

Terms of Reference for the commissioning of an Independent Expert to support a Departmental Review of Behaviour Policy

1. Background

The Department of Education (DE) is undertaking a strategic review of behaviour policy and practice across the Northern Ireland school system. This reflects increasing challenges relating to pupil behaviour and the need to ensure that existing policy frameworks remain effective, practical, and aligned with wider system priorities, including inclusion, Special Educational Needs (SEN) and safeguarding.

The Minister has indicated his intention to commission Tom Bennett, in an independent expert capacity, to support this review and contribute to the development of a strengthened and coherent approach to behaviour across the system.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this commission is to provide independent expert advice and support to the Department in conducting an evidence-informed review of behaviour policy and practice.

The review will inform the development of:

- A Departmental Behaviour Policy Statement setting out the strategic direction; and
- Updated Behaviour Guidance for Schools, providing clear and practical implementation guidance.

The review is expected to commence in June 2026 and conclude by December 2026, with final policy and guidance to be published in January 2027.

3. Objectives

The key objectives of the review are to ensure that behaviour policy:

- Is grounded in evidence-informed and practical approaches to behaviour management;
- Supports teachers in maintaining safe, calm and purposeful learning environments;
- Aligns with the aims of inclusion, SEN, and safeguarding frameworks; and
- Is clear, consistent, and implementable across all education settings.

4. Scope of Work

The Independent Expert will undertake the areas of work outlined below.

4.1 Policy Review and System Analysis

- Review existing DE behaviour policy and guidance;
- Assess clarity, accessibility, and practical application;
- Update policy in line with current evidence-informed best practice; and
- Ensure policy is operationally realistic and grounded in classroom experience.

4.2 Sector Engagement

- Design and lead targeted engagement with a representative sample of schools and stakeholders;
- Facilitate a “call for evidence” to inform the review; and
- Gather insights on:
 - Current behaviour systems and approaches;
 - Challenges experienced by school leaders and staff;
 - Examples of effective and scalable practice.

4.3 School Visits

- Undertake 5–10 targeted school visits to:
 - Observe behaviour systems and routines in practice;
 - Engage directly with school leaders, teachers, and support staff;
 - Identify effective models of behaviour culture with potential for wider adoption.

4.4 Policy Development

- Work collaboratively with Departmental officials to develop:
 - A Departmental Behaviour Policy Statement (strategic framework);
 - A Behaviour Guidance Circular providing practical, actionable guidance for schools; and
- Ensure outputs achieve an appropriate balance between strategic clarity and operational practicality.

5. Deliverables

The review has the following key deliverables:

By December 2026

- Draft Departmental Behaviour Policy Statement;
- Draft Behaviour Guidance Circular.

By January 2027

- Final Behaviour Policy Statement;
- Final Behaviour Guidance Circular (ready for publication and launch).

6. Timeline and estimated time commitment

Overall timeframe: 22 June 2026 – 31 January 2027

Estimated Time Commitment

Period	Days	Activity
June 2026	5	Scoping, initial review, stakeholder engagement
July 2026	3	Documentation review and early analysis
August 2026	2	Engagement design and preparation
September 2026	10	School visits and stakeholder engagement
October–November 2026	10	Analysis and presentation of findings
November–December 2026	10	Drafting policy and guidance
September –December 2026	5	Planning and delivery of a behaviour conference
January 2027	5	Finalisation, dissemination, and presentations
Total	50 days	

7. Key Milestones

- June–August 2026: Scoping, review, and preparation
- September 2026: School visits and sector engagement
- October–November 2026: Analysis and reporting of findings
- November–December 2026: Drafting of policy and guidance
- January 2027: Finalisation, publication, and launch

8. Governance and Reporting

- The Independent Expert will work in partnership with the DE project team;
- The Department will provide administrative, analytical, and drafting support;
- Regular progress updates will be provided at agreed checkpoints; and
- Outputs will be developed iteratively in collaboration with DE officials.

10. Expected Outcomes

The exercise is expected to deliver the following outcomes:

- Establish a clear, evidence-informed Departmental position on behaviour;
- Increase confidence among school leaders and teachers in behaviour systems;
- Provide practical, consistent, and implementable guidance;
- Align behaviour policy with Departmental and system priorities; and
- Support sector-wide engagement and readiness for implementation.