5-YEAR EDUCATION BUDGET STRATEGY: STRUCTURAL REFORM PROGRAMME BRIEF

Delivering a stable, sustainable and high-quality education system

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1. Background

1.1 The Education Minister's [Five-Year Budget Strategy] sets out a programme of structural reforms to deliver a stable, sustainable and high-quality education system.

1.2 The Structural Reform Programme ('the Programme') will oversee overall progress against implementation of the Strategy.

1.3 Delivery of the Strategy, however, also relies on the broader transformation of the Education system through the TransformED Strategy and SEND Reform.

1.4 Publications and documents relating to the Programme are hosted on a dedicated webpage - Structural Reform Programme | Department of Education.

2. Purpose

2.1 The purpose of this Programme Brief is to support the implementation of the Strategy and achievement of its strategic outcomes.

2.2 Specially the Programme Brief:

- outlines the Programme scope;
- ensures a clear understanding of governance arrangements, roles and responsibilities;
- provides the basis for the Programme's management and measurement of its success;
- reflects underpinning assumptions and cross-cutting enablers of reform; and
- captures known constraints and interdependencies.

3. Programme Scope

3.1. The key areas for reform and associated aims of the Programme are as follows:

- **Home-to-School Transport** - Create an affordable and sustainable transport system
- **School Meals** - Modernise school catering to deliver high-quality, cost-effective meals for all pupils.
- **Special Educational Needs Support Model** - Develop a sustainable, inclusive, needs-led support model that improves education outcomes for pupils with SEN.
- **Schools' Estate** - Create a sustainable school network that reflects demographic trends and delivers curriculum breadth
- **Financial Delegation** - Strengthen financial governance and accountability in schools to restore stability

3.2. Other reforms which could contribute to the overall aim of the Strategy may be identified and subject to consideration by the Minister.

4. Governance

4.1. A Programme Board has been established, co-chaired by the Department of Education (DE) Permanent Secretary and the EA Chief Executive.

4.2. The Programme Board will provide strategic oversight of the programme of reforms (see Terms of Reference).

4.3. Delivery of the contributing reforms may though be through a range of approaches:

- Use of existing project or programme structures led by DE, EA or jointly as appropriate e.g. SEN Reform.
- Work commissioned and governed directly by the Department e.g. Area Planning Commission.
- Work commissioned and governed by the Programme Board led by DE, EA or jointly as appropriate.

4.4. Where reforms are being delivered through pre-existing project/programme structures or work commissioned directly by the Department, governance, planning and reporting will not duplicate or supersede agreed arrangements. Steps will be taken to ensure this work is captured and reflected in reporting of overall progress and to ensure interdependencies across the programme are managed appropriately.

4.5. Project Teams may be established by the Programme Board for work that is required to be commissioned and governed directly by the Programme Board. Project Leads will be nominated as appropriate in line with the nature of the work to be progressed at any given time.

4.6. Where appropriate, Project Teams will be responsible for scoping and planning the specific actions that will be taken; as well as driving delivery, reporting progress and managing risk.

4.7. Where appropriate, Project Plans or PIDs will be developed for approval by the Programme Board, and should include:

- Project scope (in & out) and deliverables;
- Action owners & timelines;
- Full costings and projected savings;
- Interdependencies and/or reform enablers e.g. policy/legislative change, workforce requirements, research & evidence
- Known constraints;
- Risks and mitigations; and
- High level plans for communication and stakeholder engagement.

4.8. Applicable Project Plans/PIDs, and the recommended contributing reforms therein, require the approval of the Programme Board. They may also evolve and be updated as necessary, particularly where later activity remains dependent on earlier actions.

5. Underpinning enablers

5.1. A number of cross-cutting enablers will underpin the programme:

- research and evidence to underpin policy, practice and legislative changes;
- communications and stakeholder management;
- workforce management/strategy;
- policy reform and/or legislative change; and
- implementation/delivery resources.

5.2. Project teams will be asked to identify these requirements during the scoping and planning process, and as part of ongoing progress reporting & risk management.

5.3. Strategic oversight of this, including interdependencies, will be provided by the DE Structural Reform Programme Team.

6. Programme Constraints and interdependencies

6.1. Individual reforms may remain subject to budget availability, Ministerial and/or Executive approval and business case approval where required.

6.2. It is recognised that some operational reforms are contingent on prior policy reform and or legislative change.

6.3. Other key stakeholders across the sector hold specific responsibilities particularly in respect of employing and managing authorities for Catholic maintained, Voluntary Grammar and Grant Maintained Integrated schools. It is important that these stakeholders work in partnership to deliver the intended outcomes.

7. Benefits Realisation

7.1. The key programme benefits are:

Benefit	Description
Benefit 1	More effective and efficient use of resources to maximise value for children and young people with special educational needs
Benefit 2	Improved operational efficiency with a stabilisation of delivery costs
Benefit 3	A more sustainable school estate with schools operating at an educationally appropriate and financially viable scale, matched to demographic trends
Benefit 4	Stronger governance, accountability and financial controls

Benefit 5	Financial management capability in schools is increased

7.2. A Benefits Realisation Plan (BRP) will be developed.

8. Programme Deliverables and Timescales

8.1. The Programme will be delivered over 5 years.

8.2. The key deliverables and timescales for the Programme will be confirmed and captured through the governance and planning arrangements outlined above.

Document Version Control

Version	Date	Author	Changes Made / Summary of Updates	Approved By
0.1	16/06/2026	Sharon Smyth (Programme Director)	Draft created for initial review	
0.2	21/08/2026	Sharon Smyth (Programme Director)	Updated following feedback from July Board meeting	
0.3	08/09/2026	EA	Updated	
1.0	23/09/2026	Sharon Smyth (Programme Director)	Final version approved	Structural Reform Programme Board