

STATUTORY GUIDANCE

FAO: Boards of Governors and Principals of all
grant-aided schools

SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING (SDP) PROCESS

2026/27 ACADEMIC YEAR

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Overview

Guidance Context

1. This guidance has been co-designed by a small working group consisting of several school leaders, the Department of Education (DE), the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the Education Authority (EA) as part of the implementation of a fundamental [review of the SDP process](#). It replaces all previous guidance and is aligned to regulatory change that is also in progress.
2. This guidance will be reviewed after the first full year of operation following feedback from schools and additionally, the Department may publish supplementary advice in subsequent years.

Statutory Duty

3. Article 13(2)(b)(i) of the 1998 Order requires the Board of Governors (BoGs) to prepare, and from time to time revise a School Development Plan (SDP). In preparing the plan, the BoGs must consult the school principal and is required to consider any guidance given by DE, EA and (in the case of a Catholic maintained school) CCMS. The BoGs must also consider the findings of any inspection as part of the SDP process.
4. This overarching primary legislation also requires the Department to make secondary legislation in the form of regulations to:
 - a) prescribe the matters to be dealt with by a school development plan;
 - b) prescribe the period for which a plan is to have effect;
 - c) prescribe the manner in which a plan is to be published;
 - d) provide for the revision of a plan.
5. The Department is replacing the former regulations on this matter - The Education (School Development Plans) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010. The new draft regulations specify that:
 - a) Every SDP should include a concise statement of (or a link to):
 - i. the school's vision and ethos;
 - ii. the school's context;
 - iii. the evaluation and evidence that informed the SDP;
 - iv. the school's high-level areas of focus across the next three years;
 - v. a set of actions for delivery in the forthcoming academic year.
 - b) The period of the SDP will be for three years, subject to (d).
 - c) The plan must be published on the school's website and a copy provided to the EA when requested.

- d) The plan is intended to be a living document, with an overarching review, informed by the whole school community, undertaken every three years and a set of actions for the year ahead developed annually.

Purpose of Guidance

6. The purpose of this guidance is to provide clarification to Boards of Governors and schools in relation to the statutory requirements for School Development Planning (SDP) for 2026/27.
7. The intended purpose is to bring clarity around what is expected (and what is not expected) of the SDP process that schools must undertake. The SDP process in each school is primarily designed to contribute to the overall shared objective to strive for equity and excellence across our education system, with a strong focus on success for every learner.
8. This guidance seeks to:
 - ensure that the child remains at the centre of the SDP process;
 - reduce unintended bureaucratic burdens and workloads;
 - provide greater flexibility for schools to focus on the key areas of focus they identify to be most important to bring about improvement in their context; and
 - create more meaningful plans with impactful and owned activity to address priorities.

School Improvement

9. [‘Every School a Good School – A Policy for School Improvement’](#) (ESaGS) emphasises that schools themselves are best placed to identify areas for improvement and to implement changes that can bring about better outcomes for pupils.
10. The vehicle that drives school improvement is the SDP process and this process is key in supporting schools to achieve their vision. The SDP process is an improvement cycle that is driven by effective ongoing self-evaluation and review based on a range of qualitative and quantitative evidence. The ongoing and purposeful collection and review of data (both performance and contextual), first-hand evidence and stakeholder views is used to identify strengths and priority areas for improvement for the benefit of every learner.
11. A robust self-evaluation process enables schools to identify clear and relevant areas of focus for improvement within their own context. The whole school community should be actively involved in this process, as they are the intended audience and beneficiaries of the SDP. Through shared involvement in shaping the SDP, there should be a common understanding of the school’s development priorities, a coherent vision for improvement, and a strong collective commitment to continuous improvement and effective implementation.

School Development Planning requirements

General

12. It is important for schools to have a three-year SDP which is developed, implemented and reviewed with **input and feedback from key stakeholders** and formally approved by the Board of Governors.
13. School leadership (senior leadership team and governors) should take a **pragmatic approach** to school development planning, ensuring that the process is useful in supporting the **improvement goals** of the school and **that it is manageable**.
14. Schools must set aside deliberate and **planned time** to focus on the SDP process at various points throughout the school year. This is the intended core purpose of the additional [School Development Days](#) (SDDs) which have been granted exceptionally by the Department for the purpose of school improvement activity.
15. The SDP process provides an opportunity to continuously evaluate how well it is meeting the needs of every learner, what is working well and what could be improved. The SDP process should be a highly effective tool used within a school to empower staff to take collective ownership and create a shared buy-in to a culture of continuous improvement for the benefit of all staff and pupils.
16. The areas of focus within the SDP should be clearly evident in the day to day running of the school, with a strong line of sight between the SDP and what happens in classroom practice. Teaching approaches, curriculum design, assessment and support systems should reflect agreed priorities, with staff professional learning aligned to deliver the SDP's aims.
17. Schools that are in the process of completing a legacy three-year school development planning process may continue to complete this cycle in the normal way.
18. All other schools should move to the new process and should:
 - a. Undertake a **robust process of self-evaluation** involving the whole school community and drawing on a range of data.
 - b. Based on the findings of the self-evaluation process, develop a **short, evidence-based SDP** which includes **no more than four key areas of focus** to deliver the school's vision over the three-year period ahead;
 - c. **Develop a set of actions to address each area of focus in the immediate year ahead** including baseline position, targets, actions, success criteria, key milestones, costs and responsible owner.
19. **Unnecessarily complicated or extensive documents are not required**, nor is there a need to duplicate information in the SDP which is available in school documentation elsewhere. It is recognised that there can be pressure to list

achievements or reference every individual or organisation that has contributed to the school or the positive work that goes on at the school as part of business as usual. However, this creates unnecessary work and reduces the impact of the plan.

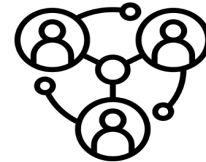
20. An evaluation of a school's development planning **process** forms part of the new model of inspection. The Empowering Improvement Framework, developed by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), seeks to engage schools in discussions on how well the school:
 - has identified and articulates its vision;
 - prioritises actions to achieve the vision;
 - overcomes the main challenges it faces;
 - monitors and reviews progression to define, celebrate and embed success; and
 - grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.
21. SDPs should be iterative, working documents which set out the 'roadmap' for the three years ahead. The school's leadership should embed regular monitoring and review cycles, considering the evidence and progress made and adjusting priorities and strategies mid-cycle if they are not having the intended impact and/or revising the plan as considered necessary.

Whole-school self-evaluation

22. The process begins with, and is underpinned and driven by, robust **whole-school self-evaluation** which looks both inwards and outwards. This will influence conclusions drawn about what the priorities should be over the next period.
23. There is no one vehicle that is recommended for this evaluation or a specific set of indicators that schools should rigidly follow. The ETI's [Empowering Improvement Framework](#), the indicators of effective performance within [ESaGS](#), the ETI's [Learning Insight Profile for Schools](#) and the ETI's former [Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework \(ISEF\)](#) may prove useful documents however, schools should primarily be led by their own professional assessment of the most important areas for improvement. This will be guided by a review of the wealth of data and first-hand evidence that schools already hold.
24. Staff members at all levels, from the classroom through to school leadership, should be engaged in ongoing, honest reflection about what is working well and could be better. This should be informed by the continuous review of **multiple sources** of first-hand evidence including the interrogation of quantitative and qualitative data (e.g. lesson observations, learner work, learner well-being and attitudes, attainment data, learner voice, stakeholder feedback). Context is central to the consideration of data and evidence should be cross-checked for reliability.



25. The evaluation process should be informed by consultation with key stakeholders – as a minimum, staff, pupils, governors and parents. Consultation should be continuous, however formal consultation, for example through surveys or focus groups, **should take place triennially in advance of developing a new three-year SDP.**
26. Schools will regularly wish to engage in professional dialogue with other schools, Education Advisers/School Improvement Professional Partners (SIPPs) and District Inspectors to learn about effective practice locally. Schools will also wish to review local and international research to inform the evaluation process.



SDP Content

27. Informed by the evaluation of data and evidence, the process moves through to setting the key **areas of focus** for improvement across the next three years. **There is no requirement to include all the matters to be addressed within the Schedule of the 2010 Regulations as the Department is working to revoke this Schedule.** There is no requirement to include specific areas of the curriculum unless this is what the self-evaluation points to as an area for action.
28. There is **no requirement for more than four areas of focus** to be addressed in any one cycle - *if everything is a priority, then nothing is*. The agreed areas may be broad and overarching or may be targeted depending on the school's self-evaluation findings and the school's context including the size of the setting. For example, to suit the setting's needs and context this might range from broad, overarching priorities like:
- teaching and learning
 - inclusion and equity
 - pupil health and wellbeing
 - leadership and management
- to more focused priorities such as:
- creating greater opportunities for outdoor play
 - embedding new specialist provision
 - professional development around SEN
 - reducing persistent absenteeism
 - smoother transitions
29. Once the school is clear on the areas on which it needs to focus and why, the **short, three-year, evidence-based SDP** can be prepared. It is expected that the SDP should be no more than **three to four pages excluding the one-year detailed action plan(s)**This should:

- a. Be fronted by the school's vision and values - this might be a high-level reference to or description of the vision with a link to any further information held elsewhere.
 - b. Include a paragraph or concise statement to set the school's context including any material challenges or opportunities specific to the individual school.
 - c. Provide a short explanation of the evaluation and evidence (including relevant evaluations for specific groups of pupils) that has informed the school's identification and prioritisation of the areas of focus across the next three years. Reference should be made to progress in addressing the priorities set out in the school's previous SDP.
 - d. Set out the areas of focus that might be presented as a plan on a page with a high-level overview of the proposed key actions in the three years ahead which will be less well defined in years two and three.
 - e. Provide a set of detailed actions for delivery in the forthcoming academic year.
30. One example of how this might be set out is attached separately at Annex A however, there is no prescribed template that schools must use.

Actions for the year ahead

31. **The school should develop detailed actions to be delivered in the forthcoming academic year only**, with the next two years in view. The actions should set challenging but realistic targets for improvement with clear outcomes linked to pupil progress (*how will we know target is achieved?*) within appropriate timescales. The action plans should identify who is responsible for delivery and the procedures in place for monitoring and evaluation.
32. The action plan(s) should flow from the areas of focus (which can be used more than once) with sub-headings linked to individual, focused modules for example on each area of learning or area of responsibility. Action plans may be linked to departmental development plans in post primary schools or relevant areas of focus within nursery, primary and special schools.
33. Annual action plans can take the form of a tabular or narrative format and should include:
 - **Baseline position:** data/evidence on where we are now.
 - **Target:** where we want to get to with interim measures as necessary to ensure progress can be celebrated intermittently.
 - **Actions:** Specific steps to be taken.
 - **Success Criteria:** how will we know we are there - how progress/impact will be measured/ what evidence will be used (this should focus on learner outcomes,

including learner experiences (what is happening in the classroom and beyond)).

- **Timescale:** When actions will be completed (milestones as necessary).
- **Resources Needed:** Staff, budget, training, etc.
- **Lead Responsibility:** Who has ownership.

34. The SDP must be informed by the school's context but in setting targets for improvement, schools should consider the need to address underachievement and support all learners, especially those at risk of disadvantage. Schools may wish to consider overall performance and the gap between the highest and lowest achievers, between the most and least disadvantaged pupils and between girls and boys.
35. To assist in setting targets for inclusion in their SDPs, schools may wish to refer to the [Interim End of Key Stage Statutory Assessment Outcomes 2024/25](#)¹ for performance data around Communication and Using mathematics at Key Stages 1-3. Data from the system-level sample checks undertaken by pupils in March 2026, will be published in June 2026. Benchmarking data for Key Stages 4-5 is provided at Annex B.

Review

36. Not all initiatives will be deliverable within a single year, and some will carry forward into the following year's action plan(s). Conversely, where an area of focus is addressed quickly, it may not feature in actions plans for years two and three. Action plans should be reviewed regularly, at intervals appropriate to their duration. For most actions plans, a formal annual review is expected.
37. The SDP cycle concludes with a review of progress and celebration of success which would be helpfully summarised in an evaluative statement. This should be included in the SDP documentation. The process then renews with a refresh of the evaluation which may include carrying forward, building upon or embedding previous areas of focus as appropriate.

Presentation and publication of the SDP

38. There is no gold standard for presenting the SDP. Schools may wish to produce a simple and effective word or pdf version for publication. Alternatively, school's that have access to presentational tools may wish to produce a more interactive version however this is not a requirement.
39. Schools may find it beneficial to display the priorities within the school on noticeboards or in the staffroom.

¹ In referencing this data, schools should be aware that Pupils in Years 4, 7 and 10 were assessed by teachers in Communication and Using Mathematics only. Returns were not standardised or moderated. Assessment of Communication was in the area of reading and Using Mathematics in the area of number only. The level of school participation was 40% of primary schools and 49% of post-primary schools.

40. Once approved, a copy of the SDP should be shared with each member of the Board of Governors, the Principal and all staff. It should be **published on the school's website** where it is accessible to parents and other members of the school community.
41. The SDP should also be submitted to the Managing Authorities – a request will issue from the Education Authority in the autumn term requesting that plans are uploaded before term-end and setting out the process. Uploaded SDPs may be shared with relevant DE officials and will be used to consider the key priorities which schools are seeking to address, to inform policy making, identify potential school improvement support needs and tailor other system supports (such as the professional learning offer).

Further information and support

42. All schools can seek advice and support for school development planning from their allocated SIPP. In the case of Catholic maintained schools, Education Advisers in the CCMS can offer advice and support.
43. The EA's School Development Service offers a range of professional learning opportunities annually around the process.
44. The managing authorities and sectoral support bodies offer support and advice to assist schools in developing their vision and ethos.
45. Support and assistance on managing data is available from the EA's C2K service.
46. A school may request a visit at any time by its ETI District Inspector to discuss school development planning. A request can be made by completing a [District/Specialist Visit Request Form](#). The ETI's '[Empowering Improvement – New Framework for Inspection](#)' sets out the focus on whole-organisation self-evaluation, and the five core questions that are central to all inspections going forward. The five core questions include an enhanced focus on: the ethos and culture of the school/organisation; its context; its vision and values; and how it creates a community of learning.

Enquiries

47. Any enquiries about this guidance should be directed to School Improvement Team in the Department at DEsit@education-ni.gov.uk.