



Department of
Education
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THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A NEW
ORGANISATION TO SUPPORT
CONTROLLED SCHOOLS

Consultation





Ministerial Foreword

Controlled schools are a vital and valued part of our education system, representing almost half of all schools across Northern Ireland. This diverse sector includes nursery, special, primary, post primary, grammar, integrated and Irish-medium schools. Each playing a crucial role in educating children and young people within the communities they serve.

The Independent Review of Education, along with feedback from many school leaders, highlighted shortcomings in the current support arrangement for controlled schools. In response, in September 2024, I commissioned a Taskforce to explore how we can better support this sector in delivering high-quality education.

The Taskforce proposed a range of practical steps that could improve support for our largest and most diverse school sector. Its recommendations are structured in two phases.

Phase 1 involves establishing a dedicated Controlled Schools Unit within the Education Authority. This work is already underway, and the Education Authority is actively engaging with schools to ensure that this Controlled Schools Unit is responsive to their needs.

Phase 2 proposes the creation of a separate organisation to support controlled schools. This would represent a significant structural change aimed at enhancing consistency and equity of support across the education system. Establishing such an organisation will require primary legislation in the Assembly.

The purpose of this consultation is to seek views on establishment of this new support body, including its role and functions. While structural reform alone cannot resolve all challenges, I believe strengthening support for controlled schools is an important step toward achieving the greater consistency and fairness envisioned by the Independent Review of Education.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul Givan". The signature is stylized and includes a horizontal line underneath the name.

Paul Givan MLA
Minister of Education

Introduction

The Department of Education is seeking views on proposals to establish a new organisation to support controlled schools in Northern Ireland. This proposed body would have a similar remit to the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), which currently provides dedicated support to Catholic maintained schools.

This consultation outlines the background of the controlled sector, current support arrangements, identified challenges and the Department's proposals for change. We invite stakeholders and members of the public to share their views.

The Controlled Sector

Northern Ireland's education system includes a number of school types – controlled, Catholic maintained, other maintained (mainly Irish-medium schools), grant-maintained integrated and voluntary grammar – each with distinct arrangements for ownership, management and provision of services. All are valued for their unique and important contribution.

The controlled sector is the largest, comprising 49% of all schools. Historically, many controlled schools were originally Protestant church schools transferred to state control in the early 20th century. Today, they retain a non-denominational Christian ethos and values whilst welcoming children of all faiths and none. The sector includes nursery, special, primary, post primary, grammar, integrated and Irish-medium schools. Controlled schools are currently owned and managed by the Education Authority (EA).

CONTROLLED SECTOR | KEY FACTS

545 SCHOOLS



62 nursery schools | 377 primary schools | 37 special schools

69 post primary schools (53 secondary schools and 16 grammar schools)

148,431 PUPILS



57.6% Protestant 10.6% Catholic

31.6% from other or no religious backgrounds



45% of newcomer pupils in Northern Ireland attend controlled schools

28% of pupils entitled to Free School Meals

Current Support Arrangements

EA has overarching responsibility for ensuring that efficient and effective primary and post primary education services are available to meet the needs of children and young people across Northern Ireland.

However, as set out in the table below, EA's responsibilities vary depending on school type, which creates complexity in both management and service delivery. It provides a wide range of universal transactional, educational and pupil support services to all publicly funded schools across all sectors. These include school transport, admissions, school improvement and Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision.

In addition, EA delivers certain services specifically to both controlled and maintained schools, but not to other sectors. These include the employment of non-teaching staff and the provision of school meals.

Furthermore, EA has a distinct set of responsibilities as the owner and manager of controlled schools. These include the employment of teaching staff, strategic estate planning and capital funding.

Alongside EA, the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC), established in 2016, provides advocacy and support for controlled schools. CSSC focuses on developing and promoting the ethos of the controlled sector, supporting governors, improving educational standards and contributing to area planning. However, CSSC remains a voluntary body without statutory powers.

SCHOOL TYPES –SUMMARY OF RESPONSIBILITIES AND MANAGEMENT

AREA	CONTROLLED	CATHOLIC MAINTAINED	OTHER MAINTAINED	GRANT-MAINTAINED INTEGRATED	VOLUNTARY GRAMMAR
MANAGING AUTHORITY	EA	Board of Governors supported by CCMS	Board of Governors	Board of Governors	Board of Governors
FUNDING AUTHORITY	EA	EA	EA	EA	EA
FUNDING ARRANGEMENT	School's Delegated budget is non-cash. School spend is administered by EA and cost journal made against school	School's Delegated budget is non-cash. School spend is administered by EA and cost journal made against school	School's Delegated budget is non-cash. School spend is administered by EA and cost journal made against school	School's Delegated Budget is paid in cash as grant-in-aid. Monthly BACS to school bank accounts, based on spend profile.	School's Delegated Budget is paid in cash as grant-in-aid. Monthly BACS to school bank accounts, based on spend profile and less teacher payroll costs.
EMPLOYER: TEACHERS	EA	CCMS	School	School	School
NON-TEACHING STAFF	EA	EA	School	School	School
ESTATE OWNER	EA	Trustees	Trustees	Individual Board of Governors	Individual Board of Governors
CAPITAL FUNDING	EA	DE	DE	DE	DE
LANDLORD	EA	EA	EA	School	School
MAINTENANCE INSURANCE	EA Indemnity	EA meet costs from centre	EA meet costs from centre	Commercial	Commercial

Challenges

The Independent Review of Education and stakeholder engagement have highlighted several challenges and issues with the current support for controlled schools as follows:

- EA's broader remit across the education sector limits its ability to provide focused support to controlled schools, act as an advocacy body for the sector, or develop its unique ethos, vision and values.
- CSSC lacks statutory authority or powers, which restricts its ability to provide comprehensive support and influence policy and delivery.
- School leaders report a lack of sector-specific vision, leadership and proactive support. There is also ongoing confusion regarding EA's structures, roles, and responsibilities.
- There is a clear need for improved collaboration, governance, leadership development, and strategic planning.

These challenges exist within a wider context whereby there are significant long standing disparities in educational outcomes between controlled and Catholic maintained schools. These pre-date the establishment of both the EA and CSSC. GCSE data since 2012 shows that Catholic maintained schools have consistently outperformed controlled schools by between 8 and 12.6 percentage points despite having higher levels of Free School Meals entitlement. Controlled schools are also historically more likely to require external support to improve education provision and to enter the Formal Intervention Process than Catholic maintained schools.

The Final Report of the Independent Review of Education emphasised that the managing authority role for the controlled sector has always been problematic given that EA also provides a wide range of services to all other schools. The report concluded that: "this results in complicated systems for school management, which are suboptimal for the controlled sector".

Controlled Schools' Taskforce Report

In September 2024, based on the findings of the Independent Review, the Minister established a Controlled Schools' Taskforce to develop proposals addressing the shortcomings in current support arrangements:

The Taskforce, which was chaired by the Chief Executive of the CSSC with senior representatives from the Department of Education and EA, issued its report on the 20 December 2024.

The Report outlined two key phases of work and identified a range of options offering a continuum of functions and responsibilities for a new authority to support controlled schools:

- **PHASE 1:** Establishment of a Controlled Schools Unit (CSU) within the EA. This interim collaborative model is designed to deliver tangible improvements for controlled schools in the short to medium term whilst the Department simultaneously commence preparing for and developing legislation to create a dedicated standalone body for controlled schools.
- **PHASE 2:** Establishment of a dedicated body with managing authority responsibilities is established to provide focused governance and strategic leadership for controlled schools. This model would require legislation to transfer identified duties and functions from EA. Whilst the Taskforce outlined a range of potential functions for the new organisation, it did not specify which functions the new organisation should exercise.

What is the Department proposing?

The Department support the Taskforce proposal for a two-phase approach to enhancing support arrangements for the controlled sector.

The EA has already taken forward considerable work to establish a Controlled Schools Unit in the 2025-2026 academic year to deliver tangible improvements for controlled schools in the short to medium term.

Establishing a new organisation with legal powers to support controlled schools will require primary legislation to be passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly. This legislation would also enable the transfer of certain existing functions from EA to the new organisation.

Subject to Executive agreement, the Department proposes to introduce a standalone Bill to establish the new organisation and define its role and functions.

Having considered the potential remit of the new body, the Department proposes that its legal responsibilities for controlled schools should broadly mirror that of CCMS for Catholic maintained schools, as set out in Articles 142 and 143 of the Education Reform Order. The new organisation's functions would explicitly reference school improvement through support for governors, principals and staff, and would also include the development of a clear vision and ethos for controlled schools which whilst assumed are not explicitly referenced within the legislation for either EA or CCMS.

Accordingly, it is proposed that the new body would assume legal responsibility for:

- Providing advice to the Department, EA, or any other relevant body on matters relating to controlled schools
- Developing and promoting the vision and ethos of the controlled sector, and advocating on its behalf
- Coordinating and planning the effective provision of controlled schools
- Supporting the effective management and governance of controlled schools by providing advice and information to Boards of Governors, principals, and staff, with a particular focus on school improvement
- Employing all teaching staff in controlled schools and developing a scheme of appointment
- Preparing a Scheme of Management for controlled schools, in consultation with Boards of Governors
- Requiring Boards of Governors to submit reports and returns that cannot be obtained by the Council from the Department or EA

It is proposed that EA will retain its overarching legal responsibilities for school improvement and governor training across all school sectors, as well as the employment of non-teaching staff in both controlled and maintained schools. EA will also continue to ensure that efficient and effective primary and post primary education services are available to meet the needs of children and young people in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, EA will retain legal responsibility for ensuring sufficient school provision, with particular regard to pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and will remain responsible for planning and delivering SEN services.

Certain key functions specific to the controlled sector will remain with EA, including school ownership and estate management. As a Centre of Procurement Expertise, EA not only plans and delivers capital works for the controlled sector but also manages landlord maintenance for both controlled and maintained schools. It is also used by the Department as the delivery agent for smaller capital projects across all education sectors. There is limited merit in transferring elements of the capital works function to the proposed new, smaller education body.

EXPECTED BENEFITS

Some of the anticipated benefits of the new organisation are outlined below. These will be further refined and developed dependent on the agreed statutory functions of the new body.

- **Clearer Vision and Stronger Advocacy for Controlled Schools**

The new organisation would be well positioned to articulate and champion a distinct vision for controlled schools, rooted in their ethos and community values. Unlike EA, which must balance competing priorities across multiple school sectors, a focused body could advocate more effectively for the unique needs and aspirations of controlled schools, ensuring their voice is not diluted in broader policy discussions. Unlike the current CSSC, the new body will have a range of other statutory functions to ensure their vision is supported by strong implementation and delivery structures.

- **Tailored HR and Employment Support for Teachers**

By assuming responsibility for teacher employment and HR advisory functions, the new organisation could offer more responsive and context-specific support. This would allow for streamlined recruitment processes, clearer career pathways and HR guidance aligned with the ethos of controlled schools. This will address concerns that the current structures are slow to adapt to local needs.

- **Strategic and Responsive Strategic Planning**

Strategic planning under a dedicated organisation could be more agile and better aligned with the long-term educational vision for controlled schools, responding more swiftly to demographic shifts.

- **Enhanced Leadership Development and Support**

Leadership support and training tailored specifically to controlled schools would foster a stronger pipeline of school leaders who are well-versed in the sector's values and challenges. This would of course align with the wider support available to all sectors from EA. The new authority could provide mentoring, coaching and professional development that is sectorally relevant and impactful, helping leaders to thrive and drive school improvement. This has been a critical role of CCMS within the Catholic maintained sector.

- **Focused Governor Training and Engagement**

Governors play a critical role in school management, and the new organisation could offer additional training and support that is more attuned to the specific governance structures and expectations within controlled schools. This would help build capacity, confidence and consistency among governors, addressing gaps that can arise and complementing EA's broader training and support for all sectors.

- **Coherent and Sector-Specific School Improvement Strategy**

The new organisation could develop and implement strategies that complements the broader work of EA and reflects the particular strengths and challenges of controlled schools. A dedicated approach could lead to more effective interventions, better outcomes and a stronger sense of shared purpose across the network of controlled schools

In summary, the establishment of a dedicated organisation for controlled schools offers a transformative opportunity to address the deficit of support for the controlled sector contributing to the transformation of our education system in support of our children and young people.

The purpose of this consultation is to seek stakeholder views on current support arrangements for the controlled sector and the Department's proposals for the new organisation.