

Special Educational Needs & Disability Strategic Development Programme

The system for supporting children and young people with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) in Northern Ireland is under unprecedented strain. The number of children with SEND and the complexity of those needs have consistently increased over the last decade and more, set against a context of austerity, political instability and structural change. Regardless of that context, we know that we must do better for our children and their families.

The SEND legislative framework is being revised, with new regulations and associated Code of Practice being implemented across 2021. However, the SEND system extends far beyond the legislative framework and a wide range of additional priorities for change have already been identified by stakeholders and accepted by government.

That overall SEND change agenda is extremely complex and needs to be developed and delivered in partnership, bringing together families, schools, government agencies and other stakeholders to deliver the services and supports that our children need.

To ensure that these efforts are fully joined up, the SEND Strategic Development Programme (SEND SDP) is being established. It will provide a single structure through which the entire SEND change agenda can be managed strategically, ensuring that all stakeholders are meaningfully engaged in the process. The programme will draw together development work which is already underway and deliver a range of new projects to address additional SEND priorities.

The programme vision is that:

“All children and young people with special educational needs or disabilities and their families are receiving the tailored and effective supports that they need to secure the best educational outcomes, delivered by a child-focused, responsive, co-ordinated, transparent, efficient and sustainable system.”

That vision will be reached by delivering the following programme outcomes:

- All schools and pre-school settings can access the necessary services and resources and provide the right SEND supports at the earliest possible point, for all children who need them;
- Statutory assessment is leading to the right additional SEND supports being delivered at the right time in the right setting;

- Parents/carers and children & young people understand, engage fully with and are getting the right support from the SEND system at the right time;
- SEND stakeholders have a shared sense of ownership and confidence in the system.

The SEND SDP is governed by a Board which includes the Education Authority, Department of Education, Department of Health, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and the Education and Training Inspectorate. The NI Commissioner for Children and Young People also has an advisory role.

Stakeholder Engagement

The SEND SDP is an ambitious programme which will impact on more than a quarter of all families in Northern Ireland (NI), all of our schools and pre-schools and more than a dozen distinct public agencies/services. The current annual budget for SEN support provision exceeds £300m and further short-term resource will be required to transform that system.

A programme of this scale requires considered and collaborative planning and the overall proposal will have to be approved and resourced by the NI Executive before full implementation can begin. We are currently in that strategic planning phase and need to engage stakeholders regarding that bigger picture – are we on the right track with this strategic programme approach? Have we missed any key strategic issues across the SEND system? Are we prioritising the issues in the right way? What are the biggest barriers and risks that you think we need to plan around?

We need to secure stakeholder input on all of these strategic issues and more, before the high-level programme plan can be submitted to the Education Minister later in the spring. Once the programme then begins full implementation, we also have to ensure continual engagement with stakeholders to make sure that the various projects have the desired impact and that the overall programme is moving us to where we want to get to.

Programme Reference Group

When the SEND SDP first moved into its planning phase, a standing Programme Reference Group (PRG) was established to ensure that stakeholders would be meaningfully and continually engaged in the process. The PRG's objectives are to:

- evaluate the programme update materials that will be regularly provided;

- explore a range of views within and beyond the PRG, putting forward feedback and perspectives on behalf the sectors represented;
- provide advice and guidance to the SEND SDP Board on how well the programme is operating, the impact that it is having and how it can be improved;
- act as a conduit to disseminate information outward and build deeper programme engagement across stakeholder groups.

It was intended that the PRG would draw in representation from the following:

- Parent & carers
- School leaders, teachers & SENCOs
- Community & voluntary sector
- Wider education bodies
- C&YP Strategy partner agencies
- Trade unions;

An initial PRG has met three times since October 2020, drawing in representation from the community and voluntary sector and wider education bodies. That group is currently developing a proposal on how to bring parents and carers into the process. Additional mechanisms are also being established to access school leaders, teachers, SENCOs and trade unions.

However, it is still important that other C&YPS partners are linked into the SEND SDP development process. The PRG and SEND SDP Board are keen to explore ways of linking up with the CYPSP Partnership to build effective two-way information flows and to make the most of pre-existing stakeholder networks.

Priority Focus

As highlighted above, the PRG and SEND SDP Board are currently focused on developing and agreeing the high-level programme plan over the coming months. ***So the immediate practical question is how CYPSP contributions can best be fed into that process?***

Once the high-level plan is approved, the PRG engagement will continue at the overarching programme level, but it will also extend into individual projects, in terms of their operationalisation and how they will best fit alongside existing interventions. The linkage with CYPSP will therefore continue to be important over the programme's lifespan.