provision in Northern Ireland Project
ESaGS	Every School a Good School
ESF	European Social Fund
ETI	Education and Training Inspectorate
FE	Further Education
FS	Foundation Stage
FSME	Free School Meals
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GRfB	Getting Ready for Baby
GRfT	Getting Ready for Toddler
GRtL	Getting Ready to Learn
GTCNI	General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland
HEI	Higher Education Institute
HOCS	Head of the Civil Service
HSCB	Health and Social Care Board
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IM	Irish Medium

IES	Intercultural Education Service
ILiAD	Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
KS	Key Stage
LAG	Local Area Groups
LT	Long Term (5+ years)
MT	Medium Term (3-4 years)
NCB	National Children's Bureau
NDPB	Non-Departmental Public Body
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
NICCY	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
NIMDM	Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PfG	Programme for Government
PHA	Public Health Authority
PQH	Professional Qualification for Headship
RAG	Regional Area Groups
Reach Programme	Provides schools with support to promote good mental health
RED	Reducing Educational Disadvantage
RISE	Regional Integrated Support for Education
RoI	Republic of Ireland
S75	Section 75 of the NI Act 1998
SBEW	Social, Behavioural, Emotional and Wellbeing needs
SCPHN	Specialist Community Public Health Nurse
SDP	School Development Plan
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SOA	Super Output Area
ST	Short Term (1-2 years)
Stratum	A broadband infrastructure project
TBA	To Be Agreed
TEO	The Executive Office
TfS	Training for Success
TPL	Teacher Professional Learning
TSN	Targeting Social Need

Expert Panel Final Report Annexes (A to G)

- A. Terms of Reference
- B. List of contributors
- C. Call for Evidence Findings
- D. Departmental and District Council Financial Expenditure Estimates
- E. Children and Young People's Views – National Children's Bureau (NCB)
- F. Children and Young People's Views – Barnardo's NI
- G. Report by Prof Feyisa Demie

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