

EVERY CHILD: DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION CORPORATE PLAN 2023-28

REPORT ON THE PUBLIC CONSULTATION

October 2023

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1. Background

The Department of Education (DE) has developed a new five-year Corporate Plan, titled *Every CHILD*, which is intended to provide the Department with a clear strategic focus in the medium-to-long term. It outlines our priorities and will help us focus our efforts on making the best difference for children and young people in the context of finite resources. This is distinct from the [Independent Review of Education](#), which is ongoing – the Department will align with any agreed recommendations from this in the future.

Every CHILD will be underpinned by annual Business Plans, which provide more detail on the specific actions the Department will undertake in order to deliver on the priorities and outcomes specified within the Corporate Plan.

The Corporate Plan public consultation proposed a new, simpler, more child-centred vision for the Department, with five new strategic priorities (*Championing, Helping, Inspiring, Learning* and *Delivering*) which, for the most part, were guided by its responsibilities under the [Programme for Government draft Outcomes Framework](#), the [Children and Young People’s Strategy](#), “[A Fair Start](#)”, and the [New Decade, New Approach](#) agreement (linkages to the COVID-19 Recovery Plan were also set out, but as it came to an end in August 2023, references have been removed from the final Corporate Plan). These new strategic priorities also took account of the feedback generated from extensive internal and external engagement to date.

Every CHILD launched for public consultation on 20 September 2022. The consultation lasted for 8 weeks and concluded on 15 November 2022.

2. Consultation methodology

2.1 Approach to consultation

To help ensure that as many stakeholders as possible would have the opportunity to respond to the consultation, a number of communication channels were used. These included the DE website, Citizen Space (a digital online platform) and downloadable documentation for email or postal submission. For those stakeholders without ready access to the internet or a computer, hard copy documents were made available on request.

The draft Plan was subject to an Equality and Human Rights Screening exercise, together with a Rural Needs Impact Assessment, prior to the public consultation. All [consultation documentation](#) was placed on the DE website and Citizen Space for stakeholders to download and/or complete online, this included;

- *Every CHILD – Department of Education’s Corporate Plan 2023-28 Consultation Document*
- *Every CHILD – Department of Education’s Corporate Plan 2023-28 Accessible Version*
- *Every CHILD – Department of Education’s Corporate Plan 2023-28 Easy Read Version*
- Consultation Questions Booklet
- Equality Screening Form
- Rural Needs Impact Assessment
- Privacy Notice – Personal Data for Consultation

NB available in hard copy upon request.

DE also commissioned the Education Authority (EA) Youth Services to engage directly with children and young people (more detail is provided in Section 5).

An online information session was held on 2 November 2022 which provided an opportunity for people to hear more about the draft Corporate Plan and what it meant

for stakeholders. The information session also provided an opportunity to raise questions about the Corporate Plan and the consultation process.

A letter was issued to key stakeholders (including staff, schools, trade unions, political representatives and voluntary and community organisations across the education sector) on 20 September 2022 to alert them to the consultation.

2.2 Response to consultation

In total, 72 stakeholder responses were received to the consultation. This total included 53 completed surveys on the online Citizen Space platform and 12 completed surveys in hard copy or via email. A further 7 stakeholders did not complete the survey but provided feedback via letter and email and these responses have been incorporated into this report.

Of the 72 responses received, 29 were from individuals and 43 were from organisations. A breakdown of stakeholders who responded to the consultation is provided in Table 1 below. The consultation responses represent a broad cross-section of stakeholders, including organisations, parents/guardians, school leaders, the voluntary and community sector, members of the public, teaching staff, trade union representatives and pupils:

Table 1 - Description of Consultation Respondent		
	No.	% ¹
Organisation	21	29.2%
Parent/Guardian	16	22.2%
School Leader	9	12.5%
Voluntary & Community Sector	8	11.1%
Other	7	9.7%
Member of the Public	4	5.6%
Teaching Staff	3	4.2%
Trade Union Representative	2	2.8%
Pupil	1	1.4%
Unknown / Not Answered	1	1.4%
TOTAL	72	

¹ Percentages do not sum to 100% due to rounding

A list of stakeholders who responded to the consultation can be found at Annex A.

In the consultation questionnaire, respondents were asked to identify their sectoral interest; this was to ensure that the feedback we received was not skewed towards a particular sector. Table 2 below demonstrates that all sectoral interests are appropriately represented, with almost a quarter (23.9%) indicating “other/general interest” (note; respondents were able to choose more than one sector hence there were 92 responses to this question):

Table 2 - Sectoral Interest		
	No.	%
Other/General Interest	22	23.9%
Controlled	20	21.7%
Maintained	16	17.4%
Voluntary Sector	15	16.3%
Integrated	12	13.0%
Irish Medium	7	7.6%
TOTAL	92	

Respondents were also asked to identify the type of education provision they were interested in; again this was in the interests of ensuring that the feedback we received was not skewed towards one particular type. Table 3 below indicates that the feedback received is suitably balanced, with most (25.0%) of respondents stating “general interest/other”, followed by post-primary (22.2%) and primary (19.4%):

Table 3 – Type of Education Provision		
	No.	%
General Interest / Other	18	25.0%
Post-Primary	16	22.2%
Primary	14	19.4%
Not Answered	14	19.4%
Specialist provision post primary	3	4.2%
Youth Service	3	4.2%
Nursery / Pre-school	2	2.8%
Special	2	2.8%
Specialist provision primary	0	0.0%
TOTAL	72	

In addition, 38 young people participated in the focus groups facilitated by EA Youth Services. Details on the participating groups can be found in the report at Annex B. The focus groups were designed by EA Youth Services to generate discussion and maximise feedback on the Corporate Plan. The face-to-face engagement proved very successful as the facilitators were able to clearly explain and elicit responses from the young people.

3. Analysis of Consultation Responses

3.1 Approach to analysis

This report presents a detailed account of the responses received and the views expressed during the public consultation on the Corporate Plan. The comments set out within the report represent the views provided by stakeholders but have not been personally attributed to any individual stakeholder.

In the consultation questionnaire document, respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the proposed (i) Vision, (ii) Strategic Priorities and (iii) Enabling Priorities. This quantitative analysis, together with a summary of the feedback on these (both positive and negative), is set out within **Section 3.2**. Respondents were also asked to highlight any missing key areas which they would like to see the Department working on – a summary of the responses are set out in **Section 3.3**.

A significant proportion of the feedback/comments received during the consultation focused on the planned action taken forward to deliver the five Strategic Priorities. A summary of the main policy themes that emerged during the consultation and our response to these is set out in **Section 4**.

An analysis of the engagement with Children and Young People, and the Department's response to their feedback/comments, is set out in **Sections 5.1 and 5.2** respectively.

As part of the consultation, the Department welcomed any comments on the Equality Screening; a summary of the feedback and the Department's response is set out in **Sections 6.1 and 6.2** respectively.

The Department has made several changes to the Corporate Plan as a result of stakeholder feedback; these amendments are set out in **Section 7**.

3.2 Stakeholder views on *Every CHILD* – Department of Education’s Corporate Plan 2023-28

In the consultation questionnaire document, respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the proposed (i) Vision, (ii) Strategic Priorities and (iii) Enabling Priorities. The results are detailed below.

a) Vision

In the consultation questionnaire document, respondents were asked “*To what extent do you agree or disagree that the new Department of Education Vision best meets the needs of children and young people?*”

“Every child and young person is happy, learning and ready to succeed”

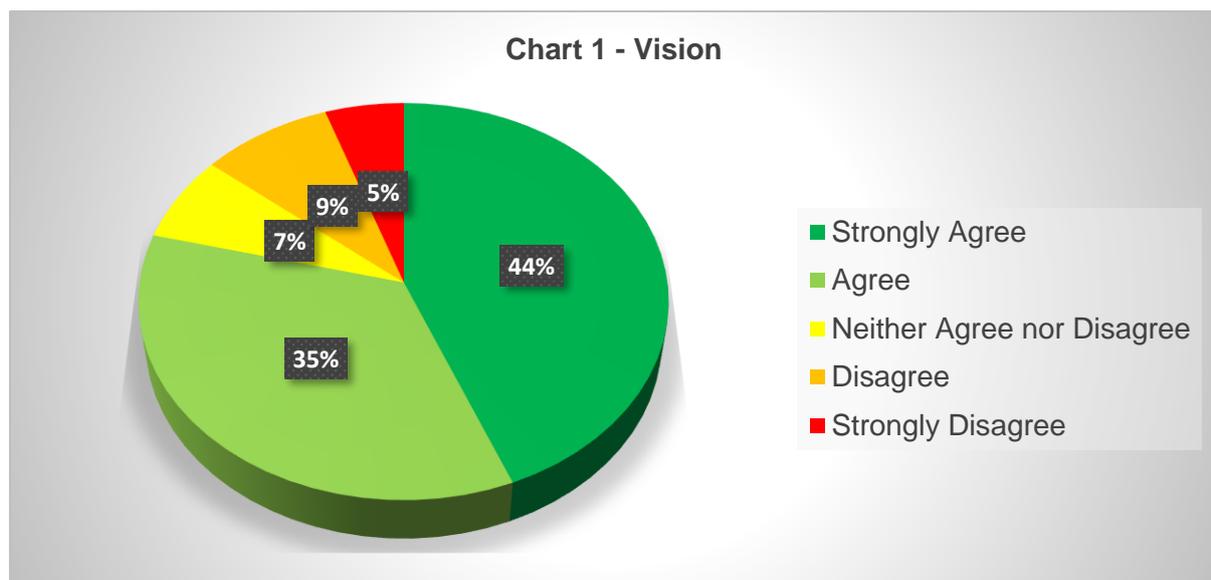


Chart 1 (above) indicates that most respondents (79%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed vision for the Corporate Plan. Only 14% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 7% neither agreed nor disagreed.

In the comments provided, many respondents welcomed the vision’s clarity, simplicity, aspirational tone and child-centred focus. Several respondents also welcomed the inclusiveness of “every child and young person” within the vision, although conversely some felt such an ambition for every child and young person was unrealistic.

There were differing views on the inclusion of “happy”. Some respondents felt it was very important that children and young people were happy, stating that without happiness, children are unable to learn. Other respondents felt that it was “not the right word”; would be difficult to measure and may mean different things to different people.

Similarly, some respondents felt that “ready to succeed” was subjective and difficult to measure; some associated the phrase with success in formal examinations (which is not the only measure of success), and that when interpreted in this way, some children and young people would feel excluded.

There was unanimous support for the inclusion of “learning” within the proposed vision.

b) Strategic Priorities

In the consultation questionnaire document, respondents were asked “*To what extent do you agree or disagree that the following Strategic Priorities meet the needs of children and young people?*”

“CHAMPIONING all our children and young people and the positive impact of education on all aspects of life”

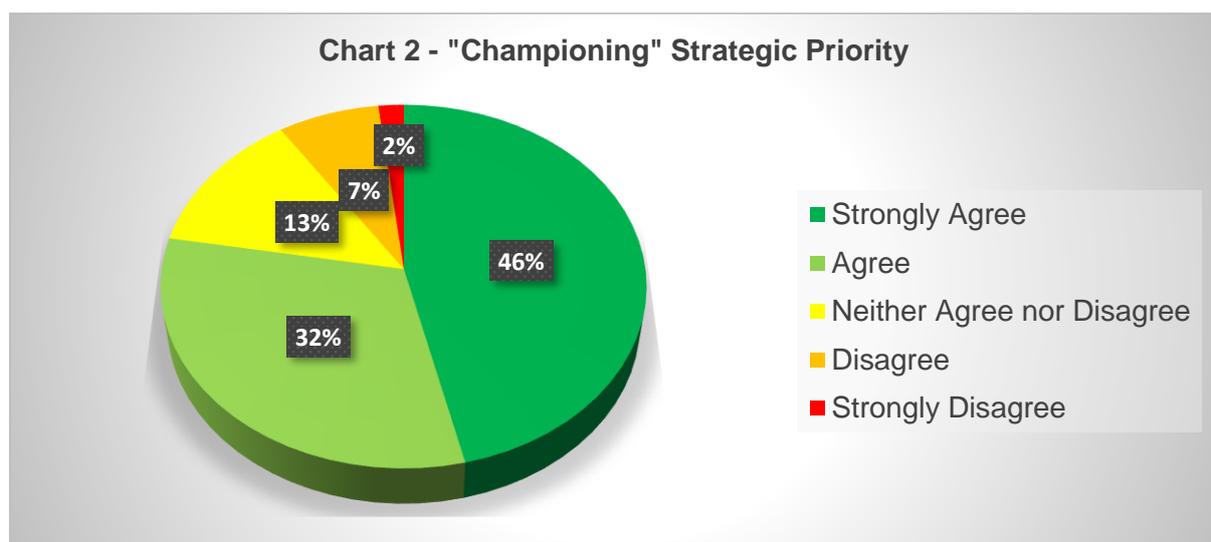


Chart 2 (above) indicates strong support for this priority, with most respondents (78%) either agreeing or strongly agreeing. Only 9.3% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 13% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Those who agreed with “championing” felt it was important to include the voice of children and young people, and that no child should be excluded from accessing high-quality education. Of those who disagreed, some felt that the Department should be more proactive in championing children and young people, and that all school types should be treated equally, rather than elevating one school type over another.

In the comments provided, some felt that the word “championing” may not be readily understood, or found it confusing. Feedback was also provided on the specific actions pertaining to this strategic priority, which is analysed further in Section 4.

“HELPING all our children and young people where they need support for their learning and well-being”

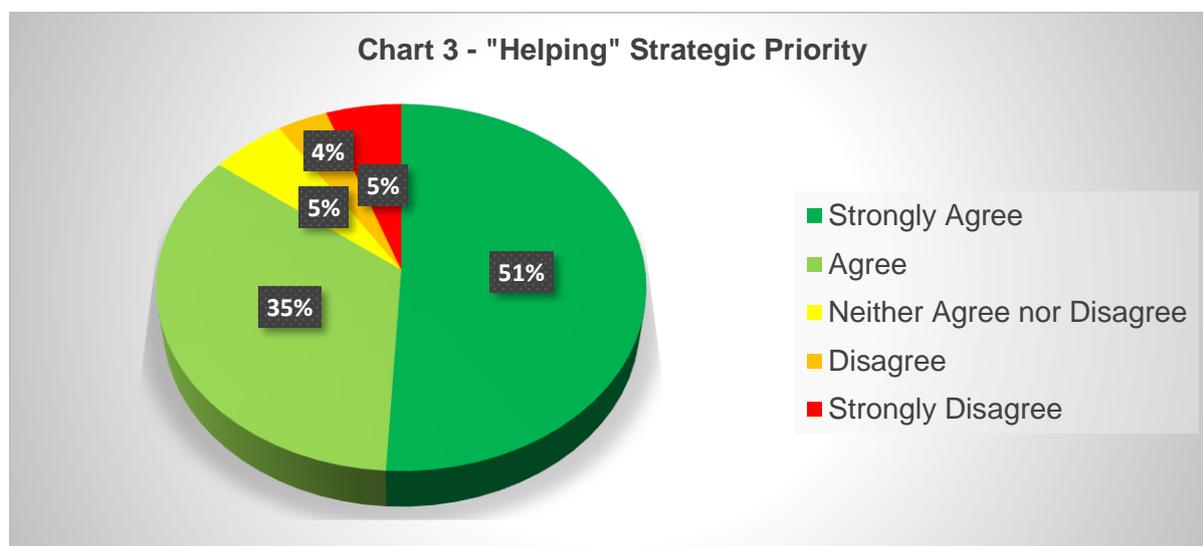


Chart 3 (above) indicates very strong support for this priority, with most respondents (86%) either agreeing or strongly agreeing. Only 9% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 5% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Those who agreed with “helping” recognised its importance, particularly in the context of COVID-19 and its impact on well-being; the growing numbers of children and young people presenting with special educational or additional needs; and the need to address persistent inequality and underachievement. Those who disagreed felt that the actions were too broad/vague or did not go far enough to address these issues, as well as a perception that the Department did not do enough currently to help all

children and young people, or the education system is inadequately supported to be able to give help and support.

In the comments provided, some respondents felt that more emphasis should be placed on supporting well-being within the strategic priority. With regard to the commitment to “support all children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate fully in education”, some respondents felt that this should not be limited solely to those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as there are many families from different backgrounds that are finding the cost of education and childcare unaffordable.

Feedback was also provided on the specific actions pertaining to this strategic priority, which is analysed further in Section 4.

“INSPIRING all our children and young people to make a positive contribution to society”

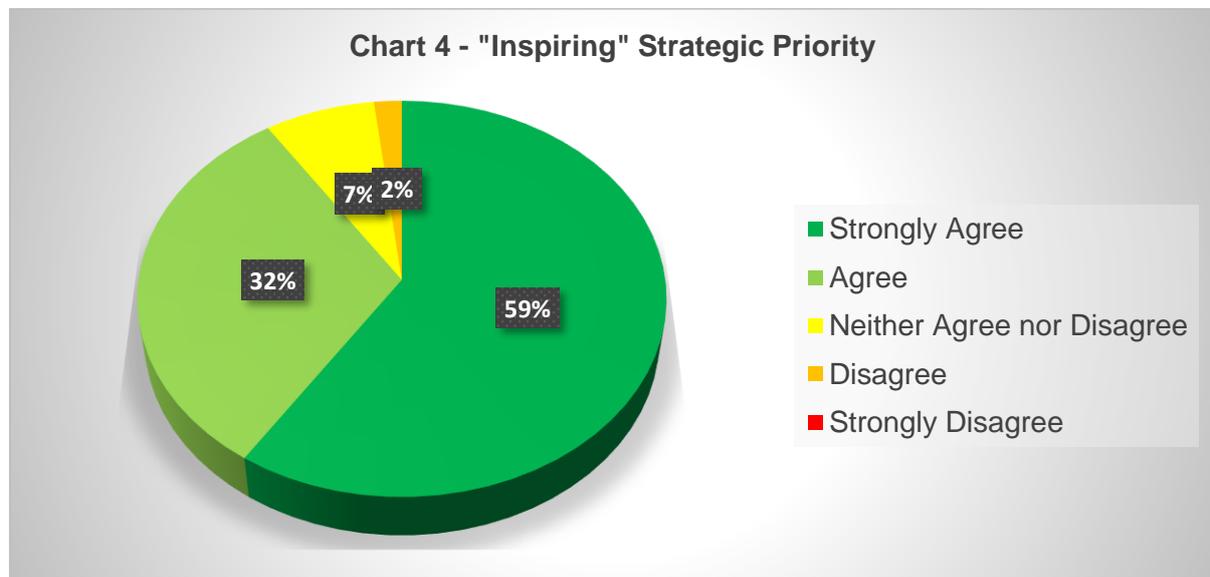


Chart 4 (above) indicates very strong support for this priority, with most respondents (91%) either agreeing or strongly agreeing. Only 2% of respondents disagreed (none strongly disagreed), and 7% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Those who agreed with “inspiring” welcomed the focus within the plan on developing more opportunities for children and young people to engage together, understand, respect and celebrate difference, particularly through shared and integrated

education; and on promoting readiness for employment and alternative pathways to learning. Those who disagreed felt that this priority was incompatible with a segregated education system, or that the Department did not do enough currently to inspire children and young people.

In the comments provided, a number of respondents highlighted the need to update the language in relation to Integrated Education and that it should feature more prominently. Some found the term “society” ambiguous, and others felt a greater emphasis was needed on inclusivity. Feedback was also provided on the specific actions pertaining to this strategic priority, which is analysed further in Section 4.

“Meeting the LEARNING needs of our children and young people and developing their knowledge and skills, enabling them to fulfil their potential”

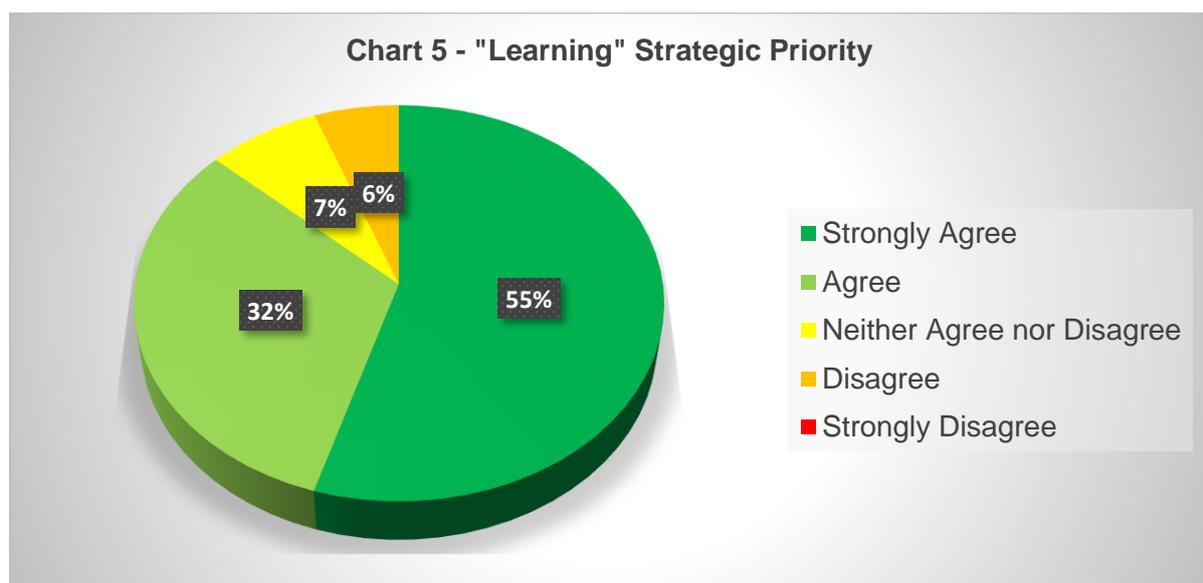


Chart 5 (above) indicates very strong support for this priority, with most respondents (87%) either agreeing or strongly agreeing. Only 6% of respondents disagreed (none strongly disagreed), and 7% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Those who agreed with “learning” welcomed the focus on the curriculum; meeting the learning needs of all children and young people, including those with Special Educational Needs (SEN); early years’ development; and reducing the impact of COVID-19 on learning. Those who disagreed felt that the current system was not

conducive to meeting learning needs, highlighting as examples current skills shortages and class sizes.

In the comments provided, some respondents queried the term “fit-for-purpose” with regard to the curriculum, whilst others queried “fulfil their potential” and what this meant in practicality. Feedback was also provided on the specific actions pertaining to this strategic priority, which is analysed further in Section 4.

“DELIVERING an effective, child-focused, collaborative, high-quality education system”

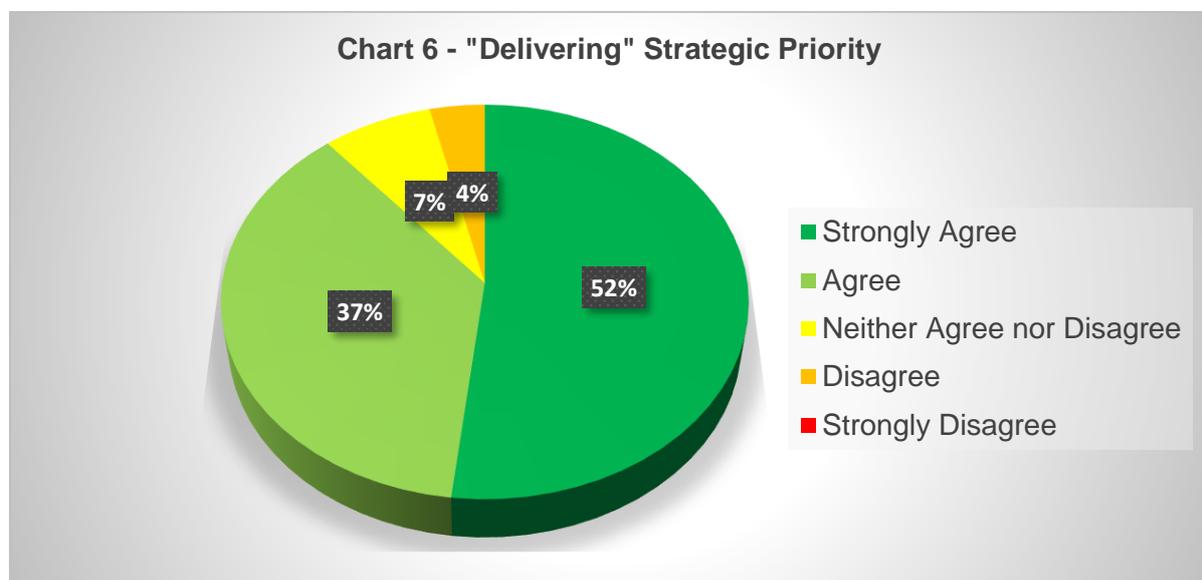


Chart 6 (above) indicates very strong support for this priority, with most respondents (89%) either agreeing or strongly agreeing. Only 4% of respondents disagreed (none strongly disagreed), and 7% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Those who agreed with “delivering” welcomed the focus on a more child-focused system; improving school sustainability; and looking after the health and well-being of staff / workforce. Those who disagreed felt that there were deficiencies within the current education system that needed to be addressed.

In the comments provided, some respondents queried what was meant by a “high-quality” education system; and some queried the use of the term “child-centred” and offered alternative wording. Feedback was also provided on the specific actions pertaining to this strategic priority, which is analysed further in Section 4.

c) Enabling Priorities

In the consultation questionnaire document, respondents were asked “*To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Enabling Priorities (**Collaborating, Optimising, Responding and Engaging**) meet the needs of children and young people?*”

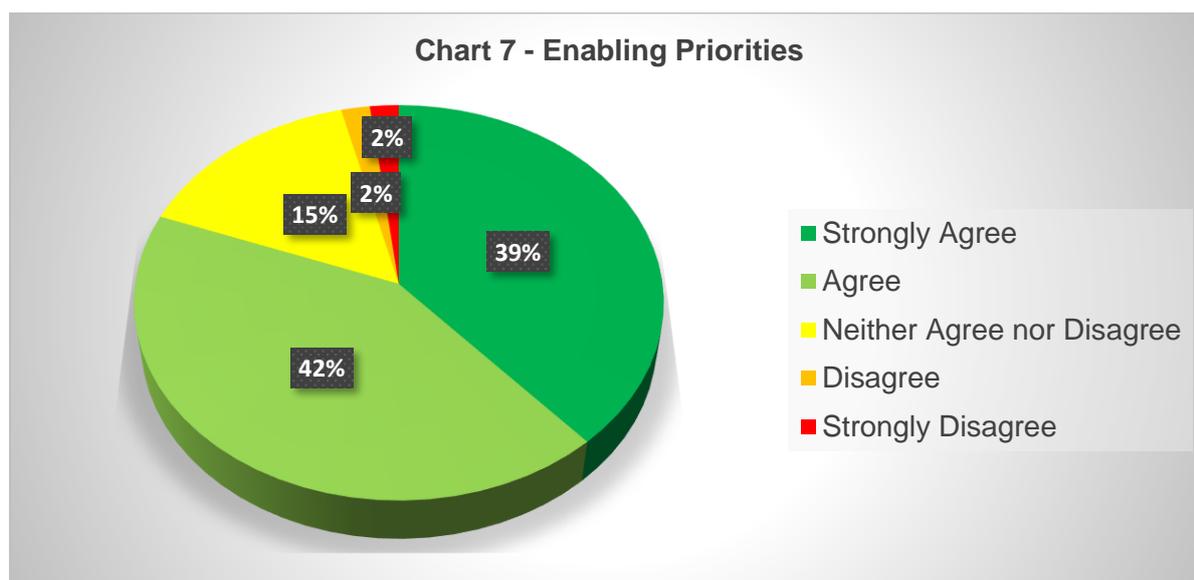


Chart 7 (above) indicates strong support for the enabling priorities, with most respondents (81%) either agreeing or strongly agreeing. Only 4% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 15% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Those who agreed with the enabling priorities welcomed the focus on greater collaboration and engagement with stakeholders across the education system to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people. Those who disagreed felt that the enabling priorities were too vague.

In the comments provided, a number of respondents sought greater clarity on what is meant by “optimising”, and more detail on how the Department would collaborate and engage.

3.3 Is there anything missing in the Corporate Plan?

In the consultation questionnaire document, respondents were asked “*Do you feel there are key areas that are missing that you would like to see the Department working on?*”. The following is a summary of what stakeholders told us:

Indicators and Performance Measures

Several respondents highlighted the absence of indicators and performance measures within the draft Plan and asked for more detail on how progress against the Corporate Plan will be measured. Some respondents asked for indicators to be developed particularly in areas where they felt a knowledge gap existed, and a push for greater data development across the education system.

Delivery of Vision/Priorities/Actions/Enablers

Several respondents felt that more information or operational detail was needed on *how* the Department will deliver upon its vision, strategic priorities and corresponding actions, and the enabling priorities; in particular, how engagement with stakeholders will happen.

Finance/Resources

Several respondents highlighted the financial context and felt that the Plan lacked discussion on the required resourcing and financial implications of delivering the stated priorities and actions.

Other key areas

Section 4 of this report provides a synopsis of policy areas that we received feedback on; this includes areas on which respondents felt the Plan lacked detail, or were not as prominent as they should be within the Plan.

Beyond this, other areas highlighted in the consultation responses included:

- A shared vision for the wider education system;
- Vision for improving outcomes for vulnerable groups, including working class Protestant boys;
- More emphasis needed on inclusivity within the Plan;
- More emphasis needed on how volunteering can meet the Strategic Priorities;
- References to specific pieces of research on the NI Education system; and
- Reference to the recently completed EA Landscape Review.

4. Emerging Themes

During this consultation, we received a number of comments on the action we plan to take to deliver the five Strategic Priorities. The Department acknowledges and appreciates all the responses and welcomes the very helpful and informative input from all stakeholders. In this section, we summarise the recurring policy themes that emerged and our response.

4.1 Engagement with children and young people

Summary of consultation responses

Respondents were encouraged that the Department intends to improve engagement with children and young people. They explained that providing young people with a greater voice and focusing on improving engagement is a positive step and that it is important that the young people involved have the opportunity to work in partnership with policy makers across departments, and that their input is valued. They felt that including children and young people in the decision-making process is consistent with co-design principles.

The intended Participation Network was welcomed. A respondent stated that it is also important to promote the establishment of forums in schools to ensure that pupil voices are heard and that they have a meaningful influence on decisions and practice at school level. One person highlighted that there is also an opportunity to further draw out the fact that the bigger impact on the educational life of a child will be contained in the decisions made in their immediate environment.

There was a desire expressed to see a more explicit focus on the critical role of the Department, on behalf of the NI Executive, in leading on the delivery of the *Children and Young People Strategy (CYPS) 2020 – 2030*. Linked closely to this, reference was made to reporting on implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which was seen as an important role for the Department, providing leadership across the NI Executive.

Department of Education response

The planned Participation Network, which is a commitment contained in the Executive's CYPS, will aim to improve engagement with children and young people across government. The network which is envisaged will provide an opportunity to address existing gaps.

The Department will continue to promote the implementation of the CYPS across all Departments with a focus on improving co-operation to deliver better outcomes for children and young people.

The CYPS is rooted in the UNCRC thereby providing a focus on children's rights issues across all Departments. The Department co-ordinated the NI Executive response on the 2023 UNCRC periodic review and has disseminated the UN Committee's 'Concluding Observations' to all Departments. It will be for incoming Ministers and the Executive to decide which recommendations they wish to address and how best to approach these, however the Department will ensure that future progress on implementation of agreed action is monitored.

4.2 Special Educational Needs

Summary of consultation responses

The responses broadly welcomed the introduction of the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Framework and the ongoing work of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Transformation Programme and recognised the additional funding provided by DE to support this work. However, concern was expressed regarding the extended timeframes for completion of some of the projects within the Transformation Programme.

Other concerns raised related to early identification and assessment, delays and inconsistencies in accessing support services, insufficient Educational Psychologists, and placements in Special Schools for children with SEN post-16.

While it was acknowledged that there have been improvements in collaborative working between Education and Health, it was considered that there was a need for better communication between health agencies, and clear guidance and information for parents.

Department of Education response

Supporting every child with Special Educational Needs (SEN) to be happy, learning and succeeding remains a key priority for the Department. DE is working closely with the EA and other stakeholders on a comprehensive transformation agenda to improve outcomes for children with SEN through the delivery of high quality, child-centred and cost-effective services. Many of the issues highlighted within the consultation have been raised in other scrutiny reports and reviews.

DE, in collaboration with EA, is embarking on an End-to-End Review of SEN. This will be an overarching piece that brings together the work being taken forward under the EA SEND Transformation Programme and other existing strands of work to address gaps and explore alternative delivery options to deliver systemic transformational change to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND in a timelier and cost-effective manner. The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Act (NI) 2016 received Royal Assent on 23 March 2016, and the Department wants to see the SEND Act fully commenced as soon as possible.

Implementation of the Act will introduce a range of new powers, duties and rights designed to strengthen support for children with SEN and ensure closer cooperation between health and education. The Department's intention remains to bring forward formal implementation of the SEND Act 2016 at the earliest available opportunity once an Assembly has been established.

The Department recognises the challenges that children and young people and their parents and carers face in the statutory assessment process. Not only will the End-to-End Review focus on the Education Psychology Service, but it will also consider the wider pupil support model and how access to educational interventions including classroom assistance could be more efficient and effective, supporting better outcomes for young people who have or may have special educational needs.

The Department is also working closely with stakeholders to consider the transition process for children with statements leaving education.

The Department supports an inclusive approach to education. Our policy intention is that the needs of all pupils who may experience learning difficulties or are vulnerable to exclusion should be addressed, that their needs are identified as early possible and that appropriate provision should be made. The Department is therefore committed to promoting inclusive practice in education settings.

The increase in the number of children with statements of SEN and their complexity of need in recent years presents an opportunity to adopt a more inclusive approach to meeting their learning needs. The creation of specialist provisions, including for children with severe learning difficulties, has delivered many benefits to whole school communities in recent years including bringing equity and consistency of provision to those whose statement recommends a specialist setting and facilitating the mainstream integration of pupils for longer periods of time in line with their development and ability. The Department will continue to work closely with the EA and other stakeholders to ensure there is sufficient, appropriate high-quality provision to meet the needs of all children with SEN.

4.3 [Additional Educational Support](#)

Summary of consultation responses

One respondent sought greater involvement in secondments, research and the sharing of knowledge and good practice with statutory colleagues in mainstream education and wider Education Other than at School (EOTAS) provision. Another felt that there may be an opportunity to include more of a focus on working on creating and developing alternative learning environments to support young people. A concern was expressed that teachers often don't connect that a difficult home life can impact on school life and take a punitive approach to behaviour rather than asking what is happening for that child and how can they help.

Respondents requested further targeted support for newcomer, Traveller and Roma children, including Asylum Seekers & Refugees (ASR) and those arriving from Ukraine.

Department of Education response

The Education and Training Inspectorate has completed a review of EOTAS provision, and the EA is developing an Action Plan in response to recommendations. The Department notes the request for future stakeholder engagement. In relation to secondments under Article 86 of the Education (NI) Order 1998 it is the statutory duty on the EA to make arrangements for the provision of EOTAS. The Department has produced guidance entitled "Pastoral Care in Schools: Promoting Positive Behaviour" which sets out how a school should develop a positive behaviour policy using a whole school approach and be in consultation with pupils and parents. The Department is working with the EA to develop a behaviour plan to assist schools in connection with the education of children with behavioural difficulties. The Department may consider reviewing behaviour policy in the future.

The Department is reviewing its Supporting Newcomer Pupils policy with a view to publishing proposals for change and a revised policy. A review of the Traveller in Education framework is due to commence in 2023. The Department, in conjunction with The Executive Office, provided emergency funding in the 2022/23 financial year for educational provision for ASR children resident in contingency accommodation. The Department, in conjunction with the Home Office, also provided additional funding to schools to support those children arriving here from Ukraine.

4.4 [Pupil support and emotional health & well-being](#)

Summary of consultation responses

The Department's commitment to promoting the emotional health and well-being of children and young people was welcomed as recognising the importance of early intervention to address the mental health needs of young people, particularly given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The positive impact of the Engage and Healthy Happy Minds initiatives was noted and emphasis on the need for early support for children at pre-school and primary level raised. The importance of the availability of necessary resources and training to deliver these key initiatives was emphasised. It was also suggested that *Every CHILD* could include a commitment relating to the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and embedding trauma informed approaches across Northern Ireland's schools. It was asked that consideration be

given to increasing opportunities for dialogue with a wider range of representatives within the voluntary and community sector and whether there were plans to include an accountability mechanism within this Framework.

There was some concern, particularly at post-primary level, that teachers didn't have time to assist with mental health interventions and support was inconsistent across schools. It was felt that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/questioning (LGBT+) young people needed more support and should not feel judged in order to improve their mental health. A primary age pupil felt there was someone to talk to if they were worried.

The commitment to deliver actions in "A Life Deserved – Caring for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland" and provide tailored support to ensure effective participation in education of every child looked after was welcomed.

Department of Education response

The Department recognises the importance of addressing the emotional health and wellbeing of children and providing early intervention strategies. The importance of the impact of the many issues and concerns faced by pupils was recognised in policy development. Projects and training provided by the EA include Trauma Informed Practice and other supports to address these needs.

The Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education (EHWB) Framework is overseen by a Programme Board and a monitoring and evaluation plan has been developed. Engagement with the community and voluntary sectors is being taken forward in conjunction with the Department of Health under the Mental Health Strategy.

In relation to Children Looked After specifically, a children's champion has been appointed in the EA's Children Looked After service to assist in progressing this area.

4.5 Educational Disadvantage

Summary of consultation responses

Comments received included reference to the need for access to high quality education for all children and young people. There was also a request for more investment in Breakfast Clubs to avoid children going to school hungry and struggling to participate. The Engage Programme and Happy Healthy Minds programmes were welcomed; flexibility of decision making for schools was encouraged; a desire was expressed that Neighbourhood Renewal boundaries be redrawn; consultation should take place with relevant bodies on policies such as the Reducing Educational Disadvantage Programme; alternatives to the use of Free School Meals as criteria to access programmes should be reviewed; the COVID-19 pandemic also shed light on the requirement for the delivery of equitable access to services and curriculum choices across Northern Ireland including both rural and disadvantaged communities.

Department of Education response

The Department recognises the importance of funding for programmes such as Extended Schools which includes the provision of Breakfast Clubs amongst a plethora of other interventions in c500 eligible schools.

Work is ongoing by the Ulster University under the report “A Fair Start” to review alternative measures to Free School Meals, with a report due by end of Summer 2023. Work is continuing on the development of the Reducing Educational Disadvantage Programme which should provide the opportunity for discussion with all relevant stakeholders across Northern Ireland including rural / urban, disadvantaged / non-disadvantaged areas.

4.6 Integrated and Irish Medium education

Summary of consultation responses

In relation to Irish-medium education, one respondent stated that “A Fair Start” should be referenced in *Every CHILD*, having regard to the high proportion of socially disadvantaged pupils in Irish-medium schools, as should more detail on what is meant by delivering the statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-

medium education. Reference was made to a lack of SEN assessment tools and specialist provision, also to a lack of online resources and apps, and that this should be addressed. A respondent considered that a capital fund for Irish-medium schools should be established, citing Area Planning and accommodation issues in the context of the statutory duty on the Department. A respondent considered that the Irish-medium primary curricular support factor in the Common Funding Formula should be raised to the same level as the post-primary curriculum support factor. There was a request that Shared Education and youth services for Irish-medium education also be addressed in the Corporate Plan and that recommendations from reports considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Irish-medium pupils be actioned.

Comments in relation to integrated education ranged from those concerned that the Integrated Education Act (NI) 2022 would take funding away from pupils in other school sectors – this included parents – to a respondent who considered that the Act did not go as far as they would have liked, akin to the Bill as originally introduced in the Assembly; this was also in the context of that respondent not supporting a Christian ethos in schools. References were made to surveys and to a belief that integrated schools would provide the solution to a single education system. Alternatively, a respondent supported a diverse, pluralist approach with a focus on addressing educational underachievement and considered that integrated schools were not the solution to a single education system. Support was expressed for choice, diversity and consideration of the role of rural schools. One parent and one organisation commented that the Corporate Plan did not explicitly reference the Act or the associated integrated education strategy.

Department of Education response

The detail of what will be delivered in the context of the Department's statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education is firmly rooted in the "Fair Start" recommendations. This detail sits in the 2023/24 Departmental Business Plan which will support the high-level statements of the Corporate Plan. However, the Corporate Plan has been amended to include a standalone Irish-medium education action, which explicitly references progressing the relevant recommendations of "A Fair Start". Furthermore, the Department is committed to

working with partners and stakeholders regarding assessment tools and SEN specialist provision.

References to the Integrated Education statutory duty include all statutory requirements relating to Integrated Education, however the Corporate Plan has been amended to provide a specific action which explicitly references implementing the Integrated Education Act (NI) 2022.

4.7 Shared education

Summary of consultation responses

The majority of comments received recognised the benefits of Shared Education and welcomed the Mainstreaming Shared Education Strategy.

The focus on encouraging cohesion and Shared Education was welcomed as a positive step to ensuring that this and future generations are better equipped to value inclusion, diversity and the globalised economy. It was noted that sharing across the education system could better provide learners with understanding and experience of the value and range of diverse cultures, identities and backgrounds in Northern Ireland. It is vital that proper and sustainable funding is in place for mainstreaming shared education. The Department was encouraged to make efforts to ensure that any Early Years services' development embodies inclusive and shared education opportunities as well as across primary and post-primary settings. One comment noted that there was evidence to suggest that Shared Education programmes are not as effective at promoting social mixing as fully integrated schools, and another comment advised that the Irish-medium sector's well-documented struggles to fully avail of the benefits of Shared Education programmes should be considered in the Corporate Plan and in actions identified.

The Mainstreaming Shared Education Strategy and the former Minister's endorsement of the Strategy was seen as an important opportunity to establish Shared Education as a core feature of educational provision, address the barriers to participation, including Irish medium education, and communicate the important contribution that Shared Education makes to educating our children together,

practitioner professional development, raising standards and supporting societal cohesion.

Department of Education response

The Department agrees that pre-school settings are a key part of Shared Education and has developed a funding model for pre-schools settings to be piloted. The Department and the EA have engaged with the Irish Medium sector in regard to participation and a number of Irish Medium schools are currently involved in Shared Education, while other schools have attended the EA's Steps into Sharing workshops for non-participating schools. A cross-organisational communication group has been established to encourage, facilitate and promote Shared Education. A Shared Education Stakeholder Forum has also been established to strengthen connections within and between education, sectoral, other government departments and external organisations, leading to coordinated operational support for schools and other educational settings involved in Shared Education.

In relation to Shared Education and Integrated Education, Shared Education very much includes integrated schools. Whilst some communities are ready to embrace integrated education, others are identifying alternative shared education models that better suit their local circumstances. There is no one size fits all solution. The Department encourages integrated schools to share their knowledge, experience and good practice with others through Shared Education. The Department has a statutory duty to encourage, facilitate and promote Shared Education and to encourage, facilitate and support the development of Integrated Education. Both have key roles in contributing to the development of a more tolerant and shared society here. The DE Mainstreamed Shared Education budget of £2m for the 2023/24 financial year was confirmed in May 2023. The PEACE PLUS Programme will provide opportunities to further develop Shared Education and allow more children and young people to access its benefits.

With regard to the Shared Education Campus (SEC) Programme, – the Department is leading on a headline action emanating from the “Together Building United Communities Strategy” (T:BUC). There are currently two post primary projects (Limavady SEC and Ballycastle SEC) and one primary project (Brookeborough SEC)

as well as the Strule Shared Education Campus, comprising of six schools in Omagh. The Department is embarking on an outcomes based evaluation of the Limavady SEC (being the first SE Campus in NI) to understand the progress and outcomes of the Campus arrangement.

4.8 Careers and Post-16

Summary of consultation responses

Consultation comments were received in relation to a range of issues. There was a call for greater coordination with the Department for the Economy (DfE) in relation to 14-19 provision and vocational courses. There was a desire expressed to align careers advice and guidance to children, young people (and adults), to the opportunities and skills that are required by the local, national and international job market and include alternative pathways to employment. A review was requested into sixth form settings with regards to sustainability and breadth of curriculum offer.

Department of Education response

The 14-19 Framework: 'Developing a More Strategic Approach to 14-19 Education and Training - A Framework to transform 14-19 Education and Training Provision' and the "Fair Start" report on educational under-achievement in Northern Ireland, include recommendations related to sixth form policy and careers.

The strategic actions in the 14-19 Framework include a review of sixth form policy and a review of the model of Careers Education delivery and careers guidance in schools, examining how best to enhance and support careers education. Work in this area will also take into account the recommendations emerging from DfE's independent review of careers.

Implementing these actions will address many of the issues raised in response to the consultation. DE is currently engaged in work to develop an overarching Sixth Form Policy. The careers system in NI is the responsibility of both DE and DfE. DE has responsibility for the policy and delivery of careers education in schools while DfE has statutory responsibility for the policy and delivery of an all-age careers guidance

service delivered by suitably qualified careers advisers. The two departments will work in partnership to address the careers education and guidance needs of young people.

4.9 Curriculum Policy and Support

Summary of consultation responses

The Department was asked to broaden the focus of the curriculum beyond academic ability, with greater emphasis on vocational qualifications and practical life skills. There was also a request to carry out the policy review and strategy development for school improvement in full collaboration with the EA and to consider the ways in which the NI curriculum can have greater alignment with the United Nations Convention and the Rights of the Child.

A respondent asked to widen the number of perspectives in religious education, making Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) guidance compulsory for all schools. Another asked to encourage all schools to increase the provision of physical education for all pupils. There was a request to introduce an NI-wide approach to the teaching of modern languages, in line with that of GB. Another asked to introduce a requirement for every child in primary school to be offered free musical instrument lessons. One request related to providing support and training to teachers for the teaching of sensitive and controversial issues.

Department of Education response

The NI Curriculum is designed to be adaptable and dynamic. It devolves autonomy to schools and trusts the professionalism of teachers. This allows the space for innovative approaches to learning. The overarching aim of the curriculum is to empower young people to develop their potential and make informed decisions through their lives placing equal emphasis on knowledge, understanding and skills so while pupils are acquiring knowledge and skills, they also have opportunities to apply their learning practically.

To ensure that the Curriculum continues to meet the needs of all learners, the Department has commissioned CCEA to take forward the 'Curriculum Delivery

Refresh', following the recommendations from the "Fair Start" Report, considering narrowing of the curriculum at Key Stages 1, and 2, and assessment driving practice at Key Stage 4; this will include revisiting the design principles of the Northern Ireland Curriculum and a review of foundation stage play.

The Department commissioned CCEA to develop an RSE Progression Framework with curricular content, and teaching and learning resources to support the delivery of RSE [including sensitive and controversial issues]; this was published in April 2023 and will be kept under review and updated annually in a responsive way. The Department is also bringing forward revised guidance to support the delivery of RSE.

The Department is considering its response to the Education and Training Inspectorate's thematic evaluation of physical activity in primary schools and has established a task and finish group to support and progress this work. Tackling the decline in update of modern languages at Key Stage 4 and post-16 through a renewed focus on its Languages Strategy for Northern Ireland is a priority area of focus for the Department. The Department is also progressing work on a number of other curriculum priority areas including digital skills, green growth and climate change.

4.10 Examinations and Assessment

Summary of consultation responses

The consultation responses focussed on concerns in relation to examination and assessment, numeracy and literacy qualifications, making choices at key decision points and post-16 pathways. In particular, there was concern about the range of qualifications (including vocational qualifications) and their relevance to preparing young people for the world of work, the method of assessment, the need to assess "soft skills" valued by employers, the "comparable outcomes approach to awarding", and the impact of the current exam system on the implementation of the curriculum.

Department of Education response

The Department has committed to a range of qualifications reform actions across the 14-19 Framework: 'Developing a More Strategic Approach to 14-19 Education and Training - A Framework to transform 14-19 Education and Training Provision' and the

“Fair Start” report on educational under-achievement in NI which include recommendations to establish a review of qualifications, and to capitalise on the opportunities presented by COVID-19 to fundamentally consider assessment at Key Stage 4. The actions encompass consideration of the number and type of qualifications available to be taught in NI schools, the structure and content of the qualifications and the technical methodology for awarding those qualifications.

In particular, the specific action in the 14-19 Framework states that a review of general qualifications should give consideration to the mode of assessment used, the value of qualifications, the impact of qualifications on skills development, parity of qualifications, and whether the current literacy and numeracy qualifications meet the needs of all learners and enable progression.

To address the issues raised during the consultation, the Department has included an action in *Every CHILD* which aims to ensure that the suite of qualifications supports the delivery of the curriculum, the development of knowledge and economically relevant skills, and facilitates progression to further/higher education, training and employment.

4.11 Early Years

Summary of consultation responses

Consultation responses emphasised how support from pre-birth is critical for children’s social and emotional development, enabling them to fulfil their educational potential. Responses welcomed the collaborative approach to developing and delivering Early Years services outlined within the draft Corporate Plan.

Responses focussed on the need to consider how services are targeted to disadvantaged children, expansion of the Pre-School programme and review of the admissions process, and the promotion of play-based learning. Respondents also highlighted the need for investment in the Early Years workforce and consideration of the qualification level requirements of Early Years staff and in the physical early learning and childcare infrastructure.

Department of Education response

The importance of the early years to a child's development is recognised in "A Fair Start", and the Department, in collaboration with the Department of Health and their respective delivery bodies, is committed to implementing the wide range of early years actions. An ongoing, independent review of the Department's targeted Early Years interventions includes consideration of how services can be most effectively targeted to provide optimum support for disadvantaged children.

Work is underway to increase the number of Pre-School hours for all children in Northern Ireland to 22.5 hours per week and the standardisation of a range of other characteristics of the service in the context of an Executive 'Early Learning and Childcare Strategy', the development of which the Department is leading on. The timeline for publication and implementation of the Strategy requires Executive agreement and approval on significant policy decisions, including agreement on the overall budget required.

The importance of play in children's development and wellbeing is promoted within the cross-departmental 'Children and Young People's Strategy', which is being led by the Department.

4.12 Area Planning

Summary of consultation responses

There were calls for improved agility and responsiveness in the area planning process and for schools to act for the good of all, not just those within their own sectors (a specific reference was made to addressing the needs of the Irish Medium sector). One respondent referred specifically to a need to deal with unviable schools and, more particularly, unsustainable sixth forms. There was reference to making use of reliable baseline data to underpin sustainability assessments. Another respondent asked about the process for the placement of children with statements of SEN and stressed the need for appropriate investment in the schools' estate and effective cross-Departmental collaboration. Another sought sustainable funding for mainstreaming shared education and shared campuses.

There was a call for close alignment between the EA and the Department in the planning and delivery of pre-school and primary school provision. With more stringent regulation of schools admissions criteria applied.

Department of Education response

The Department welcomes the call for improved agility in the area planning process. It has scoped and delivered a number of “agility projects” and continues to examine options for others. Options for sustainable education provision in rural areas are being examined, but such work will require provision of resource that is not currently approved given current budget constraints. Nonetheless the Department, through the Area Planning Steering Group (APSG) continues to explore options in this space. Boards of Governors’ checklist and Future Schools Toolkit have the potential to contribute to such work and can also provide useful content alongside detailed analysis of the levels of unsustainability published by the Department in its “Sustainability Baseline Report”.

It is a matter for the planning authorities, in collaboration with sectoral body representatives to plan education provision. A comprehensive review and/or reform of area planning, including any changes to Sustainable Schools Policy, will be dependent on the outcome of the Independent Review of Education, the End-to-End review of School Improvement and any subsequent appropriate consultation.

Setting admissions criteria is a matter for an individual school’s Board of Governors. The Department does not currently play a role in setting criteria other than providing guidance.

In relation to community asset transfer, the Sustainable Schools Policy recognises the importance of the strong links with the community as a driver for educationally and financially sustainable education provision.

In relation to the placement of children with Special Educational Needs, the Department worked in close collaboration with EA in the production of the SEN Area Planning Frameworks and the first Special Education Strategic Area Plan.

Development proposal guidance has recently been updated to remove the need for a Development Proposal for Specialist Provision in Mainstream (SPiM) which allows for a more flexible and agile approach to meeting the needs of children who require such provision.

4.13 Education Estate

Summary of consultation responses

Respondents raised the need for substantial investment across the school estate, including capital funding for the Irish Medium sector, controlled schools, modernisation of youth facilities, and to support physical early learning and childcare infrastructure. There was a request for funding arrangements to be transparent, fair and allow for forward planning, considering the needs of individual localities as well as individual schools.

Respondents considered that schools need help to implement green energy solutions such as wind turbines and solar panels to support sustainability and encouraged the Department to specifically consider adaptation of the school estate to invest in more green space. Respondents asked that the Department consider including actions to implement the Green and Blue Infrastructure Plan for Belfast, and actions to encourage more active travel initiatives.

Department of Education response

The schools' estate consists of 1,121 schools educating over 325,000 children and young people across Northern Ireland. As indicated by respondents, this ageing and dispersed estate is in urgent need of significant additional investment. Some of the key issues faced include large numbers of old buildings which are no longer fit for purpose, a 15-year backlog in planned maintenance across the schools estate and Insufficient school places to meet the needs of increasing numbers of children with complex Special Education Needs. There is also a need to implement comprehensive measures to combat climate change as raised by respondents.

The Department wishes to invest in a large-scale school building programme to modernize our schools' estate and provide fit-for-purpose education facilities that

support delivery of the Northern Ireland curriculum. Currently, this is not possible within the current and projected levels of capital funding available to the education sector.

The Department plans to articulate the compelling case for additional capital investment in the ageing education estate through publication of a Capital Investment Strategy. We will prioritise available investment to ensure schools remain open and safe for all pupils, provide better access to education for pupils with Special Educational Needs; and enhance facilities and ICT infrastructure to support delivery of the Northern Ireland curriculum and improve pupil outcomes. The Department will refocus our approach on a greater number of smaller, high impact projects so as many children and staff as possible benefit from capital investment. This represents an equitable approach to the funding pressures we face - designed to benefit all our pupils.

4.14 Education Workforce

Summary of consultation responses

In relation to teachers' pay and workloads, a Trade Union representative sought a commitment that teachers and school leaders are 'properly recognised for the job that they do' and that teachers' pay keeps at least in line with inflation.

A number of respondents welcomed the introduction of the Fair Employment (School Teachers) Act 2022, which will come into effect in May 2024, as it will prevent schools from discriminating on the basis of religion when recruiting teaching staff. One respondent noted their disappointment that the Act does not address the requirement for teachers in Catholic primary schools to hold the Certificate in Religious Education.

Some respondents commented on the importance of the role of Classroom Assistants and the need for them to be remunerated properly. Other comments related to the need for more Classroom Assistants in schools to support children, reducing the amount of short-term contracts and introducing a career progression structure within the role. There was a request for the Department to resource a Pay & Grading Review

(for non-teaching staff). Comments also included need for an increase in wages for teaching/classroom assistants as well as the need for job security and job progression.

In relation to teacher and school leader workloads, a Trade Union Representative highlighted the need for protection for school leaders from the growing entitlement culture, a reduction in unnecessary bureaucracy for all teachers and school leaders, with an impact assessment being carried out before new initiatives are introduced, and timely, targeted and coordinated communication from the Department, the EA and other bodies to allow schools to plan properly and to ensure that they are not overwhelmed with information.

Department of Education response

In relation to pay, the Department acknowledges the challenges affecting all employees within the education sector, particularly due to the ongoing increases in the cost of living. However, teachers' pay awards are negotiated locally in Northern Ireland through the Teachers' Negotiating Committee (TNC) which includes employer and sectoral body representation as well as DE and the five main teachers' unions. The management of the TNC is not within the remit of the Department. Pay awards must be affordable and comply with NI Public Sector Pay Policy. Notwithstanding the ongoing budget challenges this presents, the Department and wider Management Side is engaging with the trade unions to seek a resolution to the ongoing industrial action which is impacting on staff and pupils.

On the issue of teacher and school leader workloads, the Department has provided funding of up to £1m to enable a dedicated team to coordinate the progression of the nine reviews committed to as part of the Teachers' Pay and Workload Agreement 2017-19, ratified by the TNC in April 2020. The reviews aim to address teachers' concerns around workload and accountability and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the education system. One review is specifically considering workload impact on school leaders, another has updated the 2011 Workload Agreement, one has examined workloads associated with SEN provision and another is reflecting on accountability issues which may create unnecessary bureaucracy. All workload and accountability related reviews were completed by March 2023 and 8 joint working group reports have been submitted to TNC for consideration.

Management Side is committed to ensuring that new initiatives, including programmes and policies, have been assessed, in conjunction with teacher representatives, to identify the workload impact for teachers and school leaders prior to implementation. The Department, Employing Authorities and other arm's length bodies will seek to co-ordinate planning and introduction of new initiatives in terms of the impact on other existing initiatives, the workforce and the system.

The Department welcomes the introduction of the Fair Employment (School Teachers) Act 2022 and preparations are underway within the education sector for the implementation of the Act in May 2024. The requirement for the Certificate in Religious Education (the Certificate) is an employer's decision. It is the current recruitment policy of some employers, namely the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), and some Grant Maintained Integrated schools, that teachers seeking employment at nursery or primary level must hold the Certificate. A teacher does not have to be of a particular religion, or any, to hold the Certificate. The Certificate is offered by St Mary's University College, Belfast, to its students as an optional part of their degree course and is open to all students irrespective of their background or faith. It is neither a requirement for entry to St Mary's University College nor a mandatory part of the degree course. Students can also complete this course at Stranmillis University College, Belfast, or by online distance learning.

The vital role of Classroom Assistants in supporting children and young people across our education sector is very much recognised and appreciated. The majority of Classroom Assistants in Northern Ireland are employed by the EA on nationally agreed terms and conditions, and the Department is therefore not involved in pay negotiations. A pay offer was agreed nationally in November 2022, which will see increases in relation to salary, allowances and annual leave for Classroom Assistants. The increase in Classroom Assistant pay was between 8.5% and 10.25%, depending on the specific pay point of the individual.

In relation to the current contractual position and lack of career progression for Classroom Assistants, the EA is carrying out a review on the pay and grading structure

for non-teaching staff and the terms and conditions of Classroom Assistants will be considered as part of this review.

The Education budget is under significant pressure, so any proposed changes to pay structures and contractual terms and conditions will need to be considered in the context of value for money and affordability. Likewise, any increase in Classroom Assistant numbers will need to be targeted to the areas in most need.

4.15 Teacher Education

Summary of consultation responses

Responses welcomed the commitments in this area to implement the Learning Leaders Strategy and to provide health & wellbeing initiatives for school staff. The commitment and professionalism of the school workforce was highlighted but this was set against the daily workload pressures school staff face. One respondent considered that the professionalism and enhancement of teachers was not sufficiently addressed within the draft Corporate Plan. The importance of quality professional learning for all school staff was fully recognised with reference made to the Independent Review of Education's interim report, which stated that it is 'a pre-requisite for educational improvement.'

Suggestions for new professional learning areas included sensitivity training, reflecting the more inclusive cultural shift of today's young people; a focus on empathy and care rather than compliance; the NI Troubles which can be a sensitive, contested and controversial issue; the impact of trauma on children and young people and Operation Encompass (also cited as an area for Initial Teacher Education). Enhanced roles for both the EA's School and Leadership Development Service and the Education & Training Inspectorate in relation to developing and enhancing the teaching profession were proposed. Concerns were raised regarding a lack of support for professional staff development and reduced opportunities for leadership programmes.

A trade union respondent supported the replacement of the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) to support and enhance the teaching profession and that a single body drawing together access to the Teacher Professional Learning and

leadership opportunities available to teachers would also be positive. However, they explicitly opposed a replacement for GTCNI fulfilling both these roles. They supported all recommendations of the GTCNI Review for the make-up of a future Management Board for a GTCNI replacement body and suggested how these could be achieved without compromising the degree of representation from the profession on such a Board.

Department of Education response

The Department welcomes the comments in relation to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and teacher professional development, in particular to the Learning Leaders Strategy. Teacher professional learning (TPL) continues to be a high priority and we welcome in particular the additional suggestions by respondents for TPL. The Department continues to work with ITE providers / Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the EA to ensure that new areas are included within programmes with Operation Encompass and the impact of trauma on children & young people among recent examples. To this end, a new Policy Engagement Working Group with the HEIs has been established to provide policy makers in DE with direct access to the HEIs and also to give the HEIs an opportunity to influence policy at the outset.

The Department is considering what, if anything, should replace GTCNI. It is however of the opinion that the quality of our teaching workforce should be recognised and would be enhanced by a strong and active body able to support developments in Education policy impacting on the wider teaching profession. Finding an optimal future model for such a body remains a key outcome for our Corporate Plan.

4.16 Other emerging themes

In response to the consultation there was a wide range of other individual comments provided, most notably under the following headings:

- Education Funding
- Childcare
- School Improvement

- Youth Work
- Inspection
- Intra & Cross Departmental Working
- Research and Data Development
- School Meals and Uniforms
- School Transport
- Climate Change
- Community Use of Schools.

All comments received during the consultation were circulated to relevant Directorates and Teams across the Department for consideration and all will help to inform and shape future decisions.

5. Engagement with Children and Young People

As a child-centred Plan, we recognised the importance of proactively engaging with children and young people as part of the consultation process. In recognition of this, the Department developed an ‘easy-read’ version of the Plan, and commissioned EA Youth Services to engage directly with children and young people.

This engagement took the form of three focus groups (two post-primary school age and one primary school age) between 10 and 22 November 2022. The purpose of these focus groups were to:

- a. Determine visibility and understanding of the purpose of DE and its Corporate Plan;
- b. Obtain consensus as to whether children and young people agree with the draft vision;
- c. Explore children and young people’s current experiences in schools and youth service provision regarding happiness, learning and readiness for success (the three themes within the vision);
- d. Obtain consensus as to whether children and young people agree with the draft five Strategic Priorities; and
- e. Explore what young people think is the most important aspect of each priority.

A total of 38 children and young people, from a range of age groups, geographical and educational settings, took part. The full report is produced in Annex B.

5.1 What children and young people told us

The purpose of this section is to summarise what children and young people told us about *Every CHILD*. It should be noted that this engagement focused primarily on the proposed Vision and the five Strategic Priorities, as these are centred on the desired outcomes for children and young people. Consequently, the focus groups did not explicitly seek views on the Enabling Priorities (Collaborating, Optimising, Responding and Engaging).

a) Vision

The general consensus from the focus groups was that children and young people agreed with the proposed vision as an aspiration. The three themes (happy, learning, ready for success) were broadly understood and clearly resonated with them, although it was evident that they had differing experiences of all three. For instance, primary school children were more likely to experience happiness than post-primary school children.

As part of the discussion on the Department's vision, a number of important topics and needs emerged:

- i. More extracurricular activities, and a need to resume educational visits and residential experiences, which have been curtailed due to COVID-19
- ii. Improved Relationship and Sexuality Education
- iii. Modernised school facilities
- iv. Better mental health support and school counselling services
- v. Better support for LGBT+ children and young people
- vi. Widening curriculum in order to better understand other religious faiths/cultures, as well as current world affairs, climate change, and managing finances
- vii. Tackling bullying
- viii. Wider subject choice at post-primary education
- ix. Alternative assessment methods (i.e. other than examinations)
- x. Having more of a say in their education (rather than parents/teachers deciding on their behalf); and
- xi. Preference for smaller class sizes to enhance learning experience

b) Strategic Priorities

Each of the focus groups were asked about the five Strategic Priorities (Championing, Helping, Inspiring, Learning and Delivering); what it meant to them, whether they agreed with them, and what they felt were the most important aspects.

Championing – this proved to be the least well understood of the five strategic priorities, with some uncertainty as to what this meant. Some interpreted this as putting children and young people at the centre of attention, which was undesirable. Children and young people wanted to be involved in decision making which affected them.

Helping – this was universally agreed by the three focus groups as a priority, with a number of children and young people highlighting that better help and support was needed. Children and young people wanted to see better mental health and support for building resilience, and more emphasis on anti-bullying strategies.

Inspiring – this was generally agreed as a positive aspiration to be prioritised but was interpreted differently by each focus group. Children and young people wanted to hear more from inspiring role models, and acceptance for who they wanted to be (rather than what the school wanted them to be).

Learning – this was universally agreed by the three focus groups as a priority. Children and young people wanted to see better support in class and more adaptive learning and teaching practices to suit their needs.

Delivering – this was viewed less important than the other strategic priorities; for children and young people, the most important aspect of this priority was training teachers to understand and empathise with them.

5.2 Department's response

The Department would like to thank all the children and young people who took part in the focus groups, which has given us an invaluable insight into the issues which affect them, and the importance they place on what we do.

We are encouraged that children and young people engaged positively with the proposed vision and, broadly speaking, the strategic priorities. It is encouraging that children and young people particularly welcomed “Helping”, “Inspiring” and “Learning” as priorities. However, we also recognise that some of the language needs to be

improved, particularly what is meant by “Championing” – as a result of this, we have revised the wording of the five strategic priorities (see Section 7).

We acknowledge that children and young people do not see “Delivering” as important a priority to them; we must ensure that those who deliver educational services to them (e.g. teachers, school staff, youth providers) are given the support they need in order to deliver on the priorities which matter to children and young people.

We recognise the variety of issues highlighted in this report, and the desire to see improvements in the learning and support children and young people receive. The majority of issues resonate and have been highlighted to us by the wider public consultation, and our response to these is set out in Section 4.

However, one important topic that did not emerge in the public consultation, but which children and young people highlighted to us, was a greater emphasis on anti-bullying strategies. As a result of this feedback, we have amended the Corporate Plan to include a specific reference to anti-bullying (see Section 7).

6. Corporate Plan Equality Screening

The consultation documentation referred to the Equality screening undertaken on the draft proposals for the *'Every CHILD: Department of Education's Corporate Plan 2023-28'*, indicating that there were no adverse impacts and that as part of the consultation we welcomed any comments on the Equality Screening.

6.1 Analysis of consultation responses

In the consultation questionnaire document, respondents were asked *"Do you agree with the outcome of the Equality Screening and/or are there any considerations that should be reflected in future documents?"*

Of the 28 responses received to this question, 20 of the respondents told us they agreed. Of the other comments received some of these related to the processes for Equality Screenings or their use in general, rather than the specific outcome of the screening on the draft Corporate Plan.

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) disagreed with the Department's Screening assessment on the draft Corporate Plan:

- The ECNI stated that given the criteria set out in the Department's equality scheme for undertaking an equality impact assessment (EQIA), that a key focus of the corporate plan relates to addressing disadvantage and under-attainment, and that DE are already consulting on the draft Corporate Plan, the Commission would have anticipated an EQIA being undertaken.
- They also stated that they viewed not carrying out an EQIA as a missed opportunity as it would enable the Department to examine more thoroughly inequalities experienced by Section 75 groups (including multiple identity issues) and how they relate to disadvantage and under-attainment. In addition, the findings of an EQIA would in turn, help inform the development of policies emanating from the Corporate Plan.

- The ECNI also made a number of points in relation to the use of data within the Screening and the omission of a section on 'Mitigations' within the screening form.

6.2 Department of Education's response

DE is fully committed to its Section 75 statutory duties and in adhering to our Equality Scheme with regard to revising and developing education policies; assessing any equality and good relations impacts, any adverse impacts and seeking opportunities to better promote equality of opportunity and good relations, alongside subsequent monitoring for any adverse impacts of policies adopted.

Every CHILD is a framework to set out the strategic priorities for education - in the medium to longer term, and as published this sets out the 'high level' objectives in terms of *Championing, Helping, Inspiring, Learning* and *Delivering*.

The entire plan has as its centre the concept of '*Every CHILD*', and in turn there is clearly a focus on 'inclusivity' for all children and young people, that will include those identified as falling under one or more of the Section 75 categories.

As detailed in the Department's Equality screening of the [Children & Young People's Strategy](#), one of its key outcomes that it seeks to achieve is that children and young people live in a society in which equality of opportunity is promoted. The Strategy sets the direction of travel for policy makers, programme developers and service providers to achieve improvements across all Section 75 equality categories where appropriate.

It is therefore anticipated that the impact of the Corporate Plan (realised through subsequent policies/programmes etc) will be positive. However, policies being developed or revised in light of this strategic framework will be subject to their own Equality Screenings.

The Department has revised the Equality Screening in light of the feedback received during the consultation and an updated version, including a section on 'Mitigations', will be published on the DE website.

7. Summary of Department's response to the public consultation

Taking on board the feedback received during the course of this public consultation – from the responses to the consultation questionnaire (sections 3 and 4) and the views of children and young people we engaged with (section 5), the Department has made amendments to *Every CHILD*, the key elements of which are summarised below:

7.1 Vision, Strategic Priorities and Enabling Priorities

The following amendments have been made to the Vision, Strategic Priorities and Enabling Priorities:

- Vision has been amended from ***“Every child and young person is happy, learning and ready to succeed”*** to ***“Every child and young person is happy, learning and succeeding”***.
- “Championing” Strategic Priority has been amended from ***“CHAMPIONING all our children and young people and the positive impact of education on all aspects of life”*** to ***“CHAMPIONING the needs and aspirations of all our children and young people and the positive impact of education.”***
- “Helping” Strategic Priority has been amended from ***“HELPING all our children and young people where they need support for their learning and well-being”*** to ***“HELPING all our children and young people by supporting their well-being and learning”***.
- “Delivering” Strategic Priority has been amended from ***“DELIVERING an effective, child-focused, collaborative, high-quality education system”*** to ***“DELIVERING an effective, child-first, collaborative and high-quality education system”***.
- “Responding” Enabling Priority has been amended from ***“Addressing the long-term impacts of the pandemic and other emerging challenges and needs faced by our children and young people and the education***

workforce” to “Anticipating and planning to proactively address the emerging challenges and needs faced by our children and young people and the education workforce”.

There have also been a number of minor amendments to wording or phrasing throughout the Corporate Plan, to aid understanding or provide greater clarification of what we wish to achieve.

7.2 Revisions to / additional supporting actions

Following the feedback received during the course of this public consultation, the supporting actions for each strategic priority were reviewed, resulting in the following main changes:

Championing

- An action to publish a 10-year Capital Investment Strategy was added; and
- An action was amended to include reference to implementation of the Children and Young People’s Strategy.

Helping

- An SEN and inclusion action was separated, and the resulting two actions were strengthened (the new action on inclusion was placed under the ‘Inspiring’ heading below);
- An action regarding the development of an Executive Childcare Strategy was moved to the ‘Learning’ heading below;
- An action referencing implementation of the ‘Children and Young People’s Emotional Health & Wellbeing in Education Framework’ was changed to make a more general reference to promoting the emotional health and well-being of children and young people;
- An action to support the needs of children with social, behavioural, emotional and well-being needs including through the Nurture in Education Programme was added;

- An action to meet child protection and safeguarding requirements was added; and
- An action relating to the Extended Schools Programme was amended to highlight more collaborative and effective working with others in order for children and young people to develop and progress.

Inspiring

- An action to set out a vision and roadmap for an inclusive education system was added (as referred to under the 'Helping' heading above);
- A joint Integrated education and Irish Medium education action was separated and the resulting two actions strengthened;
- An action to address bullying in schools was added;
- An action relating to lifelong learning and alternative pathways to learning was removed;
- An action to contribute to the implementation of government strategies including on racial equality, refugee integration and social inclusion was added;
- An action relating to Newcomer pupils was expanded to include Traveller children; and
- A 14-19 education and training action was strengthened.

Learning

- An action to work with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment to provide qualifications that support the delivery of the curriculum, the development of knowledge and economically relevant skills, and facilitate progression to further/higher education, training and employment was added;
- An action regarding developing new arrangements for Key Stage assessment was amended to specify that it relates to Key Stage 1–3;
- An action to support children and young people with SEN to access the curriculum was strengthened;
- An action to review Early Years programmes which target support to children and families facing disadvantage and to collaborate with Health practitioners was expanded to include all children;

- An action to promote learning through play was amended to remove reference to provision of a further resource and capital programme to support outdoor learning.
- An action regarding the development of an ‘Executive Childcare Strategy’ was moved from the ‘Helping’ heading above and amended to ‘Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy’;
- An action relating to implementation of the ‘Reducing Educational Disadvantage’ programme was expanded to reference the development of whole community participative approaches to education;
- An action referencing undertaking a system level assessment of learners to ascertain the impact of COVID-19 on educational attainment was amended to monitoring the impact of COVID-19 and identifying areas for improvement; and
- An action referencing expanding and accelerating the delivery of digital devices to learners was amended to completing the roll-out of digital devices to learners as far as existing stock permits, alongside supporting the use of assistive technology.

Delivering

- Reference in a sub-heading to delivering an “efficient education system” was expanded to an “efficient and sustainable education system”;
- An action on investing in our education estate was amended to prioritising available capital investment to ensure schools remain open and safe for all pupils; providing better access to education for pupils with SEN; and enhancing facilities and ICT infrastructure to support delivery of the curriculum and improve pupil outcomes;
- An action on undertaking Children’s Rights Impact Assessment training was added;
- Reference in an action to agreeing a communications strategy to reduce administrative burden for our schools and ALBs was amended to providing better signposting of support services; and
- Reference in an action to replacing the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland was amended to legislating to create a professional body to support the teaching profession in Northern Ireland.

7.3 Indicators and performance measures

During the consultation, several of our stakeholders asked how we will measure success; the Department has undertaken a significant amount of work to identify and develop a suite of indicators for each Strategic Priority, which will sit alongside the Corporate Plan in the form of a ‘dashboard’ published on the DE website. These indicators will act as an overarching gauge of the progress we are making towards achieving our priorities and realising the ambition of our vision.

With regard to performance measures (how much did we do; how well did we do it; is anyone better off?), these will be reflected within the annual Business Plans which support delivery of the Corporate Plan. The annual Business Plan will also provide more detail on the actions we will take to deliver on our priorities.

7.4 Delivery of our Plan

During the consultation, several of our stakeholders asked for more detail on how we will deliver on *Every CHILD*. As above, more detail will be set out in annual Business Plans. In addition, our enabling priorities have a clear focus on collaboration and engagement with stakeholders as an intrinsic part of delivering on our Corporate Plan; *Every CHILD* contains specific actions on engaging with, and co-designing our policies with children and young people and working across government, to ensure the interests of children and young people and the education sector are at the fore.

We have added two sections to *Every CHILD*: “Our People” sets out how we will support our Departmental staff to give them the resources and skills needed to deliver the actions set out within the Plan and “Our Partners” sets out who we will collaborate with in the delivery of *Every CHILD*.

7.5 Financial Context

During the consultation, several of our stakeholders highlighted the prevailing financial/budgetary environment and asked how *Every CHILD* will be delivered in this context; we have added a section acknowledging this challenge (particularly in light of

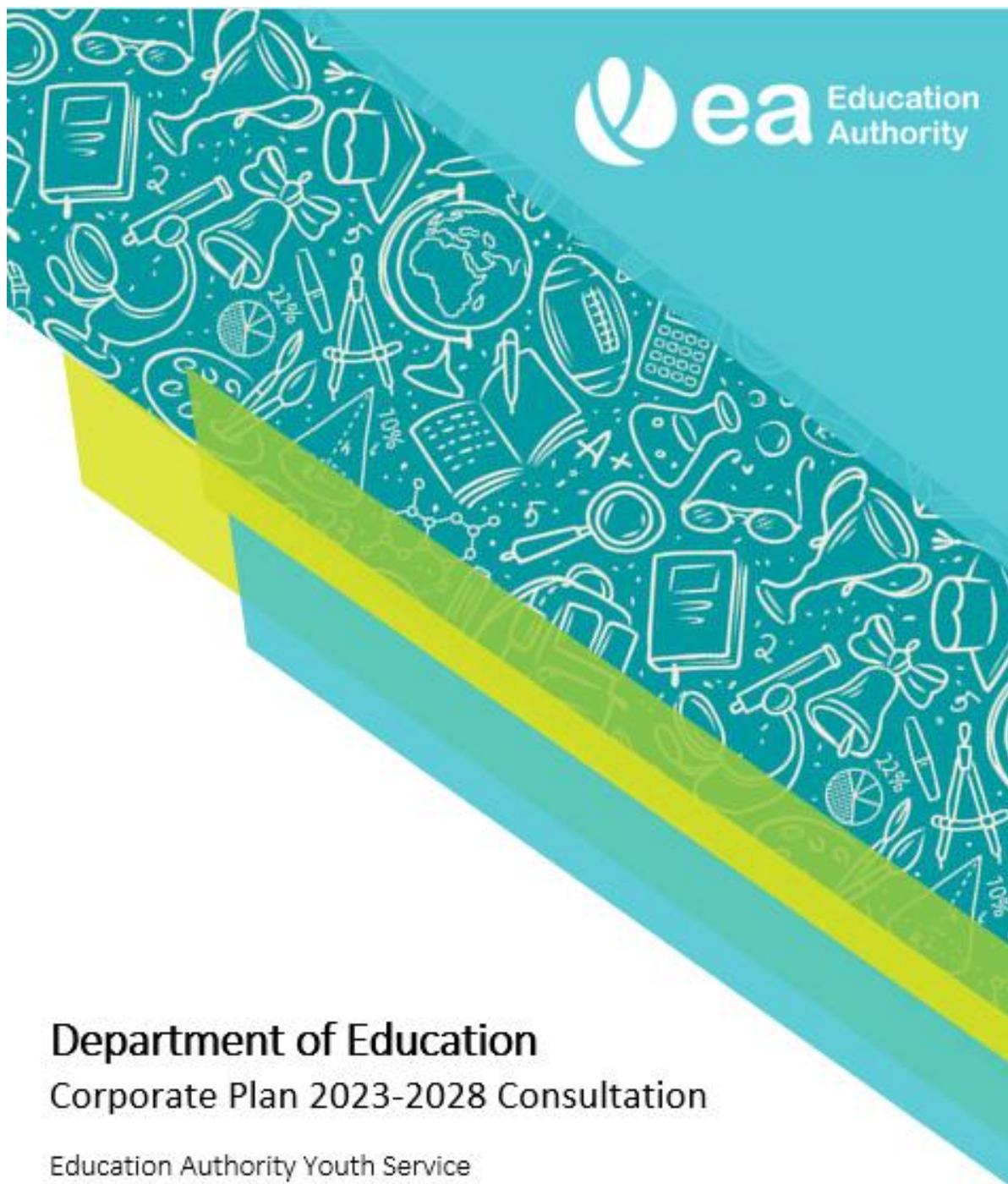
the 2023/24 budget) and how we aim to deliver on this Plan using the resources that we have – “Our Funding”.

ANNEX A – List of Respondents

DE would like to thank the following individuals and organisations who responded to the consultation and particularly the children and young people who attended events with EA Youth Services or participated in other ways to share their feedback:

- ASCL Northern Ireland
 - Action for Children Northern Ireland
 - Belfast City Council
 - Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS)
 - Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta
 - Commission for Victims and Survivors
 - Controlled Schools' Support Council
 - Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)
 - Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)
 - Donemana Primary School
 - Education Authority
 - Employers for Childcare
 - Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
 - Extern – Newtownabbey, County Antrim
 - Gaelscoil Phádraig Naofa
 - Governing Bodies Association (GBA)
 - Holy Trinity Youth Centre
 - Integrated Education Fund
 - Limavady High School
 - Mental Health Champion
 - Mid Ulster District Council
 - Middletown Centre for Autism
 - NI Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO)
 - Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)
 - Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)
 - Northern Ireland Humanists
 - Northern Ireland Sports Forum (NISF)
 - Parentkind
 - PlayBoard
 - Priory Integrated College
 - PwC
 - Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (PCPCH)
 - TAMHI
 - UNISON
 - Young Enterprise NI
-
- Twenty-seven responses marked as Confidential
 - Twenty-nine responses from individuals
 - Thirty-eight young people engaged directly with EA Youth Services

ANNEX B – EA Youth Services Report: Engagement with Children and Young People



Department of Education Corporate Plan 2023-2028 Consultation

Education Authority Youth Service
November 2022

Department of Education Corporate Plan 2023-2028 Consultation with Young People

Report on a Consultation with Children and Young People on a
Department of Education's Corporate Plan 2023-2028

Consultation and Report provided by the Education Authority Participation Team

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Introduction

This report contains the findings of a consultation exercise with young people with a view to contributing to the development of the Department of Education's (DE) 2023-2028 Corporate Plan.

The Corporate Plan will set their strategic focus over the next five years and, working in partnership with stakeholders, it will help them make a difference and improve outcomes for children and young people.

In developing this Plan, they engaged with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders to get their views on how they could best improve these outcomes. In addition to this, they also considered the wide range of commitments the Department has across strategies such as the Programme for Government draft Outcomes Framework, the Consolidated Covid-19 Recovery Plan, the Children and Young People Strategy, A Fair Start and The New Decade, New Approach.

This work has helped them develop a draft vision, supported by five Strategic Priorities which set out what they will aim to do.

Draft Vision:

The proposed vision is one which aims to have an outward focus on children and young people, seek to develop skills – academic and otherwise – and also provide broader support for wellbeing and as a foundation for life.

“Every child and young person is happy, learning and ready to succeed”

Draft Strategic Priorities and Enablers:

- CHAMPIONING all our children and young people and the positive impact of education on all aspects of life.
- HELPING all our children and young people where they need support for their learning and well-being.
- INSPIRING all our children and young people to make a positive contribution to society.
- Meeting the LEARNING needs of our children and young people and developing their knowledge and skills, enabling them to fulfil their potential.
- DELIVERING an effective, child-focused, collaborative, high-quality education system.

The voice of children and young people in decision making is critical to designing and building of services leading to their continued success in meeting their needs. Evidence has shown that when young people are part of the process, the services provided are more effective and valued by all.

When young people are engaged by decision makers, at all levels, it generates policies and programmes that are informed by young people and therefore will have greater credibility

amongst them. There are clear, identifiable benefits to organisations where the participation of young people is meaningful, enabling them to meet their statutory requirements:

- Enhance the quality of policy development
- Improve decision making
- Improve services, in particular for children and young people
- Change attitudes of public organisations
- Increase the relevance of the organisation or policy to children and young people
- Ensure that the needs of young people are met in the way they have identified and suggested.

To ensure that Department for Education receive feedback from a variety of children and young people, they requested that Education Authority Youth Service (EAYS) facilitate a consultation to gauge the level of agreement with the vision and strategic priorities set out in the draft plan.

Methodology

The purpose of this consultation is to gain an insight of the views of children and young people in the context of the draft corporate plan.

Aims & Objectives of Consultation:

1. Determine visibility and understanding of the purpose of Department of Education and their corporate plan.
2. Obtain consensus if young people agree with the overall vision.
3. Explore young people’s current experiences in school and youth service regarding happiness, learning and readiness for success.
4. Obtain consensus if young people agree with the five strategic priorities.
5. Explore what young people think is the most important aspect of each priority.

A total of 38 young people, from a range of age groups, geographical and educational settings, took part across three consultation sessions in November 2022. The process was facilitated by the EAYS Participation Team to generate discussion and feedback.

Participating groups are detailed below:

Reference	Location	Schools represented	Age range	Count of participating children and young people	Notes
Focus Group 1 (FG 1)	Parkhall Youth Club, Parkhall Integrated College, Steeple Road, Antrim,	Parkhall Integrated College, Crumlin Integrated College, St Benedict’s College, Belfast	13-18 years	20	Mixture of male, female, and non-binary attendees in addition to young people diagnosed with neurodivergent conditions.

		Royal Academy, Northern Regional College			
Focus Group 2 (FG 2)	Doyle Youth Club, Mountpottinger Road, Belfast	St Malachys Primary School, St Matthews Primary School	9-11 years	7	Mixture of male and female attendees from local Short Strand area of East Belfast.
Focus Group 3 (FG 3)	Kilkeel High School, Knockchree Avenue, Kilkeel	Kilkeel High School	16-17 years	11	Mixture of male and female attendees in Year 13 who are part of a peer mentoring programme for younger students.

Report of Findings

Determine visibility and understanding of the purpose of Department of Education (DE) and the corporate plan.

EAYS Participation team introduced themselves as Youth Workers from EA and explained they had been asked to engage in a discussion with young people by the Department of Education. The groups were asked about the knowledge of DE, several of the young people recognised its role in “*running and organising schools and youth clubs.*” Some of the young people made the connection between Department of Education and Education Authority however, were unsure of the distinction between the two.

The Participation team clarified the role of DE and explained that DE is developing a new corporate plan. Young people were prompted as to its purpose and understood it as “a business plan” and in its most basic terms, outlines DE’s intentions for what they want to do in schools and youth settings and how they were going to make this happen.

Obtain consensus if young people agree with the overall vision.

“We want every child and young person in Northern Ireland to be happy, learning and ready for success.”

The Participation team explained the DE vision and asked the groups to keep this in mind during discussions and consider if DE were providing on the commitments that it was making towards children and young people. The groups then engaged in a ‘walking debate’ activity where they were asked to indicate agreement or disagreement and pass comments as they related to a number of statements.

The general consensus is that children and young people agree with this vision and are grateful that the Department of Education are aspiring to it. They feel there has been varying success with the implementation of this vision in their past and current experiences, and this is heavily dependent on the school type and governance, relationship with teachers and their relationships with peers.

Explore young people's current experiences in school and youth service regarding happiness, learning and readiness for success.

Happiness

Primary school young people felt positive about school; specifically getting to see their friends, playing sports and liking their teachers. Post-primary young people generally held a low to middling opinion on their overall happiness in the school setting. Over half of the post-primary young people consulted rated their happiness in school as extremely low between 0-1 out of 10.

Curriculum Enhancements

Young people showed an approximate 50/50 approval at the prospect of more extracurricular activities, more variety in sports offered and activities like drama as some of the young people didn't have it available as a subject choice. All three focus groups agreed that more creative clubs were desirable; alongside the value placed on sports.

FG 1 expressed frustration with poor relationships and sexuality education including gender and LGBT+ issues, which has had negative consequences regarding mental health and bullying. They also reflected that this is vital knowledge for life outside school and readiness for independent living.

Educational visits and residential experiences were a common factor attributing to happiness in school and most felt that this hasn't recommenced after COVID-19 at the level it would have been previously.

FG 2 noted breakfast club as one of the main highlights of their school and a notable amount of their feedback was food motivated. This group also felt that their facilities needed modernised; particularly sports facilities and bathrooms with one individual stating that bathing/showering facilities would be beneficial. Both points could potentially point towards pressures from cost-of-living crisis and the responsibility of schools to meet basic needs of sustenance and hygiene.

Mental Health

There was nearly a universal appetite for advocating improvements to mental health support and school counselling services. FG 1 felt that teachers didn't have time to assist with mental health interventions and support was inconsistent as it depended on individual staff. They also indicated concerns around the skills, experience, values and professional boundaries of school counsellors, which was echoed by FG 3 who felt that counselling was only encouraged to students who exhibited challenging behaviour.

Both post-primary groups felt that support for LGBT+ young people could be improved. FG 1 had a particular group of LGBT+ young people who felt that the acceptance and 'coming out' process was not handled positively by school, which contributed to their poor mental health. FG 3 agreed that there isn't a lot of support for young people who identify as something other than the "norm" and there needs to be more space for young people to explore, experiment and express themselves.

Although understanding of mental health was more limited with the younger focus group, FG 2 all agreed that if they were worried, they felt they had someone to talk to; either within school or youth service and they also noted that one of the schools taught mindfulness. Post-primary young people in general felt that school was not a safe place to raise their problems or struggles and compared this to the openness, non judgmental and informal environment of the youth service which fostered a sense of safety and trust.

Working and learning with others

All three focus groups were enthusiastic about Shared Education and cross community initiatives in school. FG 2 excitedly highlighted the multi-ethnic student population in their school and felt it was a welcoming place, *"It's a good thing to meet different people."* FG 3 was complimentary about sharing A-Level classes with the local Catholic grammar school.

All three focus groups expressed interest in widening curriculum to learn about world faiths and other cultures; however the extent varied depending on the school context. The young people consulted felt that religious and cultural education needs to be reviewed to represent the shifting diversity of the school population; regardless of whether their school is Controlled, Catholic Maintained or Integrated.

FG 1 also stated they have found it difficult to engage with sensitive/triggering material and derogatory language being used in classrooms e.g. studying *To Kill a Mockingbird* in English. During the workshops, the Participation team observed and noted a cultural shift with many young people in the focus groups being very inclusive and non-judgemental in their language and reflections on curriculum content. This may need to be reviewed and/or helping young people to better understand the context of controversial subject material.

Bullying

Bullying was a prevalent issue across all three focus groups within the school system. Both post-primary groups agreed that they have been forced to become more resilient and “develop a thick skin” (FG 3) because they have been treated negatively by their peers. FG 2 felt that their school was trying to tackle bullying in primary school by teaching them to be kind and how to treat others positively. FG 3 are actively working as anti-bullying ambassadors in their school but felt that education was often around “*what not to do rather than how to help people.*” The Participation team observed that mental health support, LGBT+ support and general attitude towards diversity were interlinked with bullying, and that improvements in those areas may have a positive ripple effect.

Learning

A reasonably sized minority of post-primary young people agreed strongly that they are being provided with the right skills whilst a little over half the young people consulted disagreed. This varied depending on the career area they were interested in. Some individuals across all three focus groups felt they weren’t being challenged enough, however this is to be expected with differentiation.

Increasing opportunities

Both post-primary groups felt that subject choices were limited and one choice could come at the expense of another. They felt that categorising similar subjects together was detrimental to their choices e.g. all creative subjects being one in box. They acknowledged timetabling difficulties and that schools were likely encouraging them to gain a breadth of subject knowledge, but this wasn’t helpful for meeting specific entrance criteria for FE/HE. One young person from FG 1 noted that as they moved from a grammar to a non-grammar school they lost the opportunity to study certain subjects and this was very frustrating for them. Both groups specifically identified animal management and agricultural studies as a subject lacking in their schools, and an individual from FG 3 expressed interest in more specialised science education such as astrophysics.

Young people recognised a trend of schools offering more ‘practical’ subjects to lower achieving pupils and expressed frustration with this; both that higher streams couldn’t access these and that lower streams couldn’t access more ‘academic’ subjects. Young people acknowledged there was less focus on alternative progression pathways, “*School only prepares us for university*” (FG 1) and FG 3 agreed with this. Both groups felt they would benefit from more balanced careers advice around FE, traineeships and apprenticeships and thereby reducing the stigma attached to favouring these pathways. FG 3 expressed frustration with Careers advice in Year 8-11 as this was often brief and vague.

Learning Styles

Young people in FG 2 felt that primary school teaches them in different ways through digital learning on iPads, play and game based teaching strategies. This helped to make schoolwork

more fun and engaging. There was notable mention of 'Mathletics' as a particularly enjoyable learning activity.

Post-primary young people showed good awareness of their own learning styles and felt that they weren't being adequately considered in school. One young person from FG 3 stated, *"School is trying on your mind, it doesn't have the facilities I require. Learning styles aren't done here, you are taught one way, but everyone learns differently."* The young people were enthusiastic about practical teaching methods and that more investment in these would improve their general happiness with school. Training for staff in learning styles differentiation was a key recommendation from this group, *"We were taught learning styles in third year but never got to incorporate or adapt this to how we learn and teachers never looked at it again."*

Both post-primary groups felt that learning styles should also be considered regarding assessment methods. Both groups referred to exams as a *"glorified memory test"* and not an effective measurement of whether learning has taken place. Professional discussions, pop quizzes, practical tasks, and ongoing holistic assessments were suggested as alternative or supplementary methods.

Decision Making capacity for young people

Post-primary young people expressed frustration that schools made decisions regarding subject choices and number of GCSEs studied based on (sometimes negative) assumptions of their abilities, rather than consulting the individual and offering support to try to help them achieve their own aspirations. *"I'm leaving with only 2 GCSEs because that's all they would allow me to do. I wanted to do more."* (FG 1)

Both focus groups felt their voices were seldom heard. FG 3 discussed the role of student council, with varying opinions and perceptions on how well this is utilised and how much power the council has to effect change. FG 1 reflected that for the strategic priority of 'Championing'; they would love to see decisions being made collaboratively with them rather than for them, or only with parents.

Support for learning

All three focus groups expressed that large class sizes meant that one-to-one support was rarely possible, aside from classroom assistants for SEND students. FG 3 articulated that their best learning experiences are when they are in smaller classes. They felt their teachers were supportive outside of class, but time and resource pressures during class negatively impacted support. FG 2 valued their homework club for support with schoolwork rather than seeking help during class; however alluded that there was often not enough staff.

Readiness for success

The consulted groups were split down the middle with around half feeling their respective schools were preparing them for life beyond school, approximately half of the young people however disagreed. The variance might be explained to an extent by the differing age demographics within the group and the limited opportunities for work-based learning due to COVID-19 pandemic.

Transversal Skills

All three focus groups felt that vocational knowledge and skills were generally being delivered well in school. FG 2 articulated that they are developing literacy and numeracy skills, as well as having positive digital learning experiences. With regards to 'transversal skills', or 'life skills', none of the groups had a sound grasp of what this was.

When given examples, FG 2 reflected on age appropriate skills they were learning in primary school such as turn taking, making friends and being kind to others. They felt school helped them become more confident with speaking in front of others, through taking part in assemblies and school plays. They felt that school didn't adequately teach them resilience in dealing with problems happening outside of school; but that the Youth Service was able to support them with this. One individual from FG 2 felt the school could benefit from more interaction with emergency services for young people to learn how to keep themselves safe at home and outdoors.

All groups were asked about their experience of global education and learning about current world affairs. Primary school young people listed a range of topics including "war", "farming", "global warming" and "nature". Post-primary groups also mentioned climate change as an area of interest but felt education was limited, with glimpses of current affairs emerging mainly in Geography classes. One young person from FG 1 spoke positively about their learning in Business Studies, explaining they were keen to join the workforce; *"I have learned a lot about the world of business, taxes, and human rights in school."*

Readiness for next steps

Both post-primary groups expressed an appetite for more focus on employability skills and generally believed that work-based learning through placements could be arranged and supported better by schools. Both also agreed they would like more input from industry through vocational tasters, visits and guest speakers. FG 1 felt that this was relevant under the 'Inspiring' strategic priority and they desire more professional role models.

With reference to feeling ready for the next step in their learning journey, a young person from FG 3 stated that school prepares them to be an *"independent learner but not an independent person."* A young person from FG 3 stated, *"Everything is more academic than practical, there is a focus on what the exam board wants you to learn rather than learning for everyday life."* Skills for managing finances was raised by both groups as an area for importance; with paying bills, credit cards, loans and mortgages given as examples. The consulted young people felt that they aren't adequately prepared for independent living;

both in school and in the Youth Service and this was highlighted as an area for improvement in both settings.

Transition from primary to post-primary education

FG 2 felt that their primary school was preparing them for their transition to post-primary education by scaffolding their schoolwork to challenge them more.

Obtain consensus if young people agree with the five strategic priorities.

The Participation team explained DE's five strategic priorities and engaged the group in a discussion about each one; what it meant to them, whether they agreed with it overall and what they felt were the most important aspects.

Championing:

- Young people in general struggled to understand what this means, and it wasn't language that made sense to them, therefore they struggled to articulate agreement or disagreement.
- Framing it as 'young people being at the centre' raised some negative connotations for young people as they associated this with being in the centre of attention and this was mostly undesirable. *"I already have a large team surrounding me, like EWOs and the school head of year, sometimes I feel like I'm letting everyone down"* (FG 1)
- Primary school FG 2 struggled to grasp the concept of person-centred approaches and had a lack of understanding around decision making in schools.

Helping:

- The consulted groups universally agree with the importance of this priority and were generally appreciative that it was being given due regard, however some noted that it was not a reflection of their current school experience.

Inspiring

- The consulted groups generally agreed this was a positive aspiration to be prioritised however each focus group interpreted it differently than the description given in the draft Corporate Plan.
- FG 1 expressed this priority was more in line with the concept of expanding horizons and creating opportunities for new experiences. The group wanted more access to inspirational people and role models to look up to, such as guest input from industry.
- FG 2 related this priority to confidence building and feeling capable.
- FG 3 felt this priority was around self-discovery and felt that school doesn't currently shape who they are and doesn't contribute to their sense of self.

Learning

- The consulted groups viewed this priority as a fundamental part of the education system and felt it was a given.

Delivery

- Young people acknowledged that training and support for staff was very important but FG 1 placed more focus on values, empathy and duty of care demonstrated by staff through their behaviour and treatment of children and young people.
- Some young people stated sensitivity training as an area for improvement, again reflecting the more inclusive cultural shift of today's young people.
- FG 3 felt that understanding and application of learning styles was a key area of improvement in this priority.

Explore what young people think is the most important aspect of each priority.

The post-primary focus groups were asked to place the five priorities in order and to identify one aspect they felt was most important in each and these are summarised below. The Participation team did not carry out this activity with FG 2 due to limitations of understanding.

	Championing	Helping	Inspiring	Learning	Delivery
FG 1 Ranking	5 th	1 st	3 rd	2 nd	4 th
FG 1 Priority	Making decisions collaboratively with young people instead of for them.	Better mental health and support for building resilience.	Hearing from inspiring role models i.e. guest speakers from industry.	Better support in class from teachers and classroom assistants.	Focus on empathy and care rather than compliance.
FG 3 Ranking	5 th	2 nd	1 st	3 rd	4 th
FG 3 Priority	Improving the understanding and utilisation of student council.	More emphasis on anti-bullying strategies - <i>"If you're not happy while learning there isn't much point."</i>	Increased openness for young people to be who they want to be, rather than who the school wants them to be.	Learning and teaching in different ways to accommodate the learning styles of everyone.	Teaching those in education how to inspire, help and adapt learning styles within schools.

Conclusion

Across all three focus groups, there was a willingness to engage in improving the learning experience in schools and Youth service. Young people agree with DE's vision and appreciate the aspirations of the department. They shared their current experiences in relation to happiness in school, learning, and readiness for success and progression into the next steps of their learning journey.

With regards to happiness, young people shared a desire for more creative extracurricular activities and educational visits and confirmed the value of initiatives like breakfast clubs. They exhibited a universal appetite for improving mental health and school counselling services, support for LGBT+ young people and tackling bullying. Young people celebrated the success of Shared Education and cross community initiatives and were very positive about learning with, and from, people from different backgrounds. They advocated for curriculum review and reform regarding world faiths, Relationships and Sexuality Education and due care around potentially sensitive or triggering material.

Young people demonstrated a keen desire for increased opportunities to study more varied subjects, and increased access to vocational subjects. They identified good digital learning experiences, play and game-based teaching strategies and also acknowledged that accommodating different learning styles at post-primary level could be improved; both in teaching and assessment. Post-primary young people are enthusiastic about improving their own decision-making capacity to have a say in their individual learning journeys.

In relation to readiness for success, young people value transversal skills and independent living skills and are keen to see improvements in both school and Youth Service in developing these; particularly relating to personal finances. Young people felt that school was preparing them for more independent learning, and the transition from primary school work to post-primary, and post-primary to university. There is an eagerness for improved careers advice for younger age groups, more focus on employability skills, work-based learning and input from different industries.

With regards to the five strategic priorities, young people struggled to understand 'Championing' and didn't see 'Delivery' as important as other priorities; both because of the inaccessible language used but also because these encapsulate aspects of education that they don't often see firsthand. Young people agree with 'Helping', 'Inspiring' and 'Learning' as the top three strategic priorities and are foundational for a positive experience in education.