



Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

Draft Special Schools Area Planning Framework

INTO Response

INTRODUCTION

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) is the largest teachers' union in Ireland with over 50,000 members. The INTO has members in nursery, primary, post-primary and special schools, including teachers at all stages of their career, from student teachers through to principals, and across all sectors of education in the North.

RESPONSE

A review of special education has been long awaited. During that time the volume of children and young people identified as needing special school provision has increased in both number and complexity. INTO members have communicated numerous concerns about the schools estate: buildings not being fit for purpose; a lego approach of adding on a mobile or extension when crisis point has been reached with class sizes (no. pupils) being too large, equipment not meeting need and increased incidences of extreme persistent challenging behaviour resulting in injury to the child/young person and/or others.

INTO is aware that Special Education has moved from the Directorate of CYPS at the EA to the Directorate for Education, however, the message has fundamentally remained the same with less detail than what was shared before. INTO believes the Draft Special School Area Planning Framework shows a lack of understanding of and responsiveness to the actual needs of the children and young people special schools were established to meet. It seeks a form of equity and consistency that is denying pupils attending special schools access to the EA vision, which includes the phrase "Inspire, support and challenge all our children and young people to be the best that they can be".

INTO members have consistently expressed significant concern at the appropriateness of a 'one size fits all' approach to education.

Overall, the INTO is disappointed with a framework that makes **no reference** to:

- How it would be implemented
 - what is planned to be built and where
 - what the timescale in areas of immediate need would be
- Capital budget to support the development of the infrastructure that is immediately needed
- The facilitating of training for staff as the needs of children and young people in their school change
- Future proofing a special school provision to meet the increase in pupils who require this provision. Figure 3 in the Framework for specialist provision in Mainstream Schools identifies the increase in pupil numbers in special schools from 2015/16 – 2019/20 as 19.35%.
- How 3-19 will be achieved in all special schools regardless of their current specialism: is it to be the amalgamation of schools currently providing support for specific age groups or needs? Or is it the extension of schools' remit from current age groups? For example will a Special school currently providing an education for children aged 3-8yrs now be extended to 3-19?

The graphs on figure 4 demonstrate a lack of understanding on the part of those who have drafted the framework regarding special schools current remit.
- How will flexibility be facilitated so as to meet changing educational, physical and medical needs

INTO would further ask whether the EA has considered:

- Whether a consistent regional approach is in the best interests of the children, young people, parents, teaching and non-teaching staff.
Equity does not mean necessarily everything must be the same and must resist a race to the bottom, or the cheapest option.
- The need to add to the special schools' estate with at least an additional school in Belfast, in line with the report produced by BELB May 2012 identifying the high SLD/PMLD demand in the Belfast Area. Since that time the number of children and young people identified has increased and resulted in the current schools becoming overcrowded.
The impact of overcrowding can be seen in the figures for incident and accident forms being completed year on year alongside the increased number of appeals to Tribunals, and finally the increasing numbers of suspension and the withdrawal of provision for some pupils.
The framework identifies zero special school capital investment before 2025 (figure 2) in 6 of the 7 schools identified in Appendix 2 is this realistic?
- The timing of this consultation while DE consult on Regulations and a Code of Practice which will direct Special education in both mainstream and special for the next 15-20 years.

Providing pathways as presented disregard the expertise in provision found in the existing school estate, which if appropriately funded can maximize inputs and resulting achievements of the pupils and enthuse the workforces professional development, health and well being. Delivering additional value to the entire system.

No doubt EANI are sincere in their intent to improve, extend and future proof special education and INTO therefore, in support of these efforts, would advise the following prior to the production of an area plan:

- Evaluate what is currently working within special schools before planning such a simplified approach to change.
- Evaluate the impact of losing the specialisms that a number of special schools deliver.
- Further research transition – The framework refers to pupils with the most severe and complex needs experiencing the uncertainty and anxiety associated with multiple transitions during their school life. INTO members would challenge that this concern on the part of EANI for their pupils reflective of experience and is best addressed at the earliest possible stage in the development process. INTO would advise the writers of the area planning framework speak to the pupils and their parents now. Anecdotally, INTO members would report that a planned transition in line with the experiences of all school children is a challenge that their pupils have historically excelled at. Transition in a planned way during the school years provides a continuum and is in line with the Draft Framework for Specialist provision in mainstream schools “the EA considers it in the best interests of the child to experience progressions” – the EA appear to be implying by insisting on a 3-19 model this is not necessary for children within special schools. If equity and consistency is a consideration no framework should plan to shield children and young people from change and the opportunity to progress and exceed expectation.
- Project the numbers of children and young people who will be coming into the special school sector at all year groups. This would involve the EA undertaking an assessment of the numbers of children and young people already within the mainstream system and struggling to sustain a placement, a placement which may be better suited to a special school setting.

- A transparent review of the programme of inclusion that has seen children including those who would have been supported in a special school setting, as outlined by the NICCY report 'Too little too late' and NIAO Report Impact review of special educational needs.
Have these children and young people achieved better outcomes?
Have training programmes met needs of teachers and school leaders?
Have resources and facilities met need?
Has the EA been able deliver to meet current need before considering extending?
The Area Plan for Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools p.10 links " an increasing pressure on special schools as a result of the lack of specialist provision in mainstream schools"

INTO considers this a framework that needs brought back to the drawing board, reviewed and considered in light of the increased complexity and challenge of supporting a range of children and young people's needs before returning for consultation. The delay to provide a purposeful plan over the last 8 years should not lead to haste to proceed with a plan that raises concerns for teachers, parents, children, young people and other stakeholders.