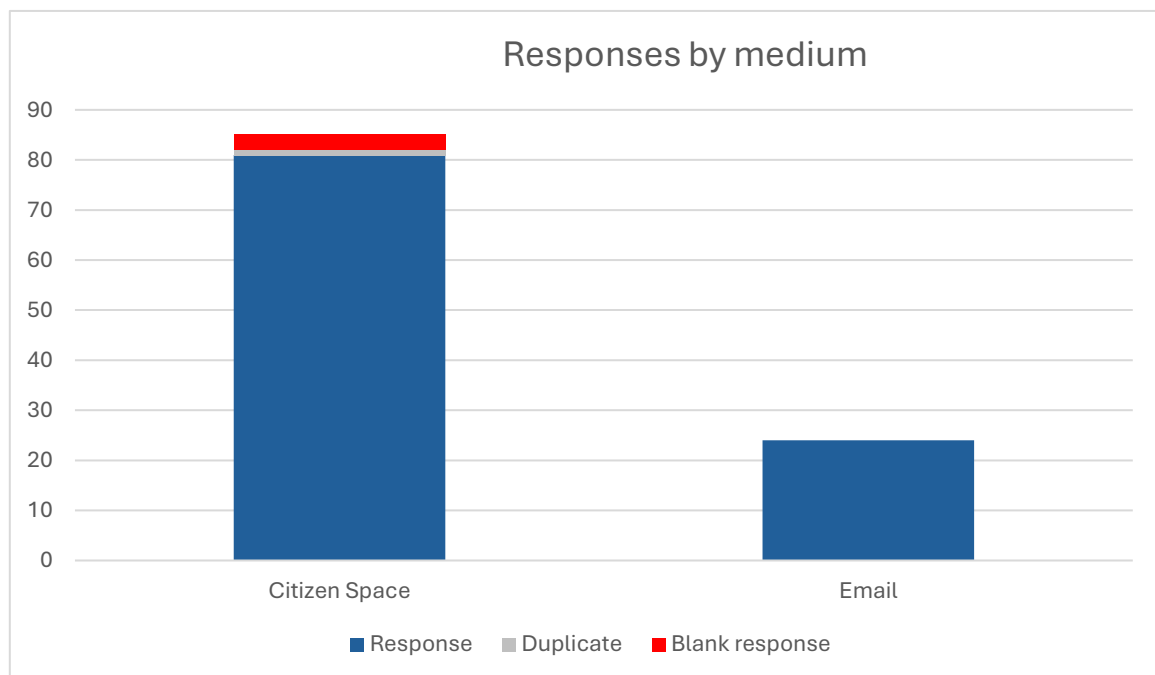


## Summary Report on the Responses to the Consultation on the Five-Year Education Budget Strategy

From 4 February to 3 April 2026 the Department of Education carried out a public consultation regarding the proposed Five-Year Education Budget Strategy. The consultation was hosted on the NI Direct Citizen Space platform, with additional responses received by email. The consultation set out six questions regarding the proposals contained within the Strategy. A summary of the responses is provided below.

### Summary of responses

In total, 105 responses were received: 24 by email and 81 via Citizen Space. One respondent advised that a response was provided via both email and Citizen Space and to disregard the latter. Three blank Citizen Space responses were excluded.



## **Question 1 – Sufficiency of proposed budget allocations**

**Do you believe that the proposed allocations for Education in the Department of Finance draft budget are sufficient to deliver an effective education system? If not, what alternative allocations would you propose?**

Of 105 respondents, 59% considered the draft budget insufficient and 6% considered it sufficient if optimally utilised. A further 35% of respondents either did not respond or gave responses that did not explicitly answer the question.

Respondents who considered the draft budget insufficient raised concerns about the ability of the Department of Education (DE) and the Education Authority (EA) to meet demand and statutory duties, particularly for Special Educational Needs (SEN), transport, safeguarding, inclusion and estate maintenance. Many warned that continued underfunding would increase inequality, destabilise schools and shift costs to families and other public services.

Respondents stressed the need for stable, long-term funding, especially for SEN, cautioning that short-term cuts, particularly to early intervention, could lead to higher future costs. Several respondents also noted that proposed reforms may require significant upfront investment not reflected in current allocations and called for clarity on long-term funding to avoid waste from short-term or emergency spending.

A small number argued the budget could be sufficient if major structural reforms were implemented and perceived waste eliminated, particularly in the area of SEN.

*“The significant funding deficit facing education, with schools reporting deficits and infrastructure delays, directly undermines efforts to support disadvantaged children. The strategy must address how adequate, sustainable education funding will be secured.”*

*“Education has been underfunded and under prioritised for decades and schools are already under so much financial pressure that they cannot deliver the standard of education they want to.”*

*“It is very clear that the proposed allocations in the budget are insufficient to deliver an effective education system. You only need to look at the number of schools operating in a financial deficit to see this. Whilst cutting costs in some areas of education is*

*necessary, all indicators are that even when these cost cutting measures are put in place, there will not be enough money available to meet the ever increasing needs of the education system in Northern Ireland.”*

*“Yes - Dept of Education needs to reform our system and work within their budget. The answer can't be ‘give me more money’ every time.”*

## **Question 2 – Agreement with proposed savings areas**

***In the context of the proposed draft budget allocations for education, do you agree with the areas of potential savings within the Five-Year Education Budget Strategy? If not, what areas that could generate equivalent savings would you propose?***

In the Five-Year Education Budget Strategy, six pillars of reform were laid out across the “areas for reform” and “reform projects”. Illustrative quotes from respondents have been included alongside the responses relating to each area.

**Reduction of earmarked budgets** – Concern was raised around the cessation of several earmarked funding programmes, including those relating to early years, extended schools, nurture and youth services. These were widely viewed as spend-to-save, with short-term cuts seen as false economies harming equality, children’s rights and anti-poverty outcomes. However, it was noted that reductions or cessations of earmarked funds could reduce the administrative burden requirements on schools.

*“Some reduction [is] possible by looking at how to deliver projects more effectively but avoid removing completely, due to the disproportionate impact of reduction of extended schools, youth services, sure start on children/young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.”*

*“Reduce administrative burden and transaction costs through streamlined processes, standardised programme/partnership packs and simplified reporting requirements for schools.”*

*“Investment in early intervention and partnership working with the voluntary and community sector can also help reduce demand for more costly statutory services in the longer term.”*

**Home-to-school transport** – There was general support for reform of home-to-school transport, with a general focus on reduction of use of taxis and some advocating better coordination with public transport as a solution. However, a number of respondents raised concerns about reform of transport eligibility criteria and its potential impact on access to Irish Medium, Integrated education and Grammar schools where this is not the pupil’s nearest post-primary option, particularly for rural and disadvantaged families.

*“The cost of taxis needs to end completely and [be] replace[d] with EA buses for all those needing it.”*

*“A lack of capacity in the EA bus service infrastructure and workforce has made it difficult to provide suitable and accessible transport for children with additional needs, with examples of children having unacceptably long journey times which leads to an over-reliance on private taxis.”*

*“The proposal to narrow the definition of “nearest suitable school” for transport eligibility directly contradicts the statutory duty to encourage integrated and Irish medium education.”*

**School meals provision** – A number of respondents were supportive of proposed reforms to school meals delivery, such as consolidating kitchens while maintaining nutritional value and greater cashless integration. However, there was concern around shifting the financial burden of meals to families and general opposition to any change which would reduce the nutritional quality of meals provided.

*“Consolidating kitchens and expanding cashless systems can generate efficiencies without harming uptake or freshness.”*

*“Changes to school meals risk shifting costs onto families during a cost-of-living crisis, undermining children’s ability to learn.”*

*“The extent of child poverty in NI is such that for some children the school meal is the main opportunity for nutritious food. Any changes to the provision of school meals should ensure that the quality of the meal remains high and that children have access to a nutritionally balanced meal.”*

*“School meals delivery can be reformed by consolidating smaller kitchens into fewer efficient production sites, expanding cashless payments and boosting uptake through better parental engagement — all while maintaining or improving nutritional standards.”*

*“Kitchens that rely on bulk cooking, reheating and long-distance transport, particularly in rural areas, can risk reducing the freshness of food provided, limit variety and compromise quality.”*

**SEN support model for statemented pupils in mainstream schools** – Many respondents regarded one-to-one classroom assistant support as essential for safety, inclusion and classroom functioning, warning that reductions would harm vulnerable pupils and increase teacher workload. Others favoured reform, arguing the model is inefficient and advocating group-based or teacher-led approaches. Some respondents emphasised the need for greater training of staff regarding SEN issues and their responsibilities.

*“Evidence shows current SEN support is inconsistent and often ineffective. A skills-based model with better training would improve outcomes without major new spending.”*

*“If you go into any school, you will see that SEN assistants are not just 1-1, they are 1-3, 1-5, 1-8, 1-33 sometimes... They not only support the SEN child, but EVERY single child in that classroom.”*

*“One-to-one classroom assistants are not a luxury; they are often the mechanism through which a child can communicate, regulate behaviour, engage with learning materials and participate in the classroom community. Removing or diluting this support risks reversing progress that pupils, families and schools have worked hard to achieve.”*

*“It is now more rare in my school to have a pupil without any additional needs therefore the pedagogy and 1-1 framework needs to change away from the direct 1-1.”*

**Restructuring of the school estate** – There was general support for the restructuring and rationalisation of the schools' estate, particularly where enrolment numbers were considered unsustainable. A number of respondents referenced the influence of political and societal factors on delaying or preventing decisions relating to restructuring. Several respondents raised concerns about the impact of school closures on rural communities, including increased travel distances and the potential for associated transport costs to reduce anticipated efficiencies.

*“I definitely feel that smaller schools need to be closed or subject [to] amalgamation. It is unfair for children in country areas to be sitting in classes of 5 or 6. When inner city areas have classes of 30 plus.”*

*“Experience has shown that, at least in the short-medium term, such change does not reduce costs; indeed it is often the case that realising effective change has an additional cost in the short term...”*

*“While [named organisation] broadly supports the rationalisation of the school estate, the deep-rooted political, religious and societal complexities involved must be fully acknowledged and mitigated. Furthermore, any restructuring will disproportionately impact rural communities, where inadequate transport infrastructure will severely exacerbate these challenges.”*

*“Restructuring of the school estate requires hard but necessary decisions to close smaller schools as these are not viable and not sustainable in the current economic climate. There have been reviews [of] the school estate in the past but it is crucial that this time politicians don't block closures/mergers just because they are unpopular with constituents.”*

**Reform of the Model of Financial Delegation** – Respondents note that widespread school deficits stem from systemic funding pressures rather than poor financial management. Some are concerned that reforms could disadvantage schools that have managed budgets responsibly and they advocate greater delegation of authority to schools. Some welcome voluntary severance, though there is scepticism about the potential savings from centralised staffing models and redeployment.

*“The options proposed, including early severance and redeployment options are therefore to be welcomed. In relation to the ‘centralised staffing model’, it is unclear how this would reduce costs since many of the schools in significant deficit employ only those staff necessary to deliver the curriculum.”*

*“In relation to financial management, many pressures are systemic. Grant Maintained Integrated schools are particularly vulnerable, where deficit is not an option. Reform should address structural pressures and ensure consistency across school types, rather than rely primarily on increased oversight.”*

*“Give schools with significant surplus budgets board of governors greater control to spend these funds for the betterment of the school.”*

*“Schools are the experts and should have more say.”*

### **Question 3 – Priority areas for funding**

#### **What education services should be prioritised for funding over the next five years?**

Respondents suggested prioritised funding for SEN, frontline staffing, estate maintenance, school meals and programmes viewed as spend-to-save such as Sure Start, early intervention, nurture and speech and language support. SEN was consistently identified as the highest priority, with calls to protect or increase funding for classroom assistants, early intervention and specialist supports such as Speech and Language Therapy.

Respondents also advocated supporting frontline staff, including teachers and classroom assistants, with concerns raised about pay, job security, workload and professional development, which were identified as contributing to long-term retention issues.

Estate maintenance was seen as essential for safety and long-term cost control, with support for proactive repairs, alongside widespread calls for procurement reform.

Affordability and nutritional standard of school meals, wellbeing and youth services were seen as critical to engagement and safeguarding.

*“SEN services must be the highest priority. This includes early identification and intervention, timely assessments, classroom assistants, specialist teaching and access to therapies. Sustained investment in SEN provision reduces reliance on costly crisis interventions and out-of-area placements while improving outcomes for children and families.”*

*“There must also be adequate funding set aside for school maintenance, ensuring children are taught in safe, secure and suitable accommodation.”*

*“Pupil wellbeing and readiness to learn, including supports that mitigate food insecurity and help pupils attend, engage and benefit from learning.”*

*“Recruitment and retention of qualified teaching and support staff by providing fair salaries, addressing workload and using contracts to provide job security. Continued professional development and the time needed to ensure training can be transferred into school settings for maximum impact.”*

#### **Question 4 – Areas for reform**

***Are there education services that can be reformed over the next five years in order to deliver high quality education with a limited budget?***

Respondents generally supported reform in principle, provided it is evidence-based, phased and savings are reinvested into classrooms.

Many defended one-to-one provision as essential and highlighted low pay and job insecurity for classroom assistants, while others supported graduated or shared models if properly resourced. Some, however, questioned the efficacy of the 1:1 provision model.

Respondents broadly agreed on the need to reduce reliance on taxis in school transport, improve route planning and expand provision, potentially with Department for Infrastructure involvement, but stressed that access must be protected and expressed concern about changes to transport eligibility criteria.

Procurement was frequently cited as a key cost-reduction opportunity, with criticism of supplier frameworks, bottlenecks and poor value for money. Some called for greater school autonomy to use open-market suppliers.

There was broad support for estate rationalisation where duplication or unsustainable enrolment exists, but opposition to blanket rural closures and scepticism about short-term savings.

Some respondents expressed support for well-designed voluntary severance and redeployment schemes, though some questioned if a centralised staffing model would provide savings.

*“Keeping one to one assistants and classroom assistants in the schools as schools could not work without them.”*

*“SEN support can be reformed by moving away from over-reliance on one-to-one classroom assistance towards team-based, flexible, needs-led models supported by training and professional development.”*

*“Reform the [transport] system rather than reduce it. As an initial step, decrease reliance on costly taxi provision.”*

*“While quality control is essential in procurement, anecdotally schools report achieving considerable savings on the open market, rather than 'lproc' suppliers. Savings will not be transformative, but an important efficiency.”*

*“As a teacher I have had many one-to-one classroom assistants in my classroom. In every situation, the child has never completely needed the assistant 100% of the time.”*

### **Question 5 – Opportunities for cost reduction**

**What further opportunities to significantly reduce education costs should be explored?**

Respondents often argued sustainable savings lie mainly in addressing system inefficiencies rather than cutting frontline services, with strong opposition to reductions

in SEN support, early years and early intervention, or charging families for access to education.

**Central administration, governance and duplication**, particularly between DE, EA and sectoral bodies, were identified as an alternative savings opportunity. Several respondents expressed concerns about excessive senior management layers and pay.

**Procurement reform** was raised as an area an area for cost reduction with criticism of inflated pricing, restrictive frameworks, poor-value maintenance contracts and approval delays that escalate costs. Many called for greater purchasing flexibility and more proactive maintenance.

**School transport** was cited as a potential savings area, with support for reducing taxi use, especially for SEN pupils. However, some respondents stressed the need to protect access to integrated and Irish-medium education.

Many also supported **estate rationalisation** where enrolments are low or provision duplicated, but emphasised the need for independent, evidence-based decisions.

*“Any opportunities to reduce education costs should focus on systemic inefficiencies rather than frontline services for vulnerable children. This includes a serious examination of duplication across the education system, including governance structures, sectoral administration and parallel support services.”*

*“Reform procurement, transport and estate management. Local reviews identify inefficiencies in school transport contracts, maintenance and capital planning.”*

*“Small repairs are not being carried out to reduce costs. These then become big jobs and cost sooo much more.”*

*“Closing small primary schools... where no significant increase in numbers is expected/projected. This must be done on a locality basis, not on a denominational basis.”*

## **Question 6 – Further comments**

### **Have you any other comments that may be relevant to considering the Five-Year Education Budget Strategy?**

Respondents often framed the strategy as cost-cutting rather than child-centred, stating that greater investment is necessary for reform. Some respondents felt decision-making is disconnected from classroom realities and called for co-design with children, young people, practitioners and communities.

Some respondents expressed concern about the absence of published Equality Impact, Children's Rights and Rural Needs Assessments and noted perceived inconsistencies between the Education Budget Strategy and the Draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy.

A few respondents proposed revenue-raising measures, including renting out school facilities outside school hours.

There was repeated concern about reforms being delayed or not delivered and workforce wellbeing and retention were highlighted as key risks. Teacher workloads and a lack of job security for classroom assistants were frequently cited as contributing factors to poor retention.

*“A five year education budget strategy will only be credible if it tackles the collapse in public trust. Families and staff have watched years of consultations, reviews and “engagement” that rarely change decisions, while local audit and committee reports repeatedly highlight duplication, delays and weak accountability in the Education Authority and Department.”*

*“Without addressing the triple threat of pay, contact hours and workload, this strategy ensures systemic burnout.”*

*“Think differently. Instead of cutting; try generating. Additional opportunities to generate income could include greater use of school facilities outside the school day...”*