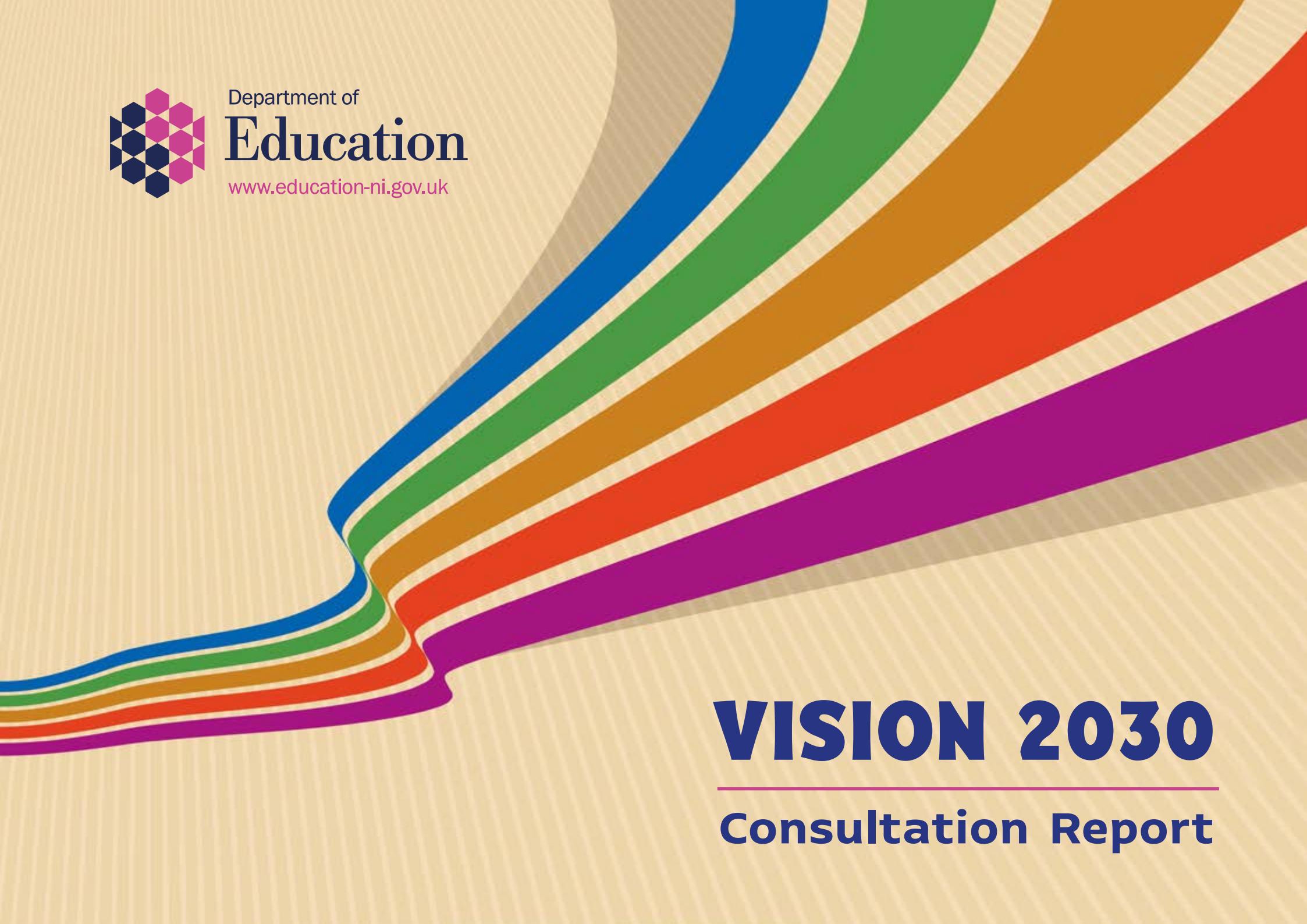




Department of
Education
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VISION 2030

Consultation Report

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Introduction

1. The Integrated Education (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 (the Act) came into force on 26 October 2022 and placed a number of requirements on the Department;
 - a. The Department of Education must prepare, publish and maintain a strategy for the encouragement, facilitation, support for and provision of Integrated Education by 26 April 2023.
 - b. The Department of Education must prepare or commission and publish a report on integrated education by 26 April 2024.
 - c. As soon as is reasonably practicable after the publication of a report the Department of Education must review and where necessary revise the integrated education strategy.
2. A revised draft version of the Strategy, Action Plan and associated benchmark data was published on 27 March 2025 alongside a public consultation that closed on 23 May 2025.
3. The primary response method for this consultation was through the online survey on the Citizen Space Hub. In addition, email responses to the Department from stakeholders were collated and considered.
4. This Report aims to provide an understanding of the consultation process and its outcomes. The level of engagement, key themes and insights gathered will be reviewed and considered prior to developing a final Integrated Education Strategy and Action Plan.

Consultation Proposals

5. The consultation sought views and feedback on a draft Strategy, Action Plan and Benchmark Data to inform, shape and improve final policy proposals to reflect changes to the law on Integrated Education made within the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.
6. In particular, the consultation sought views on the actions, targets and benchmarks contained in the consultation documents that will enable the Department to make progress towards achieving our overarching vision for Integrated Education set out within the Strategy.



'a vibrant and supported network of sustainable Integrated schools providing high quality Integrated Education to children and young people.'

Consultation Responses

7. Of the 165 online responses,

- 65 were from parents/guardians
- 70 from members of the public
- 1 school leader
- 16 from teachers or educational practitioners
- 5 school governors
- 8 sectoral bodies

Of the parents responses, 25 had children that were attending an Integrated school while 1 school leader, 4 governors and 7 teachers or educational practitioners were involved with an

Integrated school, with 4 members of the public also reporting a connection to an Integrated post-primary school.

8. Of all the respondents who had a child at school, 37 attended a primary school, 29 attended a post primary school, 11 attended pre-school, 1 attended special school, with 5 reporting none of the above.

9. Most respondents used the free text element of the consultation as an opportunity to highlight issues or concerns relevant to them, notwithstanding their support or otherwise for the strategy.

10. Responses to Question 13. 'To help us measure the success of the strategy, please tell us to what extent you agree or disagree that the strategy and action plan helped you understand the requirements of the Act?' were as follows:

Strongly Agree	32	19.39%
Agree	56	33.94%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	60	36.36%
Disagree	14	8.48%
Strongly Disagree	3	1.82%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

11. Responses to Question 14. 'To what extent do you agree or disagree that the vision for Integrated Education is fitting and in line with the Act?' were as follows:

Strongly Agree	40	24.24 %
Agree	54	32.73%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	44	26.67%
Disagree	17	10.30%
Strongly Disagree	10	6.06%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

12. The comments provided after this question reveal dissatisfaction with the Department of Education's vision for Integrated Education in Northern Ireland. Key criticisms include:

- **Lack of Ambition & Targets:** The vision is seen as unambitious, lacking concrete goals, timelines, and measurable targets for growth. Commenters demand a requirement for more Integrated schools.
- **Integrated vs. Shared Education:** There's a rejection of "Shared Education" being equated with genuine "Integrated Education." True Integration means children learning together daily in the same classrooms.
- **Insufficient Support & Funding:** Concerns are raised about inadequate funding and practical support for Integrated Education and transforming schools.
- **Implementation Failures:** Recent Ministerial decisions are cited as contradicting the stated vision, leading to scepticism about its actual implementation.

- **Inclusive Definition:** Calls exist for a more inclusive definition of “Integrated” to reflect Northern Ireland’s diverse society, including non-religious groups, and for a more pluralistic approach to Religious Education.

13. Overall, commenters believe Integrated Education is vital for a harmonious society but that the current vision falls short, needing more ambition, clear targets, and genuine support.

14. Responses to Question 15. ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree with the strategic aims for Integrated Education?’ were as follows:

Strongly Agree	66	40.00 %
Agree	45	27.27 %
Neither Agree nor Disagree	9	5.45 %
Disagree	37	22.42 %
Strongly Disagree	8	4.85 %
Not Answered	0	0.00 %

15. Responses to Question 16. ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Actions proposed

in the Action Plan deliver on the Department and EA’s duty to encourage, facilitate and support Integrated Education?’ were as follows:

Strongly Agree	42	25.45%
Agree	44	26.67%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	19	11.52%
Disagree	44	26.67%
Strongly Disagree	16	9.70%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

16. The comments express dissatisfaction with the Department of Education’s Integrated Education strategy in Northern Ireland. Key themes include:

- **Lack of Specificity and Ambition:** The strategy is widely criticized for lacking clear, measurable targets and sufficient ambition for increasing Integrated school places and transformations.
- **Insufficient Funding and Support:** Concerns are raised about inadequate financial

resources and practical support for Integrated Education.

- **Implementation Gap:** There's a perceived disconnect between the stated vision and actual ministerial decisions.
- **Distinction from Shared Education:** Commenters emphasize that true Integration means full-time learning together, not occasional shared activities.
- **Integrated Education as the Norm:** Many advocate for Integrated Education to become the standard option across Northern Ireland.
- **Inclusivity and Admissions:** Issues around current admissions quotas and the perceived ethos of Integrated schools hindering access for non-religious and "Other" groups are also highlighted.

17. Responses to Question 17. 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed targets?' were as follows:

Strongly Agree	37	22.42%
Agree	39	23.64%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	23	13.94%
Disagree	23	13.94%
Strongly Disagree	43	26.06%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

18. The comments are critical of the Department of Education's Integrated Education Strategy for its lack of specific and ambitious targets. Key themes include:

- **Insufficient Measurable Targets:** The most dominant criticism is the scarcity of clear, measurable goals for new Integrated schools, transformations, and pupil numbers, leading to doubts about accountability and progress.

- **Lack of Ambition & Resources:** Commenters view existing targets as unambitious, reflecting a perceived lack of commitment and necessary resources for growth.
- **Gap in Implementation:** Frustration is evident over parental demand for Integrated Education being overridden by departmental decisions, highlighting a disconnect between policy and practice.
- **Need for Broader Integration:** Calls exist for Integrated Education to become the norm, with concerns raised about admissions criteria and the inclusive ethos of schools.

19. Responses to Question 18. 'Are you aware of any other issues, actions or targets not currently included within the Strategy or Action Plan that might be included?' were as follows:

Yes	87	52.73%
No	78	47.27%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

20. The comments reveal general dissatisfaction with the strategy, primarily due to:

- **Lack of Concrete, Ambitious Targets:** A dominant theme is the absence of measurable goals for new Integrated schools, transformations, and pupil numbers, leading to concerns about accountability and genuine growth.
- **Inadequate Funding and Resources:** Critics consistently highlight insufficient financial allocation and under-resourcing for key support bodies.
- **Challenge to Christian Ethos and Demand for Pluralistic RE:** Many call for removing the "Christian ethos" from Integrated schools and ensuring Religious Education is taught objectively, covering all religions and non-religious beliefs.
- **Implementation Gaps and Accountability:** Frustration is evident over ministerial decisions seemingly undermining the

strategy and a lack of clear accountability for progress.

- **Demand for Universal, Inclusive Integration:** Commenters advocate for Integrated Education to be the norm, accessible to all, and to encompass a broader definition of diversity beyond just religious background.

21. Responses to Question 19. 'To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Departments definition of demand is suitable for assessing and monitoring demand?' were as follows:

Strongly Agree	30	18.18%
Agree	43	26.06%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	21	12.73%
Disagree	31	18.79%
Strongly Disagree	40	24.24%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

22. The comments on Questions 19 primarily focus on the measurement and interpretation of parental demand for Integrated Education, indicating disagreement with the Department of Education's current approach. The key themes are:

- **Flawed Definition/Measurement of "Demand":** This is the most dominant theme across both questions. Commenters widely argue that the Department's definition of "demand," largely based on current school application behaviour and existing provision, is inaccurate and misleading. They contend that it underestimates true parental demand because:
 - i. Parents cannot apply for Integrated schools where none exist locally.

ii. Parents may not apply for oversubscribed Integrated schools, fearing their child won't get in.

iii. Logistical factors (e.g., proximity, transport) often dictate school choice over a preference for Integration.

iv. The measure compares a "potential" (unmet demand) to a "real" (limited existing options) situation.

◉ **Unmet and Latent Demand:** There's a belief that significant "latent" or "unmet" demand for Integrated Education exists, particularly in areas without provision, and that the current methods fail to capture this.

◉ **Disregard for Parental Voice and Ballots:** Frustration is expressed that demonstrated parental demand, such as successful ballots for school transformation (e.g.,

Bangor Academy), is often ignored or overruled by ministerial decisions.

◉ **Need for Proactive Assessment and Provision:** Commenters advocate for more proactive methods to assess demand, such as:

i. Surveys directly asking about aspirations for Integrated Education.

ii. Recording parental preference at birth registration.

iii. Including Integrated nursery provision in demand assessments.

iv. Acknowledging demand that results in oversubscription, even if it doesn't lead to a successful application.

◉ **Integrated Education as the Norm/Societal Benefit:** Many comments reiterate the belief that Integrated Education should be

the norm and that it offers broader societal benefits, suggesting that “demand” should not be the sole determinant for its provision.

- **Lack of Action and Resourcing:** The comments also implicitly or explicitly connect the flawed demand measurement to a perceived lack of action, inadequate funding, and a slow pace in establishing new Integrated schools or supporting transformations.

23. Responses to Question 20. ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree that the measures of demand outlined in the Action Plan are sufficient to measure demand for Integrated Education?’ were as follows:

Strongly Agree	24	14.55%
Agree	31	18.79%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	24	14.55%
Disagree	38	23.03%
Strongly Disagree	48	29.09%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Section 3 Bodies Comments

24. Summary responses are provided below with full submissions included in Annex A.

CSSC

25. CSSC welcomed the Department of Education's engagement in developing the Integrated Education Strategy, acknowledging its advisory role as defined in the Integrated Education Act (2022). They expressed appreciation for the positive emphasis on the legal definition of Integrated Education, which now encompasses children and young people of various cultures, religions (and none), socio-economic backgrounds, and abilities. Moving forward, CSSC advocates for the use of benchmarking data for all aspects of this broadened definition to ensure it equitably influences the strategy's actions.

26. While CSSC clearly supports the central vision of a robust and well-resourced network of sustainable Integrated schools providing high-quality education, they strongly believe the strategy and action plan should more explicitly detail the crucial role of the Education and Training Inspectorate. This is particularly important given that high-quality education is a sustainability criterion within the Policy for Sustainable Schools. CSSC also appreciates the Department's efforts in engaging various stakeholders and acknowledges the contributions of identified educational partners in implementing the strategy, endorsing the plan to review and enhance the current support system for Integrated schools.

27. CSSC seeks greater transparency regarding its specific role in supporting Controlled Integrated

schools and how cross-organizational collaboration can be strengthened. They anticipate closer collaboration with the Education Authority due to the recommendations from the Controlled Schools Taskforce, with a Controlled Schools Unit expected within the EA by September 2025. The eventual establishment of a dedicated Managing Authority for controlled schools is also seen as having significant implications for the Integrated Education Strategy. Finally, CSSC agrees that all school sectors are vital in preparing young people for the future, and while recognizing Integrated Education's positive impact, they emphasize the importance of acknowledging the contributions of all schools in educating children from diverse backgrounds and traditions. They also welcome the Department's commitment to publishing an annual comprehensive update on the demand for Integrated Education, with data accessible to all stakeholders.

Integrated Education Fund (IEF)

28. IEF acknowledges the Department of Education's (DE) "Vision 2030 – A Draft Strategy for Integrated Education" as a formal commitment to promoting Integrated Education in Northern Ireland. The IEF's response highlights both positive aspects and significant concerns.

Positive Aspects

29. The IEF welcomes the Draft Strategy's emphasis on inclusivity and parental voice, particularly the use of parent ballots for school transformation. They appreciate the inclusion of pupil testimonies and a detailed historical overview of the Integrated Education movement, which adds credibility and depth. The IEF is also pleased with the acknowledgment of its own role in the sector's development.

30. The IEF supports forward-looking measures, such as embedding Integrated Education into Higher Education and teacher training. They view the improved definition of demand for Integrated Education, incorporating parental ballot data, as a positive step. The proposed reviews of NICIE (Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education) and governance arrangements are welcomed as necessary evaluations to ensure appropriate structures and equitable systems. Finally, the inclusion of an Action Plan and data benchmarks across 25 indicator areas is seen as a positive sign of accountability.
32. A major concern is the continual delays in finalising the Draft Strategy, which remains in draft form more than three years after the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 became law. They highlight missed deadlines, including the March 2025 deadline for reviewing the Transformation guidance, and a lack of engagement with the IEF on this. The IEF also points to a lack of updated data on demand for Integrated Education, with crucial survey results yet to be included.
33. Significant issues are raised regarding benchmark data and performance indicators. Out of 25 indicators, only three have defined targets, severely limiting their utility for measuring outcomes. The IEF criticizes the modest ambition of the post-primary oversubscription target and the exclusion of nursery provision from indicators. Concerns are also raised about the quality and presentation of baseline data, including misleading

Negative Aspects and Concerns

31. Despite these positives, the IEF raises several serious concerns, primarily regarding implementation delays, a perceived lack of commitment, and inadequate resourcing.

comparisons and the use of an inappropriate proxy for socio-economic status.

34. The IEF expresses strong concern that recent ministerial decisions suggest a lack of full support for the Integrated Education Act. They cite the rejection of development proposals for two schools to transform to Integrated status, which contradicts the need to address oversubscription. The reallocation of £150 million of Fresh Start Funding from Integrated Schools and a Shared Education Campus to the Strule Shared Education Campus is also highlighted as a significant concern.
35. Finally, the IEF highlights lack of additional resources and funding. They note that NICIE has not received increased financial support despite expanded responsibilities, and the DE's £50,000 annual allocation for the Draft Strategy's implementation is deemed "wholly inadequate." The IEF also points out the inadequate funding

for schools post-transformation and questions the clarity of capital support figures. The response concludes by comparing "Vision 2030" unfavourably to other DE strategies that have clear targets, timetables, and resources.

36. The IEF advocates for a more robust, well-resourced Draft Strategy that includes accurate demand assessment, clear targets, timelines, benchmarks, and appropriate funding to effectively support Integrated Education in Northern Ireland.

The Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) comments

37. NICIE generally welcomes the Department of Education's (DE) "Vision 2030 - A Strategy for Integrated Education 2025 to 2030." They appreciate the strategy's focus on supporting

the growth of Integrated Education and are pleased that some of their previous feedback has been incorporated. Likewise, they are pleased to be named as the leading delivery partner. NICIE's response offers detailed comments on various sections of the draft strategy, with specific feedback on the associated Action Plan and Benchmark Data, highlighting areas for improvement and further clarification.

38. NICIE has identified several inaccuracies and areas for refinement within the strategy's introductory chapters providing some suggested changes to the existing text and recommend updating statistics to reflect the correct number of Integrated schools (73) and pupils (28,411 as of September 2024). The response also calls for a more nuanced description of capital investment for Integrated schools, acknowledging the existing challenges

with "Fresh Start" funding and the need for modern, fit-for-purpose facilities. Furthermore, NICIE seeks to clarify its own role, emphasizing its support for all Integrated schools, its representative function for Grant Maintained Integrated schools, and its involvement in transformation and new school development.

39. A significant point of contention for NICIE is the strategy's portrayal of diversity within the broader Northern Ireland education system. While recognizing that many schools enrol pupils from diverse backgrounds, NICIE's analysis of the 2022/23 school year shows that only 153 schools (15.5%), including 70 Integrated schools, have at least a 10% mix of the two main communities. These schools educate 19% of pupils in Northern Ireland, indicating that while there is diversity, schools are not consistently educating children from both traditions together. This statistical evidence,

further supported by a 2024 study by Professor Tony Gallagher, suggests that efforts to achieve a more diverse enrolment in relation to the two main religious communities have had limited success. NICIE believes this statement should be nuanced to reflect the reality that many schools have diversity, but they are not educating children from the two main traditions together.

40. NICIE questions the inclusion of Shared Education within the strategy and its potential impact on the prioritization of Integrated Education. They highlight a drift in policy and financial resourcing away from Integrated Education towards Shared Education, citing instances like the EU Peace Plus program. NICIE asserts that while Shared Education has benefits and they are supportive, Integrated Education was outlined in the Good Friday/ Belfast Agreement as the primary vehicle for addressing division and building peace.

They advocate for ensuring that the strategy adequately leverages resources to advance Integrated Education, which aligns with the Independent Review of Education's objectives and supports DE's statutory responsibilities.

41. NICIE are critical of the lack of targets in both the Action Plan and Benchmark Data noting that the Action Plan and the Benchmark Data don't easily align to each other. They suggest there should be greater coherence across both documents, possibly merging them, so the relationship between benchmarks and actions are clearer. NICIE are also keen to see ambitious targets set for the majority of actions and related stakeholders. Finally, NICIE emphasizes the need for adequate financial resources to support its own work, strongly arguing that the current funding levels are a barrier to growth and promotion of Integrated Education.

Comments from Other Education Sectoral Bodies

42. Summary responses are provided below with full submissions included in Annex B.

Governing Bodies Association Northern Ireland (GBANI)

43. The GBA argues that the strategy's definition of an "Integrated school" - one fostering diversity, respect, and understanding - is already evident in all Northern Ireland schools, not just those formally designated as integrated. They highlight that the NI Curriculum promotes tolerance and respect across all educational settings, and the benefits often linked to integrated education are also found in other school types and through Shared Education Partnerships.

Questioning 'Demand' Metrics

44. The GBA contends that the strategy's "societal demand" and "behavioural demand" concepts for Integrated Education don't align with the Integrated Education Act. The Act requires measuring parental preference for Integrated schools versus other types, demanding consistent metrics across all sectors. The GBA's data (Tables 2-5) indicates that unmet demand is not exclusive to the Integrated sector, with voluntary grammar schools often showing greater unmet need. They advocate for an area-based approach to provision that considers all school types and overall sustainability.

Sustainability Concerns

45. The GBA raises sustainability issues, noting that several integrated schools fall below minimum pupil thresholds for Years 8-12 (500 pupils) and self-sufficient sixth forms (100 pupils). They point to projected declines in both post-primary and primary student populations, impacting school sustainability across all sectors. They also request the terms of reference for the planned review of integrated school governance.

Capital Funding and Future Planning

46. The GBA expresses concern about the strategy's language regarding capital funding for new integrated schools, specifically the use of "when" instead of "if," which implies a presumption of approval without considering area planning and overall sustainability. They emphasize the need for published, objective

criteria for assessing capital projects across all school sectors, given budget constraints.

Millennium Integrated Primary School

47. Millennium IPS welcome the strategy but comments that the plans are based upon legislation that is still largely incomplete, without secondary Regulations or Explanatory guidance in certain key areas below

Strategic Aim 1 Action 6

- Provides that the impact of admissions criteria upon access to Integrated Education will be assessed but how will this work? How will the new definition of the Act impact admission criteria? How will socio-economic disadvantage and all abilities be measured?

Strategic Aim 1 Action 9

- ▢ How will the review of governance of GMI's be carried out? We would certainly welcome a review of the operating model itself to look for any improvement which could be made, but if the intention is to remove the model and incorporate all Integrated Schools into the same scheme, then we would have concerns as to how this would be funded.

When will research on demand be published?

Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)

48. CCMS generally supports a high-quality, diverse, and inclusive education system, recognizing the contribution of Integrated Education.

However, they express concern that the "Vision 2030" strategy primarily focuses on the growth of a discrete Integrated sector to the apparent detriment of others, particularly Catholic maintained schools. CCMS asserts that Catholic schools are inherently inclusive, welcoming pupils of all beliefs, and consistently achieve high educational outcomes within a values-led curriculum. They argue that the strategy fails to acknowledge the significant role and achievements of faith-based education, and that it may inadvertently reinforce the "unfounded perception that faith-based education is divisive." CCMS advocates for a greater emphasis on learner outcomes and leveraging the existing strengths of the entire education system to foster inclusion and diversity, ensuring equitable access to resources for all schools, especially given current financial challenges.

49. CCMS also raises specific concerns regarding the strategy's understanding of "demand" for Integrated Education and its potential conflict with existing area planning processes. They caution against presuming that oversubscription at first preference equates to unmet demand, suggesting a need for more comprehensive data analysis that considers enrolment trends across all sectors and factors influencing parental preference. Furthermore, CCMS expresses strong reservations about measures like "Calls for Transformation," arguing that these could undermine the role of Trustees and CCMS as enshrined in legislation and impede progress on closing unsustainable schools. They also emphasize the need for equitable capital funding allocation based on assessed need across all sectors, ensuring that the proposed approach for integrated education does not negatively impact other school types,

as was previously assured during legislative consultation.

The Council for Statutory Support for Transferor Schools (CSTS)

50. CSTS acknowledges that the "Vision 2030" strategy for Integrated Education responds to the Integrated Education Act (NI) 2022 and aims to increase the number of children educated together. However, CSTS emphasizes that any inclusive education model must recognize Northern Ireland's diverse, multi-cultural, multi-faith, and socio-economically stratified society, rather than solely focusing on the historical "political binary." They assert that Catholic schools are already inclusive, welcoming children from all backgrounds, and that the strategy unfortunately doesn't adequately acknowledge the pluralistic nature of existing provision

within Northern Ireland or its benefits for parental preference.

51. CSTS also raises concerns about potential biases and inconsistencies within the strategy. They suggest that claims of "remarkable growth" in integrated education since 1981, representing an 8% increase over 44 years, may be subjective and advocate for avoiding such comments. CSTS contends that the strategy's assertions about integrated education fostering commonality, respect for differences, and awareness of bias apply equally to Catholic schools, and that

failing to acknowledge this may perpetuate the unfounded perception that faith-based education is divisive. Furthermore, CSTS stresses the importance of ensuring equity in support and financial allocation across all sectors, particularly regarding capital funding, believing it should be based on assessed need across all school types, not solely prioritized for integrated schools. They also caution that "Calls for Transformation" could be misused by unsustainable schools seeking survival rather than genuine integrated status, potentially undermining existing area planning processes.

Responses from Political Parties

Sinn Féin

52. Sinn Féin welcomes the opportunity to the opportunity to respond consultation on Vision 2030: A Strategy for Integrated Education and fully support efforts to develop a strategy that will deliver on the intent of the 2022 Integrated Education Act.
53. However, Sinn Féin also highlight concerns around targets and delivery and the importance of ensuring equity and sustainability in growth.

Workers Party

54. The Workers Party made a number of comments regarding school segregation on religious grounds, parental ballots as clear

evidence of demand, having one primary education system that is comprehensive, integrated and secular as the norm, shared education is not integrated education, no religious education in schools for secular schools and duplication of funds maintaining a divided education system.

Alliance Party

55. The Alliance Party generally welcomes the “Vision 2030” strategy for Integrated Education, recognizing the Integrated Education Act (NI) 2022 as a significant step. They emphasize the consistent public support for integrated education and its crucial role in fostering an excellent education system and a

shared society. However, the party expresses fundamental concerns about the strategy's effectiveness, particularly regarding the slow pace of implementation since the Act's requirements were established. They highlight a significant conflict between the strategy's aims of increasing access to integrated education, particularly in areas of unmet demand, and recent Ministerial decisions that denied transformation requests for two schools in Bangor, an area with clear demand.

56. The Alliance Party further criticizes the strategy for its lack of specific targets, with only 3 out of 25 indicators currently having measurable goals.

They stress that without concrete targets for key indicators like the number of new places, approved expansions, or transformations, the Department's ambition is unclear. While welcoming the data collection efforts, the party demands more detail on how this data will practically translate into action and decision-making, particularly concerning the statutory obligation to meet demand within area planning. Additionally, the Alliance Party raises significant concerns about the minimal and insufficiently detailed budget committed to delivering the strategy's actions, noting that organizations like NICIE have substantial new responsibilities without corresponding increases in funding.

Other Comments Received

57. Of the 93 responses emailed directly into the Department, there were 70 received as part of what we understand to be an IEF-led campaign which all had exactly the same content;

Dear Department of Education,

I am writing as part of your Integrated Education consultation to demand a far stronger Integrated Education Strategy.

- The current strategy only has targets for 3 of the 25 benchmark areas. Please create targets for key areas, including meeting the demand for Integrated Education, creating additional places in Integrated schools, boosting numbers of existing schools 'transforming' to Integrated status.

- The strategy lacks the ambition to live up to the requirements of the Integrated Education Act, now over 3 years old. Please create a more ambitious strategy, with the resources necessary to implement it.
- Many smaller Catholic and Protestant schools are closing due to low numbers. Please produce a strategy with a clear plan to create sustainable community schools by facilitating transformation for these unsustainable schools into Integrated schools.

The overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland want more Integrated Education - please act to meet the demand with a real strategy.

Best wishes,

58. Of these campaign responses, 50 (5 submitted a second email but were only counted once with 2 of the 5 sending second response after consultation closed) were from within the UK and 20 (8 submitted a second response but were only counted once) from outside the UK.

Integrated AlumNI

59. Integrated AlumNI, a charity supporting Integrated Education (IE), expresses strong disappointment with the Department of Education's slow progress on the Integrated Education Act Action Plan. Despite the Act's passage over three years ago, the organization notes a continued lack of ambition and significant delays in implementing its requirements, particularly concerning the assessment of demand for Integrated Education and the provision of sufficient places. Integrated

AlumNI emphasizes that the current strategy falls short of the Act's mandate to "encourage, facilitate, and support" Integrated Education, highlighting that crucial processes are still in their early stages.

60. The response from Integrated AlumNI criticizes the strategy's insufficient resourcing, pointing out that the allocated £50,000 for transformation support is grossly inadequate. They also stress the need for active monitoring and enforcement of the Fair Employment (School Teachers) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 to address religious discrimination in teacher recruitment. While acknowledging some positive inclusions in the Action Plan, such as a mechanism for assessing IE demand and commissioning NICIE for specific engagement, Integrated AlumNI believes many actions lack substantive impact and are merely "filler,"

failing to address the core requirements of the Integrated Education Act.

61. Integrated AlumNI advocates for the inclusion of substantial and ambitious targets in the strategy, particularly for areas like the creation of new Integrated school places, the number of transformations, and the overall growth of Integrated provision. They contend that the current targets are inadequate and not transformative, urging the Department to draw inspiration from Section 9 of the Integrated Education Act for more robust objectives. To fulfil its legal obligations, the organization calls for clear benchmarks, a summary of changes since the 2023 strategy, diligent monitoring of the Fair Employment Act, a comprehensive plan to leverage transformation for school sustainability, and a significant increase in funding for NICIE.

National Secular Society (NSS)

62. NSS strongly criticizes "Vision 2030 – A Draft Strategy for Integrated Education," arguing it lacks ambition and specifics. They believe Integrated Education should be the "default" choice for all families, not a niche option. A key concern is the reliance on further research rather than concrete action like opening new schools or transforming existing ones, despite abundant evidence of parental demand. Recent ministerial refusals of Integrated status for two schools are highlighted as contradicting policy and demonstrating a lack of commitment. The NSS points to a serious lack of clear targets for Integrated school place growth and criticizes the inadequate £50,000 annual budget for implementation, with no additional funding for NICIE despite increased responsibilities. They advise limiting engagement with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) due to

its inherent bias against Integrated Education. Overall, the NSS believes resources should be invested in making Integrated Education available immediately, rather than conducting more research into demand, which they argue is already well-established.

The Commission for Victims and Survivors (CVS)

63. CVS broadly supports the Department of Education's "Vision 2030 – A Strategy for Integrated Education," highlighting the crucial role of education in addressing the Troubles' legacy. While acknowledging the growth of integrated education, CVS emphasizes the need for significant further progress, given that only 8% of NI pupils attend integrated schools. They welcome the strategy's recognition of Integrated and Shared Education's

contributions to a society emerging from conflict, and commend schools for teaching about prejudice, sectarianism, and the past in a balanced way.

64. CVS specifically recommends integrating its "Building for a Better Future by Learning the Past" document and the "It Didn't End in 1998" research, which explores the transgenerational impacts of conflict, into the strategy's actions. They advocate for equipping educators to teach NI's history and its legacy, noting survey results indicating strong public and student support for compulsory teaching of the Troubles' history in schools. CVS concludes by reiterating widespread public support for integrated education, seeing the strategy as a vital tool to meet parental demand, foster community understanding, and advance societal reconciliation.

Office of the Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland

65. The Mental Health Champion agreed with most areas in the strategy, helping to understand the requirements of the Act, the strategic aims for Integrated Education, that the actions proposed deliver on the Department and EA's duty to encourage, facilitate and support Integrated Education, as well as with the definition of demand and that the measures of demand are sufficient.

66. However, there was disagreement that the vision for Integrated Education is fitting and in line with the Act, stating that there is some ambiguity in how the "reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Catholic Children" are determined. Quoting the NICIE-Statement-of-Principles giving clear numerical targets for the mix within Integrated schools, to reflect a

40% Catholic, 40% Protestant and 20% other or non-religious groupings. Also stating that Shared Education should not be listed alongside Integrated Education as playing a critical role in continuing to build trust, mutual respect, and inclusivity.

67. A neutral stance was taken on the proposed targets.

Northern Ireland Humanists

68. The Northern Ireland Humanists were neutral of vision and whether the actions deliver on the Departments duty to encourage, facilitate and support Integrated Education but disagreed with the strategic aims, the proposed targets and definition of demand and the measures being sufficient.

69. Main reasons cited were:

- Strategic aims align in principle with the Act but too cautious, needs bolder ambition
- Most important targets are missing, unclear or deferred with no concrete goals for increasing IE provision in the future
- Definition of demand is not suitable, relying heavily on interpreting parental admissions preferences in existing schools, but this conflates actual choice with available choice
- School preference cannot be used to determine demand for integrated education in an environment where there are insufficient integrated schools to outweigh other factors for school preference
- The Action Plan identifies both societal and behavioural indicators, there is no clarity on how these will be weighted or interpreted in practice

70. The Northern Ireland Humanists also raise the issue that the strategy fails to mention Religious Education (RE) and proposes a target should be included to move towards pluralistic, knowledge-based RE that is inclusive of a range of religions and humanism in Integrated Schools. The current assumption of a Christian ethos in integrated schools should be reviewed with further target included to ensure that integrated schools are no longer defined by a residual Christian character, but instead reflect the diversity required by Section 1(2)(a) of the Act.

Pivotal

71. Pivotal, an independent public policy think tank, generally supports the "Vision 2030" strategy, recognizing its reaffirmation of government support for integrated education and its potential to foster a more shared future. Their

research, based on extensive engagement with young people and experts, highlights broad support for greater integration, though young people doubted the integrated sector alone could achieve it within their divided communities. Pivotal's core conclusion is that significantly increasing the proportion of pupils in schools with a diverse enrolment from both main traditions requires growth in both the integrated sector and increased mixing within all school models. They welcome the strategy's detailed approach to understanding demand for integrated education, including annual research and monitoring.

72. However, Pivotal also notes that some aspects of the Integrated Education Act (2022) remain ambiguous and contested, weakening the strategy's overall effectiveness. This ambiguity is particularly evident in the "reasonable

numbers" clause for Protestant and Catholic pupils, which lacks clarity and points to ongoing debate about appropriate criteria for integrated status in an era of changing demographics. Pivotal suggests further clarity is needed on the duties stemming from the phrase "encouraging, facilitating and supporting" integrated education, questioning whether it implies a responsibility for the Department of Education to actively work towards growth in demand for the sector. They also emphasize the need for a joint approach to area planning, integrating housing and education policies to build a more shared future, and acknowledge that the traditional "two communities" model for measuring integration is becoming outdated with the rising proportion of self-identifying "Others" in Northern Ireland.

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO)

73. INTO criticizes the "Vision 2030" strategy for its narrow focus on Integrated Education, arguing it overlooks the existing diversity in most Northern Ireland schools and perpetuates an outdated system of sectarian designation. INTO advocates for a more inclusive educational approach, similar to the Educate Together model in the Republic of Ireland, which prioritizes respect for difference, justice, and equality for all children, irrespective of their religious background. They contend that the strategy's definition of Integrated Education is outdated and that the broader education system in Northern Ireland should aim to provide a truly inclusive environment for all pupils, rather than focusing on the religious composition of schools.

74. INTO expresses concern that the strategy's focus on Integrated Education may exclude other sectors and create unnecessary workload for teachers. They question the purpose of an "Excellence in Integrated Education Award scheme" and a specific "Framework for Integrated Education" when existing self-evaluation frameworks and good practices across all sectors could be utilized. INTO also highlights the need for equitable support services and capital funding across all schools, not just the Integrated sector, stressing that progress on Integrated school buildings should not come at the expense of other schools awaiting much-needed improvements. They emphasize that professional learning and the exploration of controversial issues should be inclusive of all teachers and schools, recognizing the diverse classrooms and good practices already present across the entire education system.

75. Responses were also received from 6 individuals largely highlighting similar issues to the main consultation, with some providing further detail to their online submission and one which sought to argue that admissions criteria used by some IE schools impacted on the level of protestant children attending those schools.

Peace Summit Partnership

76. The Peace Summit Partnership welcomes Vision 2030 – A Draft Strategy for Integrated

Education as a step toward embedding educational integration in Northern Ireland's peacebuilding agenda. The strategy's acknowledgement of parental voices, the Integrated Education movement, and historical context are commendable. However, substantial concerns remain regarding missed deadlines, the absence of updated demand data, lack of meaningful performance benchmarks, and severe underfunding.

Section 3 Bodies Comments

IEF



Integrated Education Fund Response to Vision 2030 –A Draft Strategy for Integrated Education, Department of Education

Introduction

The Integrated Education Fund (IEF) acknowledges the publication of *Vision 2030 – A Draft Strategy for Integrated Education* as a formal commitment by the Department of Education (DE) to the promotion and development of Integrated Education in Northern Ireland.

IEF WELCOMES

The IEF welcomes several aspects of the Strategy:

- **Emphasis on Inclusivity and Parental Voice**

The IEF welcomes the Department's recognition of the importance of parental engagement, notably through parent ballots used to gauge support for Transformation proposals.

- **Acknowledgement of the Integrated Education Movement**

A key strength of the Draft Strategy is its inclusion of voices from the Integrated Education movement, including testimonies from current and former pupils. These first-hand accounts provide a powerful and authentic illustration of the social and educational benefits of integration, and their inclusion lends the document credibility and depth.

Moreover, the Department's detailed historical overview of the movement – from the founding of Lagan College in 1981 to the present – reflects a welcome recognition of the sector's resilience, innovation, and growth. The Draft Strategy clearly affirms the value of Integrated Education in breaking down community divisions and fostering inclusive identities.

- **Recognition of the IEF's Role**

The IEF is pleased that the Draft Strategy acknowledges its own longstanding role in the growth and development of Integrated Education. Recognition of the IEF's efforts underscores the importance of collaboration between government and civic society in achieving sustainable educational outcomes.

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- **Commitment to Future-Oriented Reforms**

The IEF welcomes some of the forward-looking measures in the Draft Strategy. These measures include: embedding Integrated Education into Higher Education and proposals to introduce Integrated Education modules in teacher training and other Higher Education programmes. This is a vital step towards long-term sustainability and cultural change within the education system.

- **Improved Definition of Demand**

The Department of Education has indicated in the Draft Strategy that data received from parental ballots, conducted as part of school Transformation proposals, will be accepted as evidence of parental demand. The IEF views this as a positive step forward, however further updates and the integration of new, robust data sources will need to be included in the Draft Strategy to fully capture and respond to the evolving educational landscape and public sentiment.

- **Review of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)**

The proposed review of NICIE's functions, funding, and resourcing by April 2026 is welcomed as a necessary evaluation to ensure that structures supporting Integrated Education are fit for purpose and adequately resourced.

- **Governance Review**

Plans to review governance arrangements for both Controlled Integrated and Grant Maintained Integrated Schools are essential to ensure equitable governance structures across all sectors. The IEF encourages a system-wide approach to ensure consistency, fairness, and transparency.

- **Focus on Measurement and Accountability**

The Draft Strategy's inclusion of an Action Plan and data benchmarks across 25 indicator areas shows an intent to embed accountability into the Draft Strategy's implementation.

IEF CONCERNS

The IEF has several areas of concern which we would wish to highlight:

- **Continual Implementation Delays**

The IEF notes with concern that the Integrated Education Draft Strategy and Action Plan (*Vision 2030*) remains in draft form.

The Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 received Royal Assent on 26 April 2022 and came into effect six months later, on 26 October 2022. Despite this, *Vision 2030* was only published for consultation on 27 March 2025, with the consultation closing on 24 May 2025. Responses will then need to be considered, along with the possibility that amendments to the Draft Strategy may be required before being signed off by the Education Minister. This means that, more than three years after the Act became law, there is still no final Strategy.

Crucially, the Draft Strategy lacks updated data on demand for Integrated Education, as results from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey and the Parental Admissions Survey have yet to be included.

The Draft Strategy also sets deadlines that have already passed, indicating a lack of ongoing progress. The IEF notes with concern that the DE has missed its own March 2025 deadline to review and revise the *Integration Works Guidance for Transformation* as promised in the Draft Strategy. Moreover, there has been no engagement with the IEF, despite its status as a Section 3 consultee, on the revised *Integration Works Guidance*.

These delays—both in meeting statutory obligations and internal deadlines—raise serious concerns for the IEF about the Department's ability to deliver on the requirements of the Act and Draft Strategy.

- **Demand for Integrated Education**

At present, the data to be utilized remains primarily a reflection of existing information, with limited incorporation of new, targeted data sources. Notably, the Draft Strategy has yet to include planned contributions from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey and the Department of Education Parental Admissions Survey—both of which are expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of public attitudes and parental preferences.

- **Benchmark Data and Performance Indicators**

The Draft Strategy's Appendix on benchmark data presents 25 performance indicators aimed at tracking progress toward the development and support of Integrated Education. However, only three of these indicators currently have defined targets, severely limiting their utility in measuring meaningful outcomes. The lack of target setting in 22 of the 25 indicators undermines the Draft Strategy's accountability and makes effective performance monitoring difficult.

Among the few with measurable outcomes, Indicator 1, which aims to reduce first-preference oversubscription at the post-primary level, sets a modest 3% reduction target over five years. While this target signals an intention to improve access, it lacks the ambition one might expect given the statutory duty placed on the DE.

Notably, Nursery provision is excluded from the indicators—despite two existing and three forthcoming standalone Integrated Nursery Schools.

The only other indicators with measurable benchmarks—Indicators 18 and 19—focus on initiatives attributed to NICIE rather than DE commitments: targeting an 80% uptake of the Excellence in Integrated Education Award and a 90% implementation rate of the new Integrated Education Framework by schools following Transformation.

It is concerning that of the 3 out of 25 indicators which currently do have a completed target field, only 1 of the 3 is the direct responsibility of the Department of Education.

Although Section 9(3) of the Integrated Education Act outlines clear areas for benchmarking—such as the number of new Integrated schools, approved development proposals, and Transformations (Indicators 4, 5, and 6)—these remain without associated targets, diluting their strategic impact.

Concerns also exist regarding the quality and presentation of baseline data. For instance:

- Indicator 2 lacks clarity regarding its data source and metric.
- Indicator 8, which covers religious breakdown, is misleading and is not an appropriate comparison unless broken down by management type.
- Indicator 9 utilizes the MDM Quintile as a proxy for socio-economic status rather than the more widely accepted Free School Meals Entitlement (FSME), which DE itself acknowledges as a superior measure of deprivation. This choice creates a false narrative suggesting that Integrated Education pupils are generally more affluent, a conclusion not supported by FSME data.

While the Draft Strategy introduces a framework for performance measurement, it falls short of delivering a credible, ambitious, and transparent system of benchmarks. The absence of clearly defined targets, the selective use of data, and the reliance on third-party indicators suggest a need for a more robust and accountable approach.

- **Ministerial Decisions on Integrated Education**

The IEF remains concerned that recent decisions taken by the Education Minister suggest a lack of full support for the Integrated Education Act and Draft Strategy. These concerns arise from two key decisions:

- **Rejection of Development Proposals**

The Minister's decisions not to support proposals for Bangor Academy and Sixth Form College and Rathmore Primary School to transform to Integrated status are in direct contradiction to the need outlined in the Action Plan for the DE to address oversubscription for Integrated Education in Ards and North Down.

[BBC: 'Givan rejects schools' bids to become integrated'](#)

[DP 728 - Rathmore Primary School](#)

[DP 727 - Bangor Academy & 6th Form](#)

These decisions have led to further reservations from the IEF regarding the Minister's commitment to Integrated Education.

- **Reallocation of Funding**

The Minister requested that £150 million of Fresh Start Funding—originally allocated to 10 Integrated Schools and one Shared Education Campus—be redirected to the Strule Shared Education Campus. This is clearly outlined in the Minister's paper, which was presented to the Northern Ireland Executive and made public following an IEF Freedom of Information request.

- **Lack of Resources and Funding**

Lack of Additional Funding to NICIE: Despite being assigned expanded responsibilities and actions by the DE, NICIE has not received any additional financial support. The Draft Strategy directs NICIE to "refocus" existing resources, raising concerns about whether these are sufficient for the implementation of new responsibilities.

A commitment of £650,000 per annum to support NICIE does not represent an increase when other economic considerations are factored in including, but not limited to, rising staff costs because of the government's decision to increase Employers' National Insurance contributions and lower the National Insurance threshold, coupled with the annual NJC pay awards and increments.

Insufficient DE Implementation Budget: The DE has allocated only £50,000 annually for the Draft Strategy's implementation, which appears wholly inadequate given the scope of proposed actions, including potential legal expenses. The IEF notes that actions in the Draft Strategy have not been costed, unlike the recent TransformED Strategy launched by the Minister.

£23,000 to support the number of schools post Transformation is also inadequate given the number of schools currently in the process. This allocation stands in contrast to the funding provided by the IEF, a charity which has considerable experience of the actual financial support required to support schools appropriately on the Transformation journey.

The naming of schools requiring capital support is misleading. The total cost of £471 million is meaningless unless it is made clear as to what is committed and what is dependent on funds being made available.

- **DE Draft Strategy Comparisons**

The draft Strategy lacks the clear targets, timetable and resources that have been allocated to other Department of Education Strategies. This can be seen when comparison is made with the Shared Education Strategy and TransformEd Strategy (online [here](#)).

[TransformED NI Delivery Plan.pdf](#)

- **IEF and Governance**

In Action 9 on page 21 of Vision 2030, the IEF is listed as one of the bodies 'responsible' for the review of governance in Grant Maintained Schools which is not appropriate. The IEF has not been involved in any discussions with the DE regarding the initiation or development of this work.

- **New Insertion in Vision 2030 (p.27)**

A new paragraph states the DE will work with NICIE to enhance clarity around the legal definition of Integrated Education, with specific reference to Section 1. It should be noted that the DE's interpretation is currently subject to a legal challenge.

- **Need to review Area Planning within the Draft Strategy**

The IEF supports the Independent Review of Education's conclusion that the current Area Planning system in Northern Ireland requires reform. The IEF is concerned that the current Area Planning system has failed to deliver any cross sectoral solutions to date with the exception of the Development Proposal approval for the new Causeway Academy.

Conclusion

The IEF welcomes the publication of the DE's *Vision 2030 – A Draft Strategy for Integrated Education*. The Draft Strategy's recognition of the importance of parental engagement, the benefits of Integrated Education and its historical perspective on the development of Integrated Education are welcomed.

However, the IEF raises several concerns, particularly regarding delays in the publication of the Draft Strategy, the lack of updated data on demand to date and an inadequate approach to measuring progress with the absence of clear benchmarks and performance targets.

The IEF also highlights significant concerns regarding resource allocation, including insufficient funding for the Draft Strategy's implementation and for the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE).

Moreover, the reallocation of Fresh Start funding and the rejection of sustainable Development Proposals for schools raise doubts about the Education Minister's full commitment to 'encourage, facilitate and support' Integrated Education.

To ensure compliance with the Integrated Education Act (2022), the IEF argues that a more robust, well-resourced Draft Strategy is needed, which includes the accurate assessment of demand with clear targets, timelines and benchmarks to meet that demand, and with an appropriate funding allocation. Only with these improvements can the Draft Strategy effectively encourage, facilitate and support Integrated Education moving forward in Northern Ireland.



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21 May 2025

Dear Sir/Madam,

Vision 2030 – A strategy for Integrated Education in Northern Ireland and associated Action Plan

The Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) supports Controlled schools, which are open to all faiths and none, in providing high quality education for children and young people to enable them to learn, develop and grow together, within the ethos of non-denominational Christian values and principles.

The controlled education sector is the largest, most diverse education sector in Northern Ireland comprising 49% of all schools across all phases: nursery, special, primary, secondary, grammar, integrated and Irish medium schools.

Of the 71 Integrated schools in Northern Ireland, almost half (33) are Controlled Integrated. In supporting Controlled Integrated schools, CSSC works with the Education Authority, the Managing Authority for Controlled Schools, and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education.

CSSC has welcomed engagement with the Department of Education in the development of a Strategy for Integrated Education in Northern Ireland. CSSC acknowledges its responsibility as an advisory body as defined in Section 3 of the IE Act (2022) and welcomes the opportunity to provide commentary in this context.

Definition of Integrated Education

CSSC acknowledges the positive emphasis on the legal definition of Integrated Education and its expanded scope to include children and young people of various cultures, religions (and none), socio-economic backgrounds, and abilities. Going forward CSSC would welcome the use of benchmarking data for all aspects of the definition to influence the actions within the strategy equitably.

Controlled Schools' Support Council www.csscni.org.uk
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Vision of Integrated Education

CSSC's active support for the central vision of a robust and well-resourced network of sustainable Integrated schools committed to high-quality education is clear. However, CSSC strongly believes that the strategy and action plan must more explicitly outline the crucial role of the Education and Training Inspectorate in providing assurance of high-quality education, particularly considering it is a sustainability criterion within the Policy for Sustainable Schools.

Role of CSSC and collaboration with key organisations

CSSC appreciates the Department of Education's efforts in engaging various stakeholders and acknowledges the contributions of identified educational partners in implementing the strategy. CSSC endorses the Department's plan to review and enhance the current support system for integrated schools, aiming to deliver better services and optimize resource use. While cross-organisational collaboration is alluded to within some of the actions, going forward, CSSC would welcome greater transparency in the specific role it has in supporting Controlled integrated schools and how collaboration can be strengthened.

Implementation of the recommendations from the Controlled Schools Taskforce will result in close collaboration between CSSC and the Education Authority. In the short to medium term the establishment of a Controlled Schools Unit within EA, by September 2025, should strengthen collaboration in matters pertaining to controlled integrated schools. In the longer term the establishment of a dedicated Managing Authority for controlled schools will have more significant implications in respect of the Strategy for Integrated Education.

Contribution of all school sectors

CSSC agrees that all school sectors play a crucial role in the education system, preparing children and young people for the future. The strategy recognizes that Integrated Education has a significant and positive impact on those who experience it. Additionally, the 2024 Education and Training Inspectorate report, "How effectively are children being prepared for living in and contributing to a diverse society?" highlighted that most schools demonstrate effective CRED practices, helping students build relationships with peers from various backgrounds. It is essential for the strategy to continue to acknowledge the valuable contributions of schools across all sectors in educating children and young people from diverse backgrounds and traditions together.

Data

CSSC welcomes the commitment from the Department of Education, within the strategy, to publish an annual comprehensive update on the demand for Integrated Education and that data collected will be available to all stakeholders.



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Support Services for Integrated Education

CSSC notes the proposed activities in actions 8 and 9, which focus on reviewing support services and governance for Integrated Education. CSSC suggests that the strategy could benefit from clearer details about the services and governance support available specifically and collectively to Grant Maintained Integrated schools and Controlled Integrated schools.

Benchmarking

The benchmarks primarily reference different religious beliefs and make limited mention of socio-economic deprivation or varying abilities. CSSC would appreciate a stronger focus on all elements of the broader definition of Integrated Education, ensuring they are benchmarked and reviewed comprehensively.

CSSC welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the strategy and is committed to working together with all stakeholders to implement it.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Baker'.

Mr Mark Baker
Chief Executive

**Council for
Integrated
Education**

Learning Together
for a Shared Society

**Vision 2030: A Strategy for Integrated
Education**

**Response from the Northern Ireland Council
for Integrated Education under the Public
Consultation Phase.**

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1. Introduction

The Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) is pleased to respond to the Vision 2030 - A Strategy for Integrated Education 2025 to 2030, the associated Action Plan and Benchmark Data. We broadly welcome the Strategy and its intention of supporting future growth and support for Integrated Education. We are pleased to see the Department planning around Integrated Education and welcome the five intended objectives of the Strategy.

We thank Officials at the Department of Education (DE) and other stakeholders who were involved in the development and redrafting process. This response will provide comments on each section of the draft Strategy, including specific feedback on the Action Plan and Benchmarks.

We are pleased to see that some of our previous feedback and suggested changes have been considered and are reflected in this version of the Strategy.

2. Chapter 1: Introduction

- 2.1. Under 'Integrated Education Today' both the introductory paragraph and the 2024 statistic in Table 1 should read '73' Integrated schools in order to be consistent with the total number of schools in September throughout other dates in the table. The number of pupils being educated in Integrated schools as of September 2024 is 28,411 as stated in DE Census data 2024-25, not 27,000 as currently stated.

3. Chapter 2: Integrated Education in Context

Key Organisations

- 3.1. We note and welcome commitments to Capital investment for Integrated schools later in the document. However, given the current situation regarding the loss of significant 'Fresh Start' funding, a more nuanced description that acknowledges the current situation could be beneficial. Furthermore, an historic policy of DE to provide 'core

1

plus mobile' facilities for new Integrated schools means many schools are now not in fit for purpose facilities. Perhaps adding to the sentence '...provide modern fit for purpose facilities and acknowledging there is further work required across the Integrated school's estate' would be appropriate.

3.2. The description of NICIE's current role is not quite accurate. NICIE carries out a support role for all Integrated schools, a representative function for Grant Maintained Integrated schools, as well as supporting schools considering transformation and for at least 5 years post-transformation. NICIE also plays a leading role in the development of new schools.

The Education System in Northern Ireland

3.3. Under the section 'The Education System in Northern Ireland' we have a number of comments. We recognise that DE ~~has~~ to recognise the contribution of all schools to the development of children and young people. However, we would seek more nuance around the statement that 'Many schools from all school sectors are now educating children and young people from diverse religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.' This is an area where NICIE ~~has~~ to contend with significant misunderstandings of the current make up of schools. We absolutely recognise that on the whole, schools of all types are enrolling pupils from an ever-increasing diversity of background. This is statistically evident in the increase of pupils designated as 'other' in the census and through newcomer pupils. However, analysis by NICIE of the 2022/23 school year shows that only 153 Schools (15.5%), including 70 Integrated Schools, have at least a 10% mix of the two main communities. These schools educate 19% of pupils in Northern Ireland. This analysis has been further reinforced by Prof Tony Gallagher, who in a 2024 study concluded¹:

'In the wake of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement there was a widespread aspiration that schools would attract a more diverse enrolment, particularly in relation to the two main religious communities in Northern Ireland. Whatever the extent to which schools pro-actively

¹ Available at <https://pure.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/record/1000000000000000000>

tried to work towards this change, the analysis here suggests that they did so with very limited, if any, success’.

We think this statement should be nuanced to reflect the statistics and the reality that whilst many schools have diversity, they are not educating children from our two traditions together.

- 3.4. We recognise there has been significant school wide advances in developing practice around CRED themes. We note the reference to a 2024 ETI report. Given the limited sample size, we would question whether it evidences that the majority of schools across NI are demonstrating effective CRED practice.

The Benefits of Integrated Education

- 3.5. We welcome the inclusion of the section featuring the benefits of Integrated Education. There may be more scope to include the positive impact on parents and the wider community who are central to the success of an Integrated school. Schools that were formed by cross-community parent groups and transformed by parents require significant levels of cooperation and trust that are key to overall social cohesion. The strategy as a whole could benefit from a greater alignment with a range of government policies which Integrated Education fosters. This includes the Together: Building a United Community Policy as well as the draft Programme for Government which has Peace as a cross-cutting commitment, but no reference to the role of Integrated Education.

Shared and Integrated Education

- 3.6. We question the inclusion of the section on Shared Education within the Strategy. Through engagement with DE Officials, we understand the rationale is related to outlining DE’s wider inclusion and cohesion agenda. NICIE is supportive of effective, well planned and far-reaching Shared Education initiatives and believes they can bring benefits to schools, children and young people. In fact, one of the pioneering Shared Education initiatives was ‘Integrating Education’ led by NICIE in the mid-2000s. However, several elements of the

² More info available at <https://www.nicie.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Beyond-See-and-Other-Documents.pdf>

existing draft text are problematic. We agree with the statement that Shared and Integrated Education should not be in competition with each other. However, it touches on a fundamental question about what the education system's role is in addressing division, the legacy of the conflict and building peace. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement outlined Integrated Education as the main vehicle, and this has arguably been diminished.

Research evidence by Ulster University⁴ as far back as 2012 attests to a drift in policy away from Integrated Education towards Shared Education. In relation to financial resourcing, there has been a considerable amount of investment from public and private philanthropy towards Shared Education. The most recent example being the EU Peace Plus programme which is hinged on Shared Education with no specific allocation towards Integrated Education. We understand from correspondence that this was based on recommendations by DE. We understand that Integrated schools can participate, however we believe supporting peace building provision that can happen in one school is essential in educational, social and economic terms. We believe this was a missed opportunity to lever some of the resources from the EU, UK and Ireland to advance Integrated Education, which clearly aligns to the Programme's objectives and would have supported delivery of DE's statutory responsibilities to Integrated Education.

- 3.7. At the end of this section, we note the statement: 'Within this context, Integrated Education alongside the other sectors in education, can play a critical role in continuing to build trust, mutual respect and inclusivity'. We understand the careful balancing act DE must play and agree all sectors have a role, however given this is the Integrated Education Strategy we feel it is appropriate the italicized text is omitted.

Challenges and Opportunities

- 3.8. We welcome the positivity of the section on 'Challenges and Opportunities' and the acknowledgement of parental involvement. *With regard to* the second bullet point, we would nuance the issue of

⁴ Available at https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/courses/education/documents/2012_report_unesco.pdf

complexity and resource intensiveness. Transformation is a significant change and as such should be complex. We welcome work DE is already undertaking in reviewing transformation processes and would highlight the need to balance reducing unnecessary complexity with the rigour required for a successful change management process. One practical issue is the length of time for DE to make decisions on Development Proposals (DP). We would suggest DE sets a service delivery standard of [making a decision](#) within 6 months of the closure of the statutory objection period. This would mirror the requirement of schools to produce their DP within 6 months of ballot.

4. Chapter 3: Demand for Integrated Education

Definition

- 4.1. NICIE recognises that the issue of measuring demand is extremely complicated. We welcome further engagement with DE and comments are made within the understanding that this is an area that will require ongoing reflection and refinement.
- 4.2. We do not believe the existing conception of demand is fully developed for the context of Integrated Education. The development of distinct elements of 'societal' and 'behavioural' is useful for categorisation purposes. However, given approx. 92% of school places are either Controlled, Maintained, Voluntary Grammar or Irish Medium, behaviour is driven by what exists and is subject to a form of 'path dependency' whereby past decisions influence the present.
- 4.3. Under 'societal demand' we would add that local independent 'micro' polls (such as those commissioned by the IEF) should also be considered alongside Northern Ireland wide surveys.
- 4.4. We are very pleased to see that parental ballots for Transformation are included within the evidence considered for assessing and monitoring demand.

Evidence and Data

- 4.5. In relation to the use of Life and Times and EA Portal data, NICIE is positive about the inclusion of this type of data. We note the EA Portal survey was issued to parents/carers of children who were part of open enrolment to Pre-School, Year 1 and Year 8 in April 2025 and look forward to analysing and interpreting the results.
- 4.6. NICIE reaffirms a commitment to work with all stakeholders to find a rigorous and reliable way to measure demand, acknowledging the complexity of the matter. We welcome the suggestion of the inclusion of such information into Area Planning processes and future strategies within the context of providing sustainable education provision across Northern Ireland.

5. Chapter 4: A Strategy for Integrated Education

- 5.1. NICIE is positive about the Vision and Strategic aims for Integrated Education. In a general statement about targets and evidence of success, we feel the separation of benchmarks from the Action Plan have disjoined the overall strategy. We provide more commentary on this below.
- 5.2. We are positive about the inclusion of NICIE in several areas of action and thank DE for their recognition of our central position. As will be highlighted below, we have considerable concerns around financial resourcing.

Increased access to Integrated Education

- 5.3. Under 'Increased access...' we would like additional clarity on what is meant by considering the impact of admissions criteria.
- 5.4. We would suggest there may need to be greater coherence between Key Action 1 and the existing content of Operational Plan 2 (OP2). This includes five Development Proposals for expansion already in the system and the limitations of capital funding on schools already at full capacity.

5.5. We have some concerns about the measurements for demand. Currently the benchmark data is using over-subscription at Integrated Primary and Post-Primary schools as a measurement of demand. DE has not included Integrated Nursery Schools, Integrated Nursery Units or Pre-School Playgroups within Integrated Primary schools in this measurement exercise for benchmarks. The availability of Integrated Pre-School and over-subscription at Integrated Pre-School should be included in this analysis. Likewise, the synergy with the standardisation of Pre-School programme should also be taken into account.

5.6. Under Priority Outcome 1: Increased Access to Integrated Education, Action 1 within the Action Plan states that DE will commission NICIE to engage with Integrated schools and EA in the six localities currently identified where Integrated Education is oversubscribed. One of these localities is Ards and North Down where the Bangor schools (Rathmore PS and Bangor Academy) who were turned down for Transformation in January 2025 are situated. Action 4 states that DE will commission NICIE to issue a 'Call for Transformation' with the view to creating sustainable enrolment in priority localities. This seems somewhat contradictory, given the decisions made in January to not approve the two Transformations in Bangor with very sustainable enrolments.

High-quality support services for Integrated Education

5.7. In a general comment on this section, we would state that the support of Integrated Education extends beyond governance arrangements, which the actions in this section particularly focus on. NICIE fields enquiries and provides proactive support on a range of areas pertaining to ethos including parental engagement, curricula and administrative issues.

5.8. Under 'High Quality support services...' we welcome the review of the objectives, resources and funding for NICIE. We note under Chapter 6 a minimum of £650k for NICIE. As we have outlined with DE and in other forums, the current level of funding is a barrier to the growth, support and promotion of Integrated Education. The table below outlined NICIE's DE funding from 09/10 to 22/23 against the growth of parental ballots, which is only one aspect of our work that has required increased resourcing. Allowing for inflation we have had cuts of 50% which we have only managed by not replacing core posts when staff

have retired or resigned. This is not sustainable and will have an adverse impact on the delivery of commissioned activities via this strategy, outlined further below.

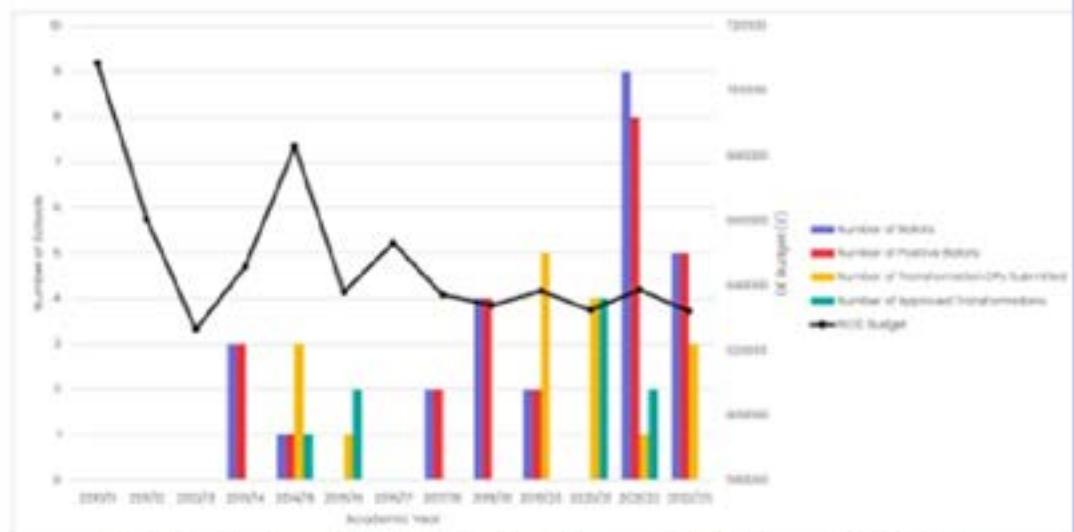


Table 1: Growing demand for school transformation support plotted alongside DE's funding to NICIE (2010 to 2023)

5.9. We note the commitment to review Integrated school governance arrangements with a particular focus on GMIs. An opportunity to review always holds positive potential. Given the Independent Review of Education's comments on overall educational governance, this action could sit alongside a wider review of all school governance. This should consider equitable support across the system, including finance, where GMI schools have had static budget lines for several years and face additional barriers. NICIE is currently supporting the development of new model articles of association for GMIs in light of legislative changes, not least the Integrated Education Act. This work will roll out across 2025 and so we would suggest pushing back the timescale in order to enable that particular NICIE workstream to have been completed, reducing any potential burden on schools.

Development, maintenance and protection of the Integrated Ethos

5.10. We welcome a focus on the Integrated ethos, which is an area NICIE has been central in promoting since our inception. We would seek further clarity on what the rationale is for an exploration of whether the Integrated ethos differs from other school sectors. It is worth noting that NICIE's Strategic Plan 2022-2025 includes a commitment to revising the Statement of Principles (SoP) for Integrated Education. This action will not be realised by the end of our current Strategic Plan due to resourcing issues. The SoP was first devised in 1991 and last revised in 2008. Given the increase in the number of Integrated Schools alongside NICIE now being a NDPB, this process will require a greater level of consultation and data collection. We would suggest that our work on revising the SoP and the activity envisaged under Action 11 should be combined to minimise the ask on schools and maximise the use of resources. We would be delighted to work further with DE to formulate such an action.

5.11. Regarding Action 12, we are delighted to see prominence for both the Framework for Integrated Education and the Excellence in Integrated Education Award (EIEA). We would suggest that the word 'promote' be used to describe how each tool be used to give equal status. We would suggest that 'by March 2026 all schools exploring transformation and for 5 years post-transformation are using the Framework'. For EIEA we would welcome 'by March 2030 80% of eligible Integrated Schools are engaged in the EIEA award scheme' (please note in an earlier response we incorrectly stated by 2026 - this is not realistic and should have read by 2030).

Increased public knowledge and understanding of Integrated Education

5.12. NICIE are very pleased that there is a commitment to increasing public knowledge and understanding of Integrated Education. This is an area we have been unable to fully realise due to funding constraints. We would strongly contend that this will require adequate financial resources in line with the ambition of the plan.

Increased school collaboration and a more shared society

5.13. NICIE welcomes more research into the impact of Integrated Education and would be keen to support the development of the Terms of Reference for any study.

6. Chapter 5: Delivering Integrated Education

6.1. NICIE concurs that the actions should be regularly reviewed and formally recorded. There seems to be a lack of targets in both the Action Plan and Benchmark Data. It also seems that the Action Plan and the Benchmark Data don't easily align to each other. There could be greater coherence across both documents, so the relationship between benchmarks and actions are clearer. We would be keen to see ambitious targets set for the majority of actions and related stakeholders.

Strategic Aim 1: Increased access to Integrated Education

Key Action 1

6.2. NICIE is pleased to be involved in the commissioning activity relating to oversubscribed localities. We would state that the work will require additional financial resources. We would suggest that the action could be augmented to not just include activity to increase subscription in oversubscribed schools but explore what other area solutions might support demand being met in these localities. We also refer to our comments in sections 5.4, 5.5 and 5.6.

Key Action 2

6.3. NICIE welcomes this action as core to our intent to make Integrated Education available to every family who wishes it. We welcome the opportunity to engage with communities; however, this scoping work is resource intensive and will require additional resources.

Key Action 3

6.4. NICIE welcomes the review of Integration Works which we believe has in part provided a stimulus regarding the existing growth of Integrated Education through transformation. We are engaged with DE and other stakeholders with regards to the review and will continue to do so. We note the deadline for this to be completed by March 2025 has passed. We will engage with the specific Section 3 consultation on the content of the revised document.

Key Action 4

6.5. As part of Key Action 3 we have begun engagement on a revised approach to Transformation. We are positive towards the concept of a 'Call for Transformation' and would draw on the existing joint work we have undertaken with the IEF focused on transformation over the past 6 years. Through this partnership we have issued an annual invitation to all schools to attend an 'Integration Works' learning event where interested schools can find out more about Integrated Education and the Transformation process. We would urge caution on a sole focus on priority localities in order to maximise the inclusion of all interested schools and recognise the role of parents in initiating Transformation. We also refer to comments in section 5.6 regarding the Ministerial decisions in January 2025 in relation to Bangor Academy and Rathmore PS in Bangor.

Key Action 5

6.6. We refer to our comments in section 4 of this consultation response.

Key Action 6

6.7. We refer to our comments in section 5.3 of this consultation response.

Key Action 7

6.8. We welcome in theory the development of a comprehensive sector profile. NICIE would be keen to engage at the earliest opportunity to clarify the scope of the task and partner working with the EA. Again, we raise the issue of adequate financial resourcing.

Strategic Aim 2: High-quality support services for Integrated Education

Key Action 8

6.9. NICIE welcomes the DE review of the current support services (HR, legal, professional learning and governor support) for Integrated schools and notes the work to date on this theme in partnership with DE and EA. This is extremely important *in order to* improve and streamline services and ensure appropriate access for all Integrated schools.

Key Action 9

6.10. We refer to our comments in section 5.7 of this consultation response.

Key Action 10

6.11. We refer to our comments in section 5.8 of this consultation response.

Strategic Aim 3: Development, maintenance and protection of the Integrated Ethos

Key Action 11

6.12. We refer to our comments in section 5.10 of this consultation response.

Key Action 12

6.13. We refer to our comments in section 5.11 of this consultation response.

Key Action 13

6.14. We refer to our comments in section 5.11 of this consultation response.
We would also seek further clarity on what is meant by DE will support use of the Award?

Key Action 14

6.15. NICIE is very positive about this action and would welcome the opportunity to support the design and delivery of such training. We would propose that this training is fully incorporated into the core teacher training programmes.

Strategic Aim 4: Increased public knowledge and understanding of Integrated Education

Key Actions 15 & 16

6.16. We refer to our comments in section 5.12 of this consultation response.
Actions relating to research and public knowledge and understanding will require resourcing and budgetary spend and cannot be delivered within NICIE's existing budget.

Strategic Aim 5: Increased school collaboration and a more shared society

Key Action 17

6.17. NICIE welcomes ongoing engagement between DE, other Departments and TEO in relation to the implementation of the T-BUC policy. We note that 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most Draft Programme for Government 2024-2027' includes a commitment to refreshing the policy. NICIE contends the original policy does not give place to the powerful role Integrated Education can play in building a united community. In fact, Integrated Education is altogether absent from the policy. We note that preference for Integrated schooling is included as a Good Relations indicator by TEO to measure T-BUC's success, which makes the omission all the more questionable. At present T-BUC only features a commitment to Shared Education initiatives, which is positive, but may add to the notion that the two concepts are in competition with each other.

Key Action 18

6.18. NICIE is pleased that Integrated schools will be given the opportunity to exchange learning around controversial issues. We would suggest this should include Teacher Professional Learning programmes.

6.19. The wording in Action 18 states 'we' will utilise – for consistency throughout the document, some actions have 'DE' and others 'we'. Although there are others with responsibility it would provide clarity if it's clear who 'we' refers to i.e. DE or the bodies in the responsibility column.

Key Action 19

6.20. We welcome the addition of this action. As above 6.19 re: terminology.

7. Chapter 6: Resourcing and Next Steps

7.1. NICIE acknowledges the many positive elements outlined in the draft Strategy. However, we have considerable concerns that the resourcing outlined in this section is insufficient to deliver what is proposed.

7.2. We note the intention to provide a minimum of £650k per annum to NICIE. In the period before the Action 10 review is carried out there is considerable activity linked or commissioned to NICIE. We also note the statement that 'The Department will work closely with NICIE as it reviews its corporate objectives and business plan to refocus on key delivery activities'. We assert that we already have activity aligned to the Strategy workstreams, as is evidenced in our Strategic Plan and Business Plan. These provide core and essential services to Integrated Education. However, we do not have the financial resources to fully realise those workstreams. Table 1 (above) illustrates this in relation to growth of schools seeking to explore transformation. We have also experienced growth in demand for other support services relating to ethos and the Excellence in Integrated Education Award, illustrated by Table 2 below. We have highlighted the long-standing reduction in funding for NICIE. A 'refocus' is not a viable way to resource our contribution to the Strategy. Without prejudice to the outcome of the Action 10 review, we require additional financial resources to deliver. NICIE has been grateful for financial support from the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade (DFA) over the past number of years. These grants are for specific, bespoke and time bound projects and are not a replacement for adequate core funding.



Table 2: Growth in Interest in EIA Award 2010-24

- 7.3. We are not confident that the allocation of £50k is sufficient to meet the implementation costs. It would be useful if indicative costs could be included across the Action Plan to show it is attainable in line with the welcomed and positive ~~TransformED~~ Delivery Plan. This would be more in line with Article 9(d) of the Integrated Education Act (2022).
- 7.4. As has been stated previously £23k is not sufficient to support transforming or transformed schools.
- 7.5. We are pleased that there is a commitment to progress capital projects with schools who were unable to be delivered via Fresh Start funding by 2030. Some of the projects have been completed and could be removed for accuracy so they're not attributed to the Strategy.
- 7.6. We have provided a more encompassing description of NICIE below for inclusion as Appendix 1.
- 7.7. We are concerned about the delayed implementation of the Strategy and the length of time it has taken to finalise a Strategy and Action Plan that meets the requirements of the Act. Some of the deadlines and timeframes within the documentation have already been missed and target for delivery dates have passed before final publication. In some areas it may be prudent to spread out target dates across the period of the strategy and we would be happy to engage further on this. It is more beneficial to be realistic on certain aspects of the plan.
- 7.8. **Benchmark Data**
The Strategy lists 25 benchmark indicators that will measure progress towards achieving the outcomes of the Strategy and Action Plan but only three of these benchmarks have actual targets. We refer to our comments in section 6.1. We feel there should be clearer goals, or at least a built-in commitment to create goals in line with the data that emerges from demand surveys or other data. This includes the following areas:
 - The number of Integrated school places
 - The expansion of existing Integrated schools; and
 - The number of Transformations to Integrated status.

We would reiterate that the splitting of the Benchmark Data and the Action Plan makes the document less coherent, as it is harder to match action progress to the associated measurable data. This impacts on the ability to monitor strategy success and our ability to provide comment for the purposes of this consultation. We would query whether this fully meets the requirements of Article 9(e)(ii) of the Act "...include an action plan, which must 'measurable benchmarks against which the success of the strategy (including progress towards meeting targets) can be assessed'. Our specific comments on the Benchmark Data should be seen with this lack of clarity.

Indicator 1:

We recognise the target provides parity with the NI average; however, the ambition could extend further to provide full access in as far as possible.

Indicator 2:

We are not clear if using a baseline year such as 22/23 is appropriate to provide an indicator of increased places. The percentage increase may be better judged on additional Integrated places created out of the total system wide places available, rather than specific to the baseline year. The baseline data should check if an increase in enrolment at Strangford Integrated College via DP 622 was included.

Indicator 3:

This should include measuring over subscription of pre-school provision to provide a full picture.

Indicator 7:

Without a target it is difficult to extrapolate any meaning from this indicator. There may be an environmental rationale to include a reduction in travel distance as a target.

Indicator 8:

Religious breakdown baseline data needs to be broken down by school type in order to be reflective of one of the defining features of Integrated Education - the education together in one school of reasonable numbers of Protestant and Catholic children. Comparing the breakdown in Integrated schools against all other school types combined does not offer any insight.

Indicator 9:

We are unclear as to why Multiple Deprivation Measures are being used as opposed to the standard Free School Meal Data. We query why the word

'only' is used which provides a negative judgment on the data which is absent elsewhere.

Indicator 15:

We are unclear what this is trying to measure and is additionally complicated as statemented children are not placed via open enrolment. We would seek greater clarity on the use of this indicator.

Indicator 16:

We are unclear as to what this indicator is seeking to measure. If it is about increasing integrated school sustainability an 'unfilled places' metric might also be useful.

Indicator 19:

As per Section 5.11 the target date for 80% should be 2030.

Indicators 20 & 21:

As with several indicators we are unsure of what action this is aligned against and how it informs success or otherwise.

Indicator 23:

It is unclear which partnership programmes this refers to.

Indicator 25:

Unless there is a specific rationale, this could be rolled into Indicator 22.

Appendix 1: Updated NICIE Description

The Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) seeks to promote reconciliation in Northern Ireland through Integrated Education. Established in 1987 as a charitable body to coordinate efforts in the development of Integrated Education, NICIE has been funded by the Department of Education (DE) since 1989. In 2012 NICIE was designated as a non-statutory executive Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) and is DE's primary Arm's Length Body in supporting Integrated Education. NICIE assist the delivery of the Department's statutory duties in relation to Integrated Education under the 1989 Education Reform Order (NI) which were extended by the Integrated Education Act (NI) 2022.

NICIE plays a pivotal role in facilitating the growth of Integrated Education by supporting all Integrated Schools through promotion, training and representation. This includes the development and promotion of the Integrated ethos. NICIE assists existing schools in transformation to Integrated status, facilitates the growth of existing schools and supports the establishment of new integrated schools.

NICIE advocates for an anti-bias approach to education through educator learning programmes. Through these efforts, NICIE contributes significantly to reconciliation and the development of a more inclusive society in Northern Ireland. NICIE is the key delivery partner for the Vision 2030 Strategy.

Education Sectoral Bodies Comments

GBANI

Governing Bodies Association
DE Vision 2030: A Strategy for Integrated Education 2025-2030 Consultation



The Governing Bodies Association NI (GBA) is the sectoral body representing all of Northern Ireland's 50 voluntary grammar schools. These schools educate 51,835 (33%) of the 156,889 post-primary pupils enrolled in NI and represent the largest single provider of post-primary provision as evidenced in the table below.

Table 1 – school population by school type 2024/2025

School Type	Number of pupils in 2024/2025 (% of total post primary pupils in NI)
Catholic Maintained	41,070 (26.2%)
Controlled	51,670 (32.9%)
Grant Maintained Integrated	10,948 (7%)
Irish Medium	1,366 (0.9%)
Voluntary Grammar	51,835 (33%)
Total	156,889

The GBA provides advice and support for member schools as well as representing their views to politicians, policy makers, media and other education stakeholders. It also contributes to the education system in a variety of ways through representation on working groups and panels and well-considered responses to consultations and questionnaires.

Established over 75 years ago, the GBA has a proud tradition of building cross-community links in education, drawing governors and schools from every community in Northern Ireland.

The GBA works alongside the various sectoral and education bodies in Northern Ireland to collectively effect positive change in our education system and wider society. The Association promotes the voluntary principle in education and the maintenance of high standards of governance in schools.

Vision 2030

The Strategy aims to outline clear targets and benchmarks for the development of Integrated Education during the five-year period (2025/2030) through the published strategy and associated action plan.

Many of the points we submit in response to this strategy and action plan have been raised previously in our participation as a member of the Integrated Education Act Steering Group. Throughout our participation in that Group, we have sought to ensure that in implementing that Act, the Department, and where relevant the Education Authority, were acting in a matter consistent with the provisions and requirements of the Act. That is essential to ensure that the right balance is struck between the aspirations of those interests promoting integrated education and all other schools delivering for our children and communities across Northern Ireland.

The Governing Bodies Association welcomes a strategy that promotes the definition contained within the Integrated Education Act that goes on to define an integrated school as: ***"A school which intentionally supports, protects and advances an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding between of those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none...."*** (Vision 2030 – A Strategy for Integrated Education 2025-2030 – page 2). However, it is our contention that this definition is realised and lived out every day in all schools across Northern Ireland. The vision and mission are in no manner confined to those schools that have been formally defined as being integrated for the purposes of statutory classifications. It is the aim of all educational establishments to support, protect and advance diversity regardless of their designation as a particular type of school. Schools that do not carry the title "integrated" educate those of different cultures and beliefs (or none), different abilities and those from diverse socio-economic backgrounds as a matter of course. This includes the voluntary grammar sector where a comparative objective analysis of school populations show that are at least as diverse as those in some schools that have been formally classified as integrated. The strategic objective must be to deliver on the principles and aspirators of diversity, respect and understanding between different cultures and religious beliefs in every school in Northern Ireland, rather than focusing on how one sector might do this.

Additionally, we welcome the strategy's recognition that the NI Curriculum has a vital role to play in promoting tolerance and respect and supports its assertion that "**Schools have become much more adept and skilled at addressing the areas of community relations and diversity.**" (Vision 2030 – A Strategy for Integrated Education 2025-2030 – page 13). We also agree with the view that elements of the statutory curriculum such as PDMU, LLW and Citizenship delivered in all schools make a vitally important contribution to promoting open-mindedness, tolerance and respect within communities.

Pages 14-16 highlight the benefits of Integrated Education. We would again highlight that these benefits are not exclusive to that sector. Children from different ethnic, cultural, socio-economic and religious backgrounds attend all schools and interact daily, both formally and informally across all school types. Moreover, we would point to the very positive engagement that comes from Shared Education Partnerships that have empowered staff and pupils from different school types to plan and work together.

Demand for Integrated Education

The strategy focuses on demand for integrated education which is expressed in two different ways. **Societal Demand** is referred to as evidence from surveys and parental ballots while **Behavioural Demand** is indicated school preference during the admission process that enable entry to pre-school, primary school and post-primary school.

In this regard we must yet again highlight the clear statutory provisions in the Integrated Education Act on the measurement of the demand for integrated education as specified in Section 6 of the Act and particularly in sub-sections 6 (2) and (3). These highlight an obligation to take steps to ascertain demand for integrated education and specify that this is a reference "*to ascertaining the extent to which parents would prefer their children to be educated at grant-maintained integrated or controlled integrated schools rather than at schools which are not grant-maintained integrated schools or controlled integrated schools.*"

There are no references in the legislation to the concepts of "societal demand" or 'behavioural demand' and hence they cannot be considered legitimate in the context of the statutory requirement placed on the Department and the Education Authority to measure the demand for integrated education. What the legislation does specify is that demand for integrated education is to be a measurement of the extent to which **parents** would prefer their children to be educated at different categories of schools. To do that requires standardised and consistent measures of parental demand for schools in all sectors.

The strategy points to unmet demand for Integrated Education in six localities (Belfast, Lisburn and Castlereagh, Ards and North Down, Antrim and Newtownabbey, Mid and East Antrim, and Newry, Mourne and Down). There is also unmet demand for other types of schools in these and other localities as well as surplus places in integrated schools in different parts of Northern Ireland. It is therefore misleading to identify unmet demand for integrated schools in selected areas, while ignoring the overall picture in terms of demand for integrated education and for other types of education in all areas of Northern Ireland. That is what the legislation requires.

From a post-primary perspective, based on admission data from 2024/2025, it would appear that the level of 'unmet' need is less than that outlined in the strategy. Table 2 highlights the admission numbers for integrated schools in each of the council areas and highlights the number of first preferences in each locality. From this, it would appear that there is unmet need in three council areas, Ards & North Down, Belfast (though to a lesser degree) and Mid & East Antrim. Applying the same criteria to the voluntary grammar sector, it should be noted that the unmet need is significantly higher, particularly in Belfast as evidenced in Table 3.

Table 2 – Integrated Schools Admission Numbers v First Preferences

Council Area	Admission No.	1st Preference	Difference
Antrim and Newtownabbey	435	326	109
Ards and North Down	230	288	-58
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon	190	151	39
Belfast	305	319	-14
Causeway Coast & Glens	80	45	35
Derry City & Strabane	130	57	73
Fermanagh & Omagh	175	84	91
Lisburn & Castlereagh	380	358	22
Mid and East Antrim	275	368	-93
Mid Ulster	230	218	12
Newry, Mourne & Down	180	135	45

Table 3 – Voluntary Grammar Schools Admission Numbers v First Preferences

Council Area	Admission No.	1st Preference	Difference
Antrim and Newtownabbey	136	211	-75
Ards and North Down	285	308	-23
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon	560	506	54
Belfast	2211	2472	-261
Causeway Coast & Glens	541	575	-34
Derry City & Strabane	666	603	63
Fermanagh & Omagh	586	626	-40
Lisburn & Castlereagh	343	440	-97
Mid and East Antrim	425	522	-97
Mid Ulster	662	768	-106
Newry, Mourne & Down	1000	852	148

A similar pattern is evident when 2024/2025 admission data is considered. Overall, there is greater unmet need in the voluntary grammar sector.

Table 4 – Integrated Schools Admission Numbers v Actual Admission

Council Area	Admission No.	Total Allocated	Difference
Antrim and Newtownabbey	435	381	54
Ards and North Down	230	250	-20
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon	190	168	22
Belfast	305	305	0
Causeway Coast & Glens	80	49	31
Derry City & Strabane	130	71	59
Fermanagh & Omagh	175	85	90
Lisburn & Castlereagh	380	310	70
Mid and East Antrim	275	295	-20
Mid Ulster	230	249	-19
Newry, Mourne & Down	180	142	38

Table 5 – Voluntary Grammar Schools Admission Numbers v Actual Admissions

Council Area	Admission No.	Total Allocated	Difference
Antrim and Newtownabbey	136	136	0
Ards and North Down	285	285	0
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon	560	492	68
Belfast	2211	2218	-7
Causeway Coast & Glens	541	532	9
Derry City & Strabane	666	603	63
Fermanagh & Omagh	586	567	19
Lisburn & Castlereagh	343	344	-1
Mid and East Antrim	425	459	-34
Mid Ulster	662	697	-35
Newry, Mourne & Down	1000	875	125

Unmet demand is not exclusive to the integrated sector. There is unmet demand in different sectors in different localities and an area-based approach must be taken that does not elevate the needs of integrated schools over others because of their title. Provision to meet demand and secure sufficient places for integrated education must be understood within the context of area planning and the overall sustainability of the school estate having examined evidence of expected future demand. This is clearly outlined in Clauses 5(a) & 5(b) of the Act.

"Clause 5 A reference in any provision of Northern Ireland legislation to support for integrated education (including support for the development of integrated education) is a reference to—

(a)identifying, assessing, monitoring and aiming to meet the demand for the provision of integrated education within the context of area planning and the overall sustainability of the school estate (including, in particular, monitoring the number and success of applications for integrated education), and

(b)providing sufficient places in integrated schools to aim to meet the demand for integrated education within the context of area planning and the overall sustainability of the school estate (including examining evidence of expected future demand)."

We believe that schools' parental choice data collated annually and published by the Department is the most accurate data available in measuring real demand for schools in the different sectors and in different areas.

However the strategy document (page 23) identifies a proposed target that raises some concerns. It states: "By 2030, we will aim to achieve a reduction in the post primary gap between percentage of 1st preferences for Integrated education being met (currently 87%) and the NI post-primary average (currently 90%)" The comparisons proposed here would be misleading in that they would compare first preferences for one sector (integrated schools) with a collective figure for all other sectors combined. To be meaningful the comparisons should be between first preferences for integrated schools and first preferences for each of the other sectors broken down separately by area.

Sustainability Issues

While many actions to enhance support for integrated education are already well underway, including support and funding for NICIE to carry out its work, insufficient attention has been given to sustainability issues surrounding some of the integrated schools. Five of the schools do not meet the criteria contained in the Sustainable Schools Policy [A Policy for Sustainable Schools](#) which states that the minimum number in Years 8-12 must be 500 pupils (and a sixth has exactly 500 pupils). Additionally, eight of the 21 schools do not meet the threshold for a financially self-sufficient sixth form as they have less than the 100 pupils required. In a statement to

the Northern Assembly on 9 August 2021, the Education Minister at the time stated that schools with sixth forms with fewer than 100 pupils cannot offer a full range of courses. How will these schools with smaller numbers fit in with Area Planning and the desire to have the right number of schools in the right places? While these issues are not unique to the integrated sector they must be fully considered as part of any forward-thinking strategy and programme of work.

Table 6 – Integrated Schools with less than 500 pupils in Years 8-12

School	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11	Year 12	Total Y8-Y12
A	40	52	56	61	42	251
B	35	48	57	72	59	271
C	64	65	51	46	57	283
D	50	67	65	49	67	298
E	58	77	85	95	103	418

Table 7 – Integrated Schools with less than 100 pupils in Years 13-14

School	Year 13	Year 14	Year 13-14 Total
P	23	13	36
Q	29	36	65
R	42	24	66
S	40	33	73
T	31	52	83
U	45	42	87
V	47	47	94
W	62	35	97

Another important factor sustainability factor to consider is the anticipated drop in population of post primary education year on year to 2030 as documented in the Education Authority Operational Plan 2: 2024-2026 ([Planning for Provision 2024-26](#)). Overall, as Table 8 shows, there will be 10,000+ fewer students in the school system across years 8-12 by 2030. This will impact on schools, particularly those struggling to meet their admission number in the current climate. Operational Plan 2 states that in planning for 2026 and beyond, discussions where sustainability has been identified will continue to seek options to meet the future needs within the post primary sector (page 13).

Table 8 – Post-Primary School Projected Numbers 2025-2030

Year	Years 8-12	Years 13-14	Total	Yearly Decline	Overall Decline
2024	126,942	29,777	156,719	-	-
2025	125,830	29,516	155,346	-1,373	-1,373
2026	125,147	29,355	154,502	-844	-2,217
2027	124,255	29,146	153,401	-1,101	-3,318
2028	122,526	28,741	151,267	-2,134	-5,452
2029	120,869	28,310	149,179	-2,088	-7,540
2030	118,646	27,831	146,477	-2,702	-10,242

Project Primary School data (Table 9), while showing a slight increase until 2027, also highlights a declining school population in the next decade and sectors should be mindful of this in their planning.

Table 9 – Primary School Projected Numbers 2024-2032

Year	Years 1-7	Yearly Decline	Overall Decline
2024	165,826	-	-
2027	167,238	1,412	1,412
2029	162,019	-5,219	-3,807
2032	157,330	-4,689	-8,496
2035	153,818	-3,512	-12,008

We have also noted the plan to carry out an immediate review of school governance arrangements within the integrated sector:

"By December 2025, we will review the school governance arrangements within Integrated Education and in particular the strengths and challenges of the Grant Maintained Integrated (GMI) governance model and prepare a report for Ministerial consideration"

It would be useful to see the terms of reference for this review given the plan to complete the exercise by December this year.

Finally, we have noted the section on resources earmarked for Integrated Education.

The strategy states "*When a DP is approved for a new integrated school... the amount of capital required will be determined on a case-by-case basis...All capital funding is subject to budget availability*"

We are concerned with the use of the word "when" here, implying a presumption that such DPs will be approved, rather than may be approved in the context of area planning and the overall sustainability of the school estate (e.g. Section 5 of the Integrated Education Act). Our suggestion would be to replace 'when' with 'if'. We have also noted the caveats around budget availability, which are of course a significant constraint on the capital funding available for all schools' sectors. In this financial environment, we believe it is essential that the Department publishes the criteria it will use to assess the priority of individual schools' capital projects to ensure that they are each assessed on the basis of objective need and unrelated to the category of school involved.

GBA would welcome the opportunity to discuss this submission with DE should this be considered helpful.

May 2025

Millennium Integrated Primary School



Celebrating 25 years 2000 – 2025

The Board of Governors for Millennium Integrated Primary School (MIPS) welcomes the Department's plan for the next five years, however, in our opinion, the plans are based upon legislation that is still largely incomplete, without secondary Regulations or Explanatory guidance in certain key areas. We have corresponded previously to raise concerns on those outstanding areas, and they remain unclear. Vision 2030 is largely based upon the Department's own legal requirement under the 2022 Act to support "Integrated Education", but key aspects of the new definition and how it works in practise remain unclear. To that end, the plan is somewhat generic in absence of the further Regulations and Guidance which is required to fully understand the operation of the new Act.



In respect to specifics, we wish to highlight the main points below.

Strategic Aim 1, Action 6 provides that the impact of admissions criteria upon access to Integrated Education will be assessed. The target date for this is September 2025. How will this work? Will the Department contact individual schools, or their Board of Governors to review admissions criteria? With the imminent summer break, how will this happen? There are also key elements missing within the 2022 Act as to how the new and wider definition of Integrated Education might impact upon admissions criteria. For example, prior to the 2022 Act, admissions were largely based upon the 40/40/20 requirement which was set in previous, now repealed legislation. That has been replaced by a "reasonable" test for Protestant and Catholic, but no other measures or metrics for the new categories. When will these new metrics or standards be set out? How can current admissions criteria really be assessed when it is unclear what metrics, if any attach to the wider definition?

These metrics, as well as being currently unknown are also in parallel with concerns being raised in respect of other areas of measure. We have concerns that the measure of socio-economic disadvantage will, again, fall to simple measure of Free School Meals (FSM) when the actual measure of socio-economic disadvantage can be much wider than this.

We would also like to draw attention to the vagaries around 'different abilities' too – and what is the intention to measure and compare this against similar schools. How will this measure be used to indicate if a school is meeting its requirement in legislation to educate children of 'different abilities' and to what extent will that be enforced within selective schools? Will it just be on selection criteria or will it, then, be applied at a classroom level.

Strategic Aim 1, Action 9 provides that the Department will review the governance of Grant Maintained Schools to assess the strengths and weaknesses of that area. The assumption is that this will not involve an assessment of the governance of individual GMI schools such as MIPS, but rather an overarching review of GMI as an operating model.



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Celebrating 25 years 2000 – 2025

We would certainly welcome a review of the operating model itself to look for any improvement which could be made, but if the intention is to remove the model and incorporate all Integrated Schools in to the same scheme, then we would have concerns as to how this would be funded. When read in conjunction with other aspects of this plan, particularly the drive to increase Integrated Education and to prioritise funding to new school proposals, will this mean that current GMI schools could potentially be remitted to a common scheme with all other schools existing and new, but with less priority on day to day funding? As this Action is due to report in April 2026, any likely change of operating model or funding model could apply in 2027 when we have already been projecting significant funding deficits.

We note that there is reference within Action 9 to work with 'NICIE and existing GMI schools to consider the strengths and weaknesses' of the model. Will consultation take place with Governors on a Board level (through meetings, for example) or will it be a broad brush review that 'consults' through surveys and paper, again, treating it as a strategic review as opposed to looking at the operational impact of the model.

We are all aware that the financial governance of GMI schools has been greatly impacted by the continual under-funding of education in general and this provides additional pressures on the GMI governance that are outside of Governors control. When financial allocation for maintenance, for example, has remained static for over 10 years in the face of rising costs, it is little wonder that there are additional major pressures on GMI schools. This is, of course, only one area.

The basis of the plan to extend Integrated Education is predicated largely upon research on oversubscription in certain parts of Northern Ireland, and lack of supply to meet untapped demand in others. That demand is to be assessed using Societal and Behavioural Demand assessments. Those assessments are due to be published in June 2025 which is imminent. However the Action Plan suggests a target date of December 2025. Will the demand analysis be published in June 2025 for all schools and parents to consider, or will it be held back to the target date in Action Plan. This is of particular relevance to our own Board of Governors in assessing demand for, and resourcing of our services in Millennium, not just this school year, but in the medium term.



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VISION 2030: A Strategy for Integrated Education 2025 – 2030

Consultation May 2025: CCMS Response

Date: 23 May 2025

Overview

CCMS was established through legislation in 1989 and is a statutory body with responsibility for the management of all Catholic maintained schools, which make up 40% of schools in Northern Ireland and educate over 120,000 pupils.

Catholic maintained schools promote the dignity, self-esteem and full development of *each, and every* young person. They are naturally inclusive, welcoming pupils of all beliefs (and none), identity, background and ability. As such, they reflect the characteristics outlined in the Integrated Education Act (NI) 2022 i.e. schools which educate together those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not; and those of different abilities.

Catholic maintained schools enjoy widespread support and confidence; educating their pupils within a values-led curriculum that underpins high quality learning and teaching, with exceptional levels of pastoral care. Resultantly, they are consistently the top performing all ability schools in Northern Ireland.

CCMS aspires to a high-quality education system that is child-centred, diverse and inclusive and values the contribution of integrated education to this vision. Faith-based education has an equally important role to play. Failure to recognise this undermines the benefits and achievements of Catholic education and propagates the unfounded perception that faith-based education is divisive.

CCMS will continue to support the Department with the development and implementation of its duties in respect of integrated education. However, the draft strategy fails to recognise the value of pluralist systems and is predicated on the creation and growth of a discrete integrated sector, to the apparent detriment of others.

The strategy prioritises form and structure and has limited reference to, or evidence of, how the proposed approach would improve children and young people's educational outcomes. Indeed, there is reference to learner outcomes only once throughout the strategy document.

CCMS would advocate for greater emphasis and focus on the learner and the opportunities for capitalising on the existing strengths and opportunities of the education system to foster inclusion and diversity. In so doing, there is an opportunity to learn from and improve upon the positive outcomes achieved by many schools and ensure equitable access to resources and support at a time of significant financial challenge across education.

Additional points

Diversity & inclusion

- Catholic schools promote a culture of respect where diverse identities are recognised, welcomed, respected and cherished. Through Shared Education projects our schools aim to deliver educational benefits and promote equality of opportunity, and good relations and community cohesion. CCMS, alongside Trustees, promotes the unique role that Catholic education plays in contributing to the common good.
- Religion plays no part in Cm schools' admissions criteria or recruitment processes. It is though acknowledged that the composition of school populations (particularly in primary and non-grammar schools) can be heavily shaped by the community from which they draw their enrolment. Indeed, this was acknowledged in public commentary following the recent rejection of development proposals for integrated post primary provision in Bangor.
- Similar understanding is not afforded to Catholic schools in Northern Ireland, and there remains public commentary and criticism of schools whose intake is resultantly predominantly Catholic.
- The perception that inclusion and diversity is discrete to formally integrated schools, or controlled schools, is further reinforced in the document; including reference to the role of CSSC, EA and NICIE as 'key bodies'.
- CCMS would welcome recognition of the contribution of Catholic maintained schools to diversity and inclusion.

Role of Trustees and CCMS

- It is imperative that there is further and prior engagement with Trustees and CCMS where measures are predicated on engagement with their schools; particularly any proposal to proactively engage with Cm schools to determine their appetite, or encourage them, to transform.

Area Planning: 'Demand' and Sustainability

- Reference is made to the fact that 8% of pupils in NI now attend a formal, integrated school and that 'Integrated Education has grown remarkably in the period since 1981'. This statement is not evidenced or contextualised by comparative analysis of birth rates and pupil numbers/change in other sectors. Data analysis would benefit from consideration of enrolment trends across all sectors & management types, as well as actual vs approved enrolment.
- In respect of the issue of demand for Integrated Education, CCMS welcomes the Department's commitment to gather and analyse data and 'work collaboratively with sectoral representatives'.
- Critically, further thought is first required as to how 'demand' is defined. The strategy is predicated on a presumption of growth at a time of falling birth rates. It should not for example be presumed that over-subscription at 1st preference equates to unmet demand. There are several factors that impact parental preference, including use of '1st preference' admissions criterion and academic selection. Consideration should also be given to of where integrated education is currently proving to be undersubscribed or unsustainable.
- It would be important also that any measures are in keeping with the requirements of the Sustainable Schools policy, and area planning processes, to which all other sectors are subject.
- CCMS would contend that aspects of the current proposals, such as the 'Calls for Transformation' are in direct contravention of the current area planning process and fundamentally undermine the role of Trustees and CCMS as contained within legislation. This specific measure, for example, could be used to impede the progress of development proposals seeking to close highly, unsustainable schools.

Funding

- Considerable capital funding for integrated schools and resource commitments for NICIE are referenced.
- Given current funding challenges, the strategy does not offer any reassurance that the proposed approach does not have a negative impact on other sectors as was assured during legislative consultation.
- It is imperative that all sectors are afforded equitable opportunity to access resources and support, and that capital funding is allocated ~~on the basis of~~ assessed need.

VISION 2030: A Strategy for Integrated Education 2025 – 2030

Department of Education

Public Consultation May 2025

CSTS Officer Response

- CSTS recognises that the strategy for Integrated Education has prepared in response to the requirements of the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.
- It is also noted that the IE strategy is intended to further the aspirations of the Independent Review of Education:
 - ...to significantly increase the numbers of children educated together from different backgrounds, including by increasing the number of Integrated schools or jointly managed community schools .
- CSTS fully supports the aspiration that young people can be educated together. Such an aspiration needs to recognise that NI is now a multi-cultural, multi-faith and economically and socially stratified society and this should needs to be factored into any understanding of an inclusive education model rather than a focus on the 'political binary' of the past. CSTS would assert that the Catholic family of schools welcomes children from all cultural, economic and religious backgrounds and those of no faith and has increasingly done so in recent times.
- It is unfortunate that the strategy doesn't acknowledge the pluralist nature of provision within NI and the benefit which this offers in terms of parental preference. Additionally, the strategy, consistent with the legislation focuses on system and not on how to provide a high performing, high quality network of schools in all sectors.

- With reference to the published strategy document CSTS offers the following comments:
 - With reference to Jointly Managed Community Schools (page3), progress continues to be made by CSTS and The Transferor Representatives in progressing the concept of a Jointly Managed Church Schools. It would be important to ensure that clarity is provided to ensure understanding of this development.
 - Reference is made to the fact that 8% of pupils in NI now attend a formal integrated school (Page 4). However to state that 'Integrated Education has grown remarkably in the period since 1981' might be perceived as a subjective claim. Some could argue that an 8% growth over 44 years is not 'significant'. CSTS would suggest that subjective comments be avoided in the rolling out of the IE strategy.
 - The Strategy states that 'CSSC is recognised as a relevant body under Section 3 of the Act' (Page 10) and continues to refer to engagement with CSTS, EA, CCMS etc during the course of the document. It is recognised that CSTS has been included to date in the emerging stages of this strategy it is important to ensure that the role of all stakeholder bodies continues to be recognised, acknowledged and safeguarded as the IE strategy unfolds.
 - The Strategy document makes the following remarks about existing diversity and shared education in schools:
 - Many schools from all school sectors are now educating children and young people with a range of abilities from diverse religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds .
 - Schools often collaborate through Area Learning Communities or Shared Education, which aims to provide opportunities for pupils from different religious and socio-economic backgrounds to be educated together.
 - Schools have become much more adept and skilled at addressing the areas of community relations and diversity.

Such comments apply in great measure to Catholic schools and serve to emphasise the inclusivity and diversity underpinned by the ethos of Catholic education thus dispelling the sometimes cited perception that faith schools are partially responsible for societal sectarianism.

- In the strategy it is claimed that 'At its core, Integrated Education is about encouraging children and young people to recognise what they share in common, as well as understanding and respecting differences . This helps them to develop a positive attitude towards others and become aware of bias'. CSTS would contend that such comments apply equally to Catholic schools. This should be acknowledged. Failure to do so only serves to promulgate the unfounded perception that faith-based education is divisive.
- Chapter 3 deals with the key issue of demand for Integrated Education. CSTS welcomes the Department's commitment to gather and analyse data and 'work collaboratively with sectoral representatives'. This is a key issue in the context of the current Area Planning process within which educational partners have collaborated to plan for the future school provision of all children. Any strategy which over-emphasises or prioritises one sector over others has the potential to undermine the ongoing Area Planning strategy and operational plans.
- Page 27 introduces the concept of 'Calls for Transformation' directed at schools with sustainable enrolments or where transformation could lead to a sustainable environment in priority locations. It is important that the strategy can also find a way of managing the transformation proposals coming from a small number of very unsustainable schools earmarked for closure, as 'a strategy of last resort'.
- CSTS regards this as a strategy which could potentially be used to encourage a large number of unsustainable schools to seek transformation as a means of survival rather than as a genuine move to IE status.

- On page 28 the strategy commits DE to the provision of high quality support services to Integrated Education. It will be important to be mindful of equity in regard to the extent of support including financial support allocated to any one sector. DE's obligation must be to ensure high quality support services are available to all sectors.
- The strategy highlights the commitment of £471-million to new build IE schools. CSTS believes that such commitment should not jeopardise the funding of capital schemes already approved by DE 'subject to budget availability'. CSTS believes that the allocation of the finite capital funding is allocated on the basis of assessed need across all sectors.
- The Benchmark Data document provided with the Strategy will be a critical issue in moving forward with the IE strategy. Given that so much of the strategy is predicated on an as yet unquantified demand, CSTS would suggest that all educational partners engage at every level in the analysis and interpretation of all data and that all interpretations of that data are given equal credence and attention.
- CSTS will continue to play its part, with all the education stakeholder bodies, in the further development and implementation of the strategy.

Political Party Comments

Sinn Féin



Sinn Féin

SINN FÉIN SUBMISSION TO:

Vision 2030 - Integrated Education Strategy Consultation

Sinn Féin welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Education's consultation on Vision 2030: A Strategy for Integrated Education. As a party committed to equality, parental choice and inclusion in education we fully support efforts to develop a strategy that will deliver on the intent of the 2022 Integrated Education Act.

Integrated Education has long been a valued part of the education landscape in the north. It offers a model through which children and young people from all backgrounds can learn together in an environment that promotes mutual respect, understanding and equality. While Integrated Education will not deliver reconciliation in isolation, with the right support and vision, it can certainly play a part in the journey towards reconciliation and breaking down segregation.

We recognise the Department's statutory duty to encourage, facilitate and support Integrated Education, and we welcome the Vision 2030 strategy as a step towards fulfilling this responsibility. The emphasis on increasing access, strengthening support services, developing the integrated ethos, and enhancing public awareness is timely and necessary.

However, Sinn Féin believes the strategy and accompanying action plan fall short in several key areas. Notably, the absence of clearly defined targets and robust implementation mechanisms raises concerns about the Department's ability to deliver meaningful change over the course of the strategy. Aspirational language must now be matched with measurable progress.

We urge the Department to set out concrete and time-bound targets for:

- Growth in the number and percentage of pupils attending integrated schools;
- Expansion of integrated school places in high-demand areas;
- Acceleration of the transformation process, with appropriate support and guidance for schools;
- Ensuring all families, regardless of geography or background, can realistically access an integrated school.

We also stress the importance of ensuring equity and sustainability in growth. As the benchmark data highlights, there are clear socio-economic disparities in access to integrated education. These must be addressed to ensure that the sector truly reflects the diversity it seeks to promote.

We note the proposed 'Call for Transformation' in Action 4 and support efforts to raise the visibility and accessibility of the transformation pathway. However, we caution against using transformation as a reactive measure for schools facing sustainability issues. The integrity of the integrated sector depends on genuine commitment to the integrated ethos, not on using transformation as a means of avoiding closure. Transformation should be driven by clear evidence of parental support, sustainable enrolment projections, and a demonstrable willingness to embed the ethos of integration in all aspects of school life.

Furthermore, there needs to be greater clarity around the financial resources available to support the ambitions of the strategy, particularly given the significant pressures facing the education budget. The role of NICIE, as a key delivery partner, must also be supported through secure and sufficient funding.

Finally, Sinn Féin reiterates the importance of an inclusive, pluralist education system that respects parental choice and supports all children and young people to achieve their full potential. Integrated Education should form a central part of this system, but its development must be intentional, well-resourced, and firmly rooted in equality and rights.

We welcome the continued engagement with stakeholders, including schools, families, and sectoral bodies, and we call on the Department to strengthen its ambition and accelerate its efforts to meet the real and growing demand for Integrated Education.

Sinn Féin remains committed to working constructively with all partners to ensure that education in the north is inclusive, forward-looking, and fit for the future.



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Vision 2030 - Integrated Education Strategy Consultation

Response by the Workers Party

Introduction

More than 90% of schools in Northern Ireland are segregated on religious grounds, operating with de facto parallel systems for Catholics and Protestants. Less than 2% of pupils who identify as Protestant currently attend a Catholic school, with less than 9% of pupils that identify as Catholic attending Controlled schools and 30% of schools having no pupils from the 'other' community.

No more than 7% of pupils here are educated in integrated schools despite decades of opinion polls showing consistently huge majorities of people in favour of integrated education. As a secular, socialist anti-sectarian party, the Workers Party is clear that the main political parties in NI have conspired over the past 25 years to retain an education system which promotes the sectarian division that enables sectarian politics to thrive in Stormont and on the streets of Northern Ireland, where geographical divisions based on background are as bad as ever.

The 2022 Integrated Education Act represented a step change, but integrated education is still at a disadvantage. Demand outstrips supply, integrated schools remain reliant on charitable funding from organisations such as the Integrated Education Fund, and changing to integrated status requires a grassroots campaign from local parents.

Since 2019, there have been 26 parental ballots in schools seeking to pivot to integrated status wherein parents returned a 'yes' response. The average 'yes' response percentage is 91%. Yet, opponents claim that there is not sufficient evidence of demand.

Education continues to be an under-utilised tool in peace and reconciliation. It is no panacea to all the ills and traumas that foment in a post-conflict society, but it is a foundation from which community cohesion may grow. Rather than have young people divided into opposing educational sectors that are dominated by religious and political identities, Northern Ireland should have one primary education system that is comprehensive, integrated and secular as the norm.

How can we expect the next generation to progress if they continue to be subject to the segregation and reinforced division that defined the experiences of their parents and grandparents? Rather than pitting opposing education sectors against one another, young people in Northern Ireland deserve the opportunity to navigate their formative years in the care of an inclusive system everyone can share. Researchers Anderson Worden and Smith (2017) note that "*the lack of committed reform to integrating Northern Ireland schools prevents the education sector from making a substantive contribution to transitional justice efforts and to reconciling divisions in the post-conflict context*" (our emphasis) [1]. Rather than hiving integrated education off into a silo where a modest increase in the numbers of integrated schools is counted a success while the basic educational divisions persist, the Executive needs to push for the substantive changes that integrated education will bring to Northern Ireland. We note that this kind of bold commitment is absent from Vision 2030 and the accompanying Action Plan.

Shared Education is not Integrated Education

According to Vision 2030, "schools often collaborate through Area Learning Communities or Shared Education, which aims to provide opportunities for pupils from different religious and socio-economic backgrounds to be educated together ... Together, Sharing Works (2015) and the Shared Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 provide a policy and legislative framework which seeks to enable collaborative working between educational settings, on a cross sectoral basis, providing children and young people from different religious and socio-economic backgrounds with opportunities to learn with and about each other. It is not a question of either integrated Education or Shared Education They are not in competition with each other". The Workers Party disagrees.

The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 committed to "facilitate and encourage integrated education..." Since then, the main Executive parties have been instrumental in sidelining the progression of integrated education and have connived to set back the integrated education project through disingenuous schemes such as their 'shared education' ploy.

'Shared' education is not Integrated education. It was never meant to be. Instead, it is a deliberate and reprehensible dodge which confirms, consolidates and copper-fastens divisions in our society at the expense of the integrated education of yet another generation of children.

No religious ethos in schools: for secular education

Census 2021 has shown us that the number of people who have 'no religion' has risen sharply in Northern Ireland since the last census of 2011. While almost 80% of respondents declare themselves to be Christians of various kinds, 1.3% belong to other religions, 17.4% say they have 'no religion' and 1.6% had 'religion not stated'. This 'no religion' population ranges from 30.6% of people in Ards & North Down council to 7.8% in Mid Ulster council. Among this 'no religion' group, 177,400 people (9.3% of the NI population) were brought up in no religious tradition.

According to *Vision 2030* "an excellent education system should respect the reasonable rights of parents to ensure that children are educated in accordance with their religious and philosophical convictions" but given the increasingly varied religious demographics of Northern Ireland, how could these 'reasonable rights' be practically respected? In particular, the rights of one in 5 people in Northern Ireland who are not religious are not respected in schools based on religious ethos.

The Workers Party believes that religious faith is an individual matter which should not be mediated by the state either through the repression of faith groups or by the positive endorsement of a faith or faiths. The Workers Party believes that education should be secular because it is the only way to fairly accommodate the rights of all children and parents. The only way to fairly "ensure that all learners have the opportunity to learn alongside individuals from other communities and backgrounds" (*Vision 2030*) is to ensure that the schools are not run by or in the interests of particular faith groups. Outside of schools, individuals and groups are within their rights to promote faith claims and religiously oriented ethical frameworks but the state should not fund or endorse schools which exist to serve faith communities.

Vision 2030 notes that the DoE's "Community Relations, Equality and Diversity in Education (CRED) policy specifically aims to ensure that children and young people, at each stage of their development, have an understanding of and respect for the rights, equality and diversity of all without discrimination". Anderson Worden and Smith (2017) describe the introduction in 2007 of Local and Global Citizenship (LGC) as a statutory requirement noting that "the LGC emphasis is on exploring a set of core concepts ('Diversity and Inclusion'; 'Human Rights and Social Responsibilities'; 'Equality

and Social Justice'; and 'Democracy and Active Participation') which are regarded as problematic from the outset and explored from multiple perspectives through a range of local and international issues". This kind of education for citizenship can only fully be realised when students from all backgrounds are educated together.

In addition to education for citizenship, rather than following particular faith traditions, RE classes in integrated schools should teach world religions from a comparative perspective. Nelson and Yang (2023) [2] who researched the teaching of world religions in 12 controlled schools in NI note that "some teachers were able to actively promote their views of Christianity as having superiority over other religions while claiming they were promoting respect and tolerance ...conservative elements within schools, including religious education teachers, can resist moves to more open and inclusive forms of education and so continue to cultivate labelling and othering among pupils". The Workers Party supports the "possible mitigations that can assist in maintaining appropriate boundaries" outlined by Yang and Nelson: a code of practice for teachers of religious education, the inspection of Religious Education by qualified inspectors, a well- balanced curriculum that is informed by a pedagogical model for inclusive religious education in plural environments, and a meaningful and contemporary legal framework for teaching about religion". But these mitigations will only work in secular schools. Moreover, the Workers Party fights for secular education while recognising that the worst aspects of religious 'othering' will only be mitigated in a socialist society.

Duplication of funds

A 2023 report from the University of Ulster [3] noted that the school maintenance backlog amounted to £500 million and that spending per pupil in NI "is lower than in any other region of the UK, and it has been the lowest spending region for the last decade at least". Against this dire background, the report details the costs of duplicating provision based on sectarian segregation.

While noting that the money amount can only ever be an estimate the researchers estimate the total additional cost of maintaining a divided system at £226 million each year, or over £600,000 every day of the year. The current system is not only educationally and culturally indefensible, but it is also a significant drain on the public purse.

Conclusion

Against the piecemeal approach of Vision 2030, the Workers Party urges the Executive parties to develop a commitment to only funding integrated schools by a date within the near future. The

current system is expensive, unreflective of the demographic realities and unfair to the generations of young people who could and should be educated together.

References

- [1] Elizabeth Anderson Worden & Alan Smith (2017) Teaching for democracy in the absence of transitional justice: the case of Northern Ireland, *Comparative Education*, 53:3, 379-395, DOI: 10.1080/03050068.2017.1334426
- [2] James Nelson & Yue Yang (2023) The role of teachers' religious beliefs in their classroom practice – a personal or public concern? *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 44:3, 316-333, DOI: 10.1080/13617672.2022.2125672
- [3] 'The Cost of Division in Northern Ireland', *Transforming Education* briefing paper 18

Introduction

The Alliance Party broadly welcomes the consultation on the draft strategy and action plan for Integrated Education 2025 to 2030.

The Integrated Education Act (NI) 2022 was a significant achievement in the advancement and promotion of integrated education. This strategy and action plan has been long delayed in the context of the clear requirements stemming from this Act.

The strategy and action plan comes in a context of numerous surveys showing consistent support for Integrated Education in Northern Ireland.

New Decade, New Approach had a stated ambition "to help build a shared and integrated society, the Executive will support educating children and young people of different backgrounds together in the classroom."

The Independent Review of Education, published in 2023, gave clear support for Integrated Education, stating:

We support Integrated education and believe that it is in the interests of Northern Irish society that the number of integrated schools should increase.

and

Increasing the number of integrated schools or jointly managed community schools. All families should have such options within a realistic travelling distance as soon as possible.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child also recommended in their 2016 Concluding Observations and Recommendations to:

"In Northern Ireland, actively promote a fully integrated education system and carefully monitor the provision of shared education, with the participation of children, in order to ensure that it facilitates social integration;"

The Alliance Party strongly believes first and foremost in an excellent education system which places young people at its centre. We believe that Integrated Education is both central to that excellent education system and a crucial part of achieving a shared society. We welcome the section within the strategy on the 'Benefits of Integrated

Education', which articulates the important role Integrated Education plays in confronting prejudice, building peace and cohesion and addressing the legacy of the past.

While there is much to welcome within the strategy, we do have some fundamental concerns with the strategy and action plan as it stands. We hope these will be addressed in the final version.

Stating the challenges and taking action

We are glad to see an articulation of two of the key challenges facing Integrated Education. Namely the gap between the public support for Integrated Education and the availability of Integrated Education and the overly complex and resource intensive process of creating a new integrated school or transforming to integrated. However, these challenges are not new, and it is for the Department to finally make progress in improving the situation, not simply articulating the issues or presenting data.

We have serious concerns about the time it has taken to get to this point, where there is a draft strategy and actions plan which meets the requirements of the Integrated Education Act and therefore, going forward, have concerns for how quickly stated actions will be delivered.

So, while it will be positive to have a finalised strategy and action plan, the real test of progress will be what decisions are made by the Education Minister and the Department.

The conflict between Ministerial decisions and the strategy

Related to the above point, before this strategy has even been finalised there appears to be a conflict with its stated aims and recent Ministerial decisions.

There is an overarching statutory requirement on the Department to 'support, encourage and facilitate' Integrated Education. More specifically, within the strategy, under 'Strategic Aim 1: Increased access to Integrated Education', there are clear actions aimed at increasing the Integrated provision in areas where there is unmet demand. Action 4 states that DE will commission NICIE to issue a 'Call for Transformation' in priority areas. Yet, in Ards and North Down, an area where clear demand for transformation has been established, the current Education Minister went against Departmental Officials to deny two schools with their request for transformation. These Ministerial decisions are clearly at odds with the strategic aim to increase access to Integrated Education and specific actions.

There needs to be clarity that the Minister is supportive of this strategy and its actions.

Measurements of targets and timelines

The strategy as it stands has 25 indicators that will 'measure progress towards achieving the outcomes of the strategy and action plan'. Concerningly only 3 of the 25 indicators currently have targets. For example, there are currently no targets attached to the below points, which are fundamental indicators:

- Number of additional places created and percentage increase
- Number of approved Development Proposals for expansion of existing Integrated schools approved
- Number of new integrated schools opened (including transformations)
- Number of approved Development Proposals for transformation

While it is good that these indicators are explicitly stated, the ambition of the Department through this strategy is impossible to understand without targets for these key indicators.

The Integrated Education Act was clear that the Department should both 'include measurable benchmarks against which the success of the strategy (including progress towards meeting targets) can be assessed' and 'include targets (including timetables)'.

Under 'Increased access to integrated education' the majority of targets are related to collecting data, which is important, however it is how that data is used in decision making which is crucial. As referenced above there are no commitments to the number of schools or development proposals which will be achieved.

There are a number of targets, which have stated intentions of preparing reports, papers or recommendations for Ministerial consideration. While that is understandable, we have concerns that while these documents may be considered by a Minister there is no guarantee of any action being taken or even a response to them. For example, while there is a stated target of 'By September 2025, we will review the objectives, resources and funding of NICIE and prepare a report for Ministerial consideration', there is no commitment to publicly publishing the report, no timelines for decisions to be made following consideration, or any commitment to actions arising from such a report.

Use of data

We are very supportive of the data which is being captured and welcome the progress on this. However, we need to understand how that data will be used to achieve the strategic goals of the strategy.

The draft strategy notes "*We expect the EA will use the report on demand for Integrated Education to meet its statutory obligation to aim to meet demand for Integrated Education and include such information into Area Planning processes and future strategies within the context of providing sustainable education provision across Northern Ireland*". While this appears promising, as is the case elsewhere in the strategy, there is little detail for what this will mean practically. More detail is needed on how it will be ensured that this data is used by the EA in the area planning process. Afterall, the Integrated Education Act outlined the meaning of 'support' for the sector as '*providing sufficient places in integrated schools to aim to meet the demand for integrated education within the context of area planning and the overall sustainability of the school estate (including examining evidence of expected future demand)*'.

Action 5 within the strategy commits the Department, following the report on demand for Integrated Education, to '*prioritise actions for the development of integrated Education which will have the greatest impact*'; yet again this is vague, and doesn't explicitly commit the Department to any actions following the data gathering and publishing process.

Budget to resource the strategy

The Integrated Education Act ensured the strategy must '*quantify funding commitments and identify respective resources made available for the support for and provision of integrated education (including resources for facilitating the establishment of new integrated schools, the expansion of existing integrated schools and the transformation of existing schools into integrated schools)*'.

However, there are significant concerns at the minimal budget committed to delivering the actions in the strategy and action plan and the lack of budget detail provided. While NICIE's budget has been maintained this year, there are significant additional asks of the organisation, yet there doesn't appear to be any additional funding provided to the organisation.

There is only £50,000 per annum committed to the implementation of engagement and surveying to assess demand.

Other Comments

Integrated AlumNI



Integrated AlumNI response to Department of Education consultation on the Integrated Education Act Action Plan

May 2025

Introduction:

[Integrated AlumNI](#) is a registered charity which supports a growing network of past pupils and supporters of Integrated Education (IE). We are passionate about the experiences we had at school, campaign for further integration and promote the long-term positive benefits of Integrated Education.

Integrated Education has been underfunded and under-prioritised for decades. Yet, this sector provides a blueprint for a single education system that will prepare children and young people for success in the future and cement a peaceful and reconciled Northern Ireland.

Summary

This response builds on our November 2023 response to the [consultation on the Integrated Education Action Plan](#). Our response is available [here](#).

Unfortunately, since 2023, there has not been significant progress. Over three years after the passage of the Integrated Education Act, the approach to change is still at the '[snail's pace](#)' we described in 2023.

Section 4 of the Act requires the Department to:

- A) *Identify, assess, monitor and aim to meet the demand for the provision of integrated education*
- B) *provide sufficient places in integrated schools to aim to meet the demand for integrated education.*

Much still needs to be done to meet this requirement and the Act's requirement to "encourage, facilitate, and support" integrated education.

Strategy lacks real ambition

The strategy and its associated document make some good points, but do not have the ambition needed for a 2030 plan for IE. There is more detail here than the 2023 strategy, but we

note that the strategy continues to fall short of what is required in the Integrated Education Act, and continues to fail to meet the demand over 3 years after the Act's passage. Many processes have been severely delayed - 3 years after the Act, the Department is still not measuring demand for IE, although at least now it has a plan to do so. The Department's final draft must be far more ambitious.

Resourcing the strategy is key. For example, £50,000 to support the transformation process falls conspicuously short of the sum needed given the Department's ambition to issue a 'Call For Transformation.' The strategy includes many additional tasks for NICIE, who must be resourced adequately to implement these.

The Strategy should include monitoring and enforcement of the Fair Employment (School Teachers) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 as a key measure. This Act removed the long-standing exemption allowing schools to discriminate on religious grounds in teacher recruitment. The Department must now follow up this legislative change with action. Employers and school boards should be expected to include proactive diversity statements in recruitment material and be held accountable for improving the mix of their teaching staff over time. If the religious composition of school workforces does not begin to shift, guidance or regulation may be required.

Action Plan does not contain much action

It should be acknowledged that the Action Plan now contains more elements than the original 2023 incarnation. We note that a mechanism for assessing IE demand will soon be put in place, but this has been much delayed - it must not be delayed further. Issuing a 'Call For Transformation' is an interesting idea, but more detail should be provided about how this would work in practice, and how this is different to what currently takes place. Research into successful school transformations identifies key phases including initiation, consultation, balloting, development and implementation. The 'Call for Transformation' should explicitly address each of these phases with clear guidance, support mechanisms, and timelines for schools considering the integrated path.

In addition, commissioning NICIE to engage in the six areas where Integrated Education is currently oversubscribed is positive.

However, some of the actions have no substantive impact, such as "we will encourage Integrated schools and education professionals to collaborate and share good practice in exploring controversial issues," and "We will encourage Integrated schools to engage with Aspire PeacePlus." While there is nothing wrong with these actions, they are notable because they are listed here while the key needs of the Integrated Education Act - producing an ambitious strategy, meeting the demand for Integrated Education, and creating a range of targets - are not being addressed. Their inclusion leaves the impression that these are included in the strategy as 'filler.'

Many actions detail plans that are happening anyway and are therefore not additional. Some actions make reference to participation in other Executive programmes, such as the T.BUC strategy, which seems to be simply there to fill space in the strategy.

Benchmark data and targets

The Benchmark data includes 25 indicator areas but only targets for 3 of them. This shows a concerning lack of ambition. Not all the indicator areas are appropriate for targets, but many are.

Targets should be included for, at a minimum:

- Number of additional IE school places created;
- Number of approved Development Proposals for expansion of existing Integrated schools;
- Number of new integrated schools opened (including Transformations);
- Number of approved Development Proposals for transformation;
- Number and percentage of pupils attending Integrated schools and the annual and five year growth rate of Integrated provision
- Number of parental ballots for Transformation held
- Number of schools following up on a 'Call For Transformation.'

Including targets for these areas would go a long way to creating a strategy with real ambition, providing a clear roadmap for the Department to follow in meeting the demand for Integrated Education.

In addition, the three target areas that are included are inadequate:

- The "Percentage of Integrated Education first preferences met compared to Northern Ireland average by sector and phase" is the most tangible target in the strategy. However, it is not ambitious. Closing a 3% gap in first preferences attained between the Integrated sector and other sectors would amount to a mere 5 schools over the next five years. This is a disappointing and inadequate target without the addition of more ambitious target areas (such as those listed above).
- The target of '90% of schools in the first 5 years following Ministerial Approval for Transformation are using the Framework to develop high-quality Integrated provision' is easy to meet; it is, in fact, already being met. However, it is not transformative and will likely continue to be met as a result of the work of NICIE and others.
- The target for '80% of schools participating in the Excellence in Integrated Education award scheme' is not transformative, and will likely happen anyway as a result of the work of NICIE and others, and is not relevant to the most important elements of the Integrated Education Act.

For the strategy and its associated components to be credible, the Department must set itself clear objectives and targets. As we repeatedly said during the 2023 consultation, Section 9 of the Integrated Education Act provides a list of suggested targets that the Department can draw inspiration from.

What is needed?

To create a strategy that will meet the requirements of the Act, the Department must:

- **Create substantial and ambitious targets and benchmarks:** The Department should 'fill in the blanks' in the very sparse table in the Benchmark Data section - only 3 sections out of 25 currently have targets. We have suggested priority areas for target-setting above.
- **Summary of changes since 2023:** To demonstrate progress, the Department should make clear in the final strategy what has been added since the 2023 and 2025 Strategy and Action Plan.
- **Fair Employment Act monitoring:** Include monitoring and enforcement of the Fair Employment (School Teachers) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 as a key measure in the strategy, with clear benchmarks and Action Plan targets for monitoring progress toward religious balance in teaching staff.
- **Plan to use transformation as a method to create sustainable schools:** Given falling classroom numbers, the department has an opportunity to act to create sustainable schools, and IE schools are the perfect model for this. However, the Department must move far more quickly to ensure school sustainability through integrated education transformation. A Call for Transformation is a good start but is more of an action than a full plan.
- **NICIE funding uplift:** We are concerned that NICIE is being asked to take on a great many tasks in this strategy. NICIE is underfunded. While it is good that a funding review will take place, this must result in a substantial increase in funding in order for the strategy's objectives to be met.

Conclusion

The Department is still not living up to its legal duty to encourage, facilitate and support integrated education. The Department must change its pace of work in order to meet this duty in a timely way. This response outlines ways the Department can fulfil its obligations, and we look forward to continuing to work with the Department on this matter.

CONTACT: hello@integratedalumni.org.

National Secular Society (NSS)

NSS submission

Vision 2030 – Integrated Education Strategy Consultation

May 2025

Submitted by email: IntegratedEducationActImplementationTeam@education-ni.gov.uk

Question 1. Please tick the box that best describes you as a respondent

A Sectoral, Community or Other Body

Question 11. Please specify which Sectoral, Community or Other Body.

This response is made on behalf of the National Secular Society (NSS).

The NSS is a not-for-profit, non-governmental civil society organisation founded in 1866, funded by its members and by donations. We advocate for separation of religion and state and promote secularism as the best means of creating a society in which people of all religions and none can live together fairly and cohesively. We seek a diverse society where all are free to practise their faith, change it, or to have no faith at all. We uphold the universality of individual human rights, which should never be overridden on the grounds of religion, tradition or culture.

We want to see an inclusive education system, free from any form of religious privilege, discrimination, or control. Northern Ireland's system of de facto religiously segregated schools is grossly inefficient and perpetuates sectarian division through the generations. Integrated schools are extremely popular and the best current hope for the ambition of inclusively educating children of all backgrounds together. However, progress towards a more integrated system remains far too slow, and access to an integrated school remains unobtainable for most families. **It is essential that the Department of Education ensures that every family who wants to send their child to an integrated school can do so.**

We have found the form to respond to this consultation on NI Direct difficult to use to express our views. Each comment box only allows for 200 characters, which is far too limited to provide meaningful commentary.

We have therefore sent this response via email in lieu of submitting an NI Direct form.

Question 14. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the vision for Integrated Education is fitting and in line with the Act?

Disagree

Comments

While the IE Strategy to create "A vibrant and supported network of sustainable integrated schools providing high-quality integrated education to children and young people" is in the right direction, we feel it lacks ambition or specifics.

We believe the DoE's vision should be to fully mainstream integrated education as the 'default' choice for families. It should not be a 'niche' form of education relegated to handfuls of communities: it should be a realistic choice for every family.

Such an ambition should be reflected in the IE Strategy. It should also include a target, based on demand, for how many pupils attend an integrated school within the next decade.

Question 15. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the strategic aims for Integrated Education?

Disagree

Question 16. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Actions proposed in the Action Plan deliver on the Department and EA's duty to encourage, facilitate and support Integrated Education?

Disagree

Comments

We think the Strategic Aims and Action Plans lack ambition and effectiveness, particularly Strategic Aim 1: Increased access to Integrated Education.

Instead of aiming to simply increase access to integrated schools, the DoE should aim for integrated schools to be the default school for children in NI. Integrated schools are widely supported by parents: polling consistently shows most people in NI think it should be the 'main model' for NI's education system¹.

We are also very concerned that the "Action plan" for Strategic Aim 1 consists mainly of carrying out more research and reviews, rather than actually opening new integrated

¹ <https://www.secuaomm.org.uk/news/2024/07/pct-87-percent-support-integrated-education-in-northern-ireland>

schools or transforming existing schools into integrated schools. There is already abundant evidence demonstrating high parental support for integrated schools. The time for research should be over – the DoE's focus should be on ensuring integrated schools can be provided as quickly as possible.

Our concerns about the Executive's lack of commitment to the aims of the Integrated Education Act have been heightened by the decision earlier this year to refuse integrated status to two schools, despite a DoE team warning this would not be in line with policy.

As you are aware, education minister Paul Givan rejected applications from Bangor Academy and Rathmore Primary School to become integrated schools, despite 80% of parents at each school supporting the move.

Documents published by the DoE showed the East Region Area Planning Team recommended Rathmore Primary School become integrated². The team told Givan that rejecting the application 'would not be in line with the Department's duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education particularly when this is considered to be a sustainable school which is seeking to Transform'.

But Givan said there was not sufficient evidence there would be enough pupils from Catholic communities at each school for it to provide integrated education, despite both schools expressing confidence that they could recruit enough pupils from Catholic backgrounds. We agree with the assessment of the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) that Givan's rationale 'negates the fact that if the schools were approved to be integrated then they would be much better placed to attract more pupils from the Catholic community'.

We also agree with their statement that the rejection appeared 'designed more to hinder the growth of Integrated Education rather than support it, as it places further obstacles to prevent a school from transforming to integrated status'.

No matter how many surveys, reviews or other forms of research the DoE conducts as part of its Action plans, it will not achieve the goal of increasing integrated education if these blocks to transformation continue.

Furthermore, the focus on more research, without any clear goals for implementation, underline the fact that some deadlines and timeframes to finalise the strategy have already passed. The slow progress on the strategy may result in future deadlines being missed.

² https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-01/br32072113208 Rathmore320721320-5208redacted11206_ibmission320for320website.pdf

Regarding the proposal to engage with educational stakeholders, we urge the DoE to limit its engagement with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). As it is ultimately controlled by the Catholic Church, CCMS is strongly motivated to ensure any child it considers Catholic goes to a Catholic school and receives a Catholic education, rather than a nondenominational education in an integrated school. It cannot be regarded as an unbiased party; it will be strongly motivated to oppose any plans that would mean historically Catholic families are more likely to choose an integrated school, or plans which it would otherwise consider a 'threat' to Catholic education. According to research from 2007-2008, just over a third of integrated schools experienced public opposition by clergy, mainly Catholic clergy making public statements discouraging Catholic parents from choosing an integrated school rather than a Catholic school³.

Question 17. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed targets?

Disagree

Comments

We are concerned that there is a serious lack of targets in the strategy/action plan. The key targets should relate to the growth of integrated school places available, but this appears to be absent from the proposals.

Question 18. Are you aware of any other issues, actions or targets not currently included within the Strategy or Action Plan that might be included? (required)

Yes

Comments

We are concerned that the budget for implementation is only £50,000 per annum and there is no commitment to provide additional funding for NICIE despite the strategy requiring NICIE to undertake significant additional work. The lack of resources will compound the factors hindering implementation.

Question 19. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Departments definition of demand is suitable for assessing and monitoring demand?

Neither agree nor disagree

Comments

We fail to understand why the Department is consulting on how to measure demand, and why it wants more research to measure demand, when there is already abundant evidence that the demand for integrated education remains high. The DoE should invest its time and resources into ensuring integrated education is available for every parent who wants it, rather than more research and reviews.

³ <https://coin.ulster.ac.uk/issues/education/docs/macoulay270109.pdf>

Question 20. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the measures of demand outlined in the Action Plan are sufficient to measure demand for Integrated Education?
Neither agree nor disagree

Comments (200 character limit)

We fail to understand why the Department is consulting on how to measure demand, and why it wants more research to measure demand, when there is already abundant evidence that the demand for integrated education remains high. The DoE should invest its time and resources into ensuring integrated education is available for every parent who wants it, rather than more research and reviews.



Department of Education (NI)

By email only: IntegratedEducationImplementationTeam@education-ni.gov.uk

Department of Education – Public Consultation on Vision 2030 – A Strategy for Integrated Education 2025-2030.

21 May 2025

Dear Sir/Madam,

The Commission for Victims and Survivors (NI) (CVS) welcomes the opportunity to provide a brief response to the Department of Education's consultation on *Vision 2030 – A Strategy for Integrated Education 2025-2030*. We recognise how this consultation is focussed on the set of actions underpinning the five outcomes identified in the previous consultation with key stakeholders within the Integrated Education sector. Please accept this short commentary as a response to the consultation as we would like to make several pertinent points in direct reference to some of the actions and comments in the strategy document related to the important contribution of our education system in addressing the legacy of the Troubles/conflict.

CVS are cognisant of the developing legislative, policy and research environment in which Vision 2030 and the five-year Action Plan will be progressed in the years ahead. As noted in the Strategy, with the enactment of the Integration Act 2022 this Action Plan, if fully implemented can provide an effective vehicle for underpinning the growth of the Integrated Education sector at both primary and post-primary levels. While the strategy document refers to the remarkable growth in Integrated Education since 1981, with only 8% of all pupils in NI attending integrated primary and post-primary schools in 2025,³ there is much progress to be made to support its growth under this strategy. Given the acknowledgement within the Strategy about the broad societal support for expansion of Integration Education and issues with sufficient availability of access to both primary and post-primary schools across NI, CVS support the series of actions among key educational stakeholders to address these issues in the years ahead.

CVS welcome the reference in the Vision 2030 Strategy document to the importance of both shared and integrated education as key components making positive contributions within a society emerging from decades of civil conflict. The Vision 2030 document rightly points to the vital work delivered on a routine and sustained basis within our primary and post-primary schools to learn about and reduce the impacts of prejudice including sectarianism. Additionally, from a victims and survivors perspective CVS acknowledges how many teachers and schools across NI work daily to enhance the knowledge and understanding of our young people about the legacy of our troubled past in a fair, balanced and objective manner.

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³ Pivotal (2025) Achieving greater integration in education and housing, Pivotal Public Policy Forum NI: 6.

In 2023, CVS published the document *Building for a Better Future by Learning the Past*. Drawing on existing Commission policy, research and engagement work the document focussed on stimulating wider debate and discussion around the important contribution of formal and informal education in learning about the Troubles and the continuing impacts of conflict legacy. Among the paper's recommended actions was a call for our local education system to continue to enhance understanding about the Troubles and its legacy and to make a significant contribution to building a shared, reconciled and multicultural society. Other recommended actions relevant to this consultation were that the teaching and broader education workforce should be equipped and supported to facilitate education on NI's past and its legacy.²

Within the Vision 2030 Action Plan there are a couple of actions worth highlighting in this response. Firstly, Action 17 refers to how the Department of Education NI (DE) will work with the Executive Office (TEO), other government departments and their agencies to support ongoing implementation of the Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) strategy. CVS would also recommend consideration of the new Strategy for Victims and Survivors 2024-34.³ Under the Identified 'The Future' strand of work TEO, CVS and other sectoral partners are committed 'to build on existing and create new formal and informal education programmes to enhance knowledge and mutual understanding about the transgenerational impacts of the Troubles/Conflict.' Relatedly, in progressing this Action it is worth considering CVS's most recent transgenerational research report produced by QUB in 2021. Entitled *It Didn't End in 1998*, a key report finding noted, 'whilst Shared Education has been an important step towards increased mixing within the school environment, the findings in this report support more fundamental changes to the structuring of the community in Northern Ireland.' The report went on 'increasing the provision (and funding) of integrated education, particularly given the increasing demand and oversubscription, is key and thus attention should be given to the UNCRC Concluding Observations in 2016 that a 'fully integrated education system' is actively promoted.'⁴

In relation to Action 18 and as aids to post primary students to explore important and potentially controversial issues linked to the Troubles and its legacy CVS would encourage consideration of the findings, recommendations and resources linked to the *It Didn't End in 1998* report (including the one above). The primary focus of the study was on the transgenerational impacts of conflict legacy on the lives of children and young people and their parents across NI and the border region of Ireland. A significant project that aided the wider circulation of the report's findings was the 'House' and the 'House Virtual Reality' experience. Originally, the House Project was a curated installation and innovative theatrical performance produced by the Big Telly Theatre Company in two Belfast based houses in 2021 which allowed visitors to explore a range of the report's themes and issues including family-based trauma and discussion about the Troubles in a classroom environment. The House project was later adapted by the same production company into a virtual reality experience which had allowed

² CVS (2023) *Building for a Better Future by Learning the Past*, CVS, January. Paper can be accessed here: <https://bit.ly/4dkG0m6>

³ Strategy for Victims and Survivors 2024-34 can be accessed here: [Victims and Survivors Strategy 2024-34](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategy-for-victims-and-survivors-2024-34)

⁴ CVS (2021) 'It Didn't End in 1998' Examining the impacts of Conflict legacy across Generations, QUB: 17. Research can be accessed here: [Microsoft Word - CVS-Final-Full-Report-02.docx](https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/qub.ac.uk/files/2021/07/It_Didn_t_End_in_1998_Report_02.docx)

CVS to facilitate access to the House with hundreds of school children in post primary schools and across NI in recent years.⁵



A question relating to the importance of the teaching about the history of the Troubles was included in three different populations surveys conducted by CVS in NI, the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and in Great Britain (GB) in recent years. In 2021 in NI, 43% of the NI population said that the teaching of the history of the Troubles/conflict in the formal education sector should be compulsory while 28% said that it should be compulsory only at secondary school level. Interestingly among respondents who said that the teaching of history should be compulsory, 72% of students agreed with this statement. This can be viewed as an encouraging finding from the data as a cohort of the population who have recently come through the formal education sector and overwhelmingly recognise the importance of young people learning about the history of the Troubles/conflict.⁶

In the RoI, 43% of the adult population believed that the teaching of history of the Troubles/conflict should be compulsory and for all ages (from 5-18 years old) in the state. In GB there was a significant level of support among the GB population for the teaching of history in schools. 34% of the GB population believed that the history of the Troubles should be taught in primary schools – with almost 80% of the adult population supporting the compulsory teaching of history of the Troubles in secondary school and in sixth forms/colleges. Importantly, those who could identify as meeting the legal definition of victims and survivors⁷ are significantly more likely to believe that the history of the Troubles should be taught in primary schools.⁸

CVS is pleased to have had the opportunity to respond to the consultation on *Vision 2030 – A Strategy for Integrated Education 2025-2030*. It is evident from recent opinion polls conducted in this area that there is significant support for increased provision of Integrated Education in NI in the years ahead. As was widely publicised earlier this year a Lucid Talk survey conducted on behalf of the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) revealed that 65% of the local adult population here support integrated education as the main model for the NI school system.⁹ Meanwhile, the recently published Pivotal Report on integration in the education and social housing sectors in NI revealed continuing high levels of segregation in these key public sector areas.¹⁰ This finding emerged despite strong support for initiatives to facilitate and encourage integrated education and mixed housing contained in the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement.¹¹ It is clear that enduring complex socio-economic challenges linked to segregation, division and

⁵ Further information on the House Project can be found here: <https://bit.ly/3H1K0ff> and on the House Virtual Reality Experience can be located here: [The House Virtual Reality Experience - Commission for Victims & Survivors](#)

⁶ Further information relating to the Population Surveys in the different jurisdictions can be found here: [Comparative-Survey-Data-Paper-2024-Final.pdf](#)

⁷ Legal definition is contained in The Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. Can be accessed here: [The Victims and Survivors \(Northern Ireland\) Order 2006](#)

⁸ Further information relating to the Population Surveys in the different jurisdictions can be found here: [Comparative-Survey-Data-Paper-2024-Final.pdf](#)

⁹ Bain, M (2025) '65% of people in NI want Integrated education system, with politicians and churches blamed for hampering progress', *Belfast Telegraph*, 9th April.

¹⁰ Pivotal (2025) *Achieving greater integration in education and housing*, Pivotal Public Policy Forum NI, Shaftesbury Square

¹¹ Department of Education (2025) *Vision 2030 – A Strategy for Integrated Education 2025-30*, DE: 3.

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deprivation are intertwined in part with outstanding unresolved conflict legacy issues. Learning about the Troubles and its legacy in a fair, objective way within both shared and integrated education settings can mitigate efforts to misunderstand or glorify the violence of the past. Equally, while it does not represent a panacea, expanding access to integrated schooling at primary and post-primary levels educating young people together from different community backgrounds from an early age can meaningfully contribute toward closing social distances in the years ahead. Vision 2030 and the series of actions collectively implemented by key stakeholders over the next five years can facilitate parental demand for integrated education, build trust and understanding within and between communities and support wider efforts to progress societal reconciliation in the future.

Note: If you would like to further discuss any of the policy and research work of CVS, including those referenced in this response please do not hesitate to contact us.

Neil Foster, Policy, Research and Engagement Manager, Commission for Victims and Survivors:
Email: neil.foster@cvsni.org

Office of the Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland



Response to Vision 2030 - A Strategy for Integrated Education

Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland

Professor Siobhan O'Neill

Dr Nicole Bond, Research Officer

The office of the mental health champion welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Vision 2023 consultation. A written response to each consultation question is included below.

Question 12. To what extent you agree or disagree that the strategy and action plan helped you understand the requirements of the Act?

Agree

Question 13. To help us measure the success of the strategy, please tell us to what extent you agree or disagree that the strategy and action plan helped you understand the requirements of the Act?

Agree,

The Vision of the Strategy 2.1 Department of Education Vision for Integrated Education Progress has been made across our society in moving towards a shared and united community. As we continue to build on the peace we now enjoy, there is an important role for education to play in continuing to build good relations at a local level and to foster positive relationships that will form the foundations for the future. The IE Strategy noted that Integrated Education, alongside Shared Education, can play a critical role in continuing to build trust, mutual respect, and inclusivity. The IE Strategy set out the Department of Education's vision for Integrated Education, which is to create: 'A vibrant and supported network of sustainable integrated schools providing high-quality Integrated Education to children and young people.'

Question 14. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the vision for Integrated Education is fitting and in line with the Act?

Disagree,

There is some ambiguity in how the "reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Catholic Children" are determined. In the wording of the Act and reflected in the strategy it is presented as a dynamic approach, shifting to the needs of the communities' schools are situated within. However, the [NICIE Statement of Principles](#) gives clear numerical targets for the mix within integrated schools, to reflect a 40% Catholic, 40% Protestant and 20% other or non-religious groupings. Therefore, in maintaining those targets, the actions set out within this strategy can inherently become exclusionary to pupils and families from other or non-religious backgrounds seeking a secular education environment, or one in which embraces and respects all religions.



I understand the overarching aim of the integrated education movement in NI is to bridge the gap between the two main communities, fostering inclusivity and peace building. This aim is to be championed at all levels, and one in which our education environments are uniquely placed to address from an early age, particularly when physical separation between communities has persisted. However, our education sector must also be able to adapt to the changing societal demographics, namely the increase in the number of young people who identify as non-religious. In the [2024 Young Life and Times Survey](#), 37% of 16 year olds indicated they belonged to no religion, compared to 37% Catholic, 23% Protestant and 3% other, differing from the 40/40/20 ratio recommended by NICIE. Religious identity in NI, has long been intertwined with political, ideological and community identity. This is reflected in the education sector, where contested subjects are not restricted to Religious Education, but extend through History and Physical Education for example.

Concurrent to that, Shared Education should not be listed alongside integrated education as playing a critical role in continuing to build trust, mutual respect, and inclusivity. Shared Education is very different to IE, and many aspects of the way in which shared education is delivered in NI, and the conditions in which shared education is implemented, are not in keeping with the conditions for success according Allport's Contact theory. Integrated Education is the only model which will lead to trust, mutual respect, and inclusivity. Social Psychological theories would suggest that Shared Education may create the opposite effect.

For both Integrated and Shared Education, focusing on religious groupings, with preference to two Christian faiths, can create a biased and exclusionary environment. Feeling included, feeling safe, respected, and feeling as though you belong is fundamental to creating a sense of safety both physically and psychologically, which enables young people to fully engage with education and promotes wellbeing. In recent report by [Pivotal](#) which summaries the views of young people on integrated environments, including schools, young people spoke of the benefits of integrated education while also acknowledging that it often doesn't go far enough, i.e. sectarianism is still a concern for young people, but so is racism. In 2024 YLT young people report the presence of flags/murals and other divisive public representations, as well as limited shared spaces are reasons for feeling unsafe in the wider community.

As our society becomes increasingly more diverse, surely the aims of an integrated education system, and those who support and enable it need to expand to meet its equalitarian objectives. I welcome the language used within the strategy of inclusivity and respect, echoed by the quotes of those who have benefited from the integrated education system. The process of achieving integrated education status is challenging for many reasons, the proportional representation requirements being one of them. The strategy and its action plan could be strengthened by outlining how these barriers are to be addressed, and indicate where, if at all, the departments vision for integrated education deviates from NICIE's statement of principles. I welcome the intent to expand on the integrated education sector, and hope that the inclusivity it purports extends to all religious, political, and cultural perspectives held within our small but diverse population.

Action Plan Section 9 of the Act requires that an Action Plan must be included with the strategy which must - Be prepared in consultation with persons with knowledge and experience of integrated schools including teachers, governors, pupils, families, and sectoral and community bodies; Include targets (including timetables); Include measurable benchmarks against which the success of the strategy (including progress towards meeting targets) can be assessed." The

Department is seeking views from all groups as specified in the Act. The Department has sought to include members of the various educational bodies in the process by setting up the following groups: Implementation Steering Group – This group is made up of senior staff at Director level from within the Department of Education and across the education sector and is tasked with setting the strategic direction of implementation subject to Ministerial views and legal constraints. IE Working Group, which is more operational in nature supports this work and is comprised of staff at senior management level (below Director) from the same organisations as the Steering Group. The Department has worked with these groups to define outcomes, indicators and performance measures that will support development of a more outcomes-based approach to monitoring and evaluation and is included in this revised strategy.

The following Strategic Aims have been identified: Strategic Aim 1 – Increased Access to Integrated Education Strategic Aim 2 – High-quality support services for Integrated Education Strategic Aim 3 – Development, maintenance and protection of the Integrated Ethos Strategic Aim 4 – Increased public knowledge and understanding of Integrated Education Strategic Aim 5 – Increased school collaboration and a more shared society

Question 15. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the strategic aims for Integrated Education?

Agree,

I would add that in developing, maintaining and protecting the integrated education ethos, emphasis should be placed on development. If this sector is to represent and meet the needs of the families seeking a more integrated society for their child, it needs to critically reflect on if current practices, guidelines, and restrictions are fit for purpose.

Question 16. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Actions proposed in the Action Plan deliver on the Department and EA's duty to encourage, facilitate and support Integrated Education?

Agree,

I welcome the inclusion of both qualitative and quantitative research embedded into multiple actions. Seeking the views of parents, pupils and all education stakeholders is essential in building and transforming the sector to better meet the needs of those it serves. It is essential that this research creates the evidence base from which all transformation is guided by and given the due weight this remit demands. It should not be conducted or hastened to meet a pre-defined targets or deadlines. In many cases the pre-defined targets and deadlines will be achievable, however the scope and scale of this work unfolds in real time and can exceed initial assumptions, this slippage should be accommodated and communicated when necessary.

Question 17. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed targets?

Neither Agree nor Disagree

Some of the deadlines are passed, Action 8 for example is to be completed in March 2025. As there are no published reports to consider, I am unsure if this has been completed. Action 15 states that the qualitative and quantitative research will be completed in December 2025 and annually



thereafter. It is unclear the scope and scale of this investigation and if the same measures will be considered annually or if the research based will be expanded upon year on year.

Question 18. Are you aware of any other issues, actions or targets not currently included within the Strategy or Action Plan that might be included?

No.

Demand Legislative Requirements The Integrated Education Act requires the Department to support Integrated Education by: (a) identifying, assessing, monitoring and aiming to meet the demand for the provision of Integrated Education within the context of area planning and the overall sustainability of the school estate (including, in particular, monitoring the number and success of applications for Integrated Education), and (b) providing sufficient places in Integrated schools to aim to meet the demand for Integrated Education within the context of area planning and the overall sustainability of the school estate (including examining evidence of expected future demand).

Definition Identifying, assessing, monitoring, and aiming to meet demand for Integrated Education is a complex and ongoing process. To fully assess and measure demand, it is important to have a clear definition of demand that is understood by all stakeholders, and which will provide meaningful data on which we plan future education provision.

The Department will employ the following definition of demand: Demand for Integrated Education is the level of support and desire for Integrated Education by parents and their expressed preferences for school admission. Demand comprises two distinct elements which we have termed Societal Demand and Behavioural Demand and which we further express as follows:

- **Societal Demand** This is evidence of demand taken from a Northern Ireland wide survey of parents on their desire for Integrated Education and the factors they consider when expressing school preferences and from parental ballots held to consider Transformation proposals.
- **Behavioural Demand** This is evidence of demand indicated by school preference as expressed via the school admission system at entry to pre-school, primary and post-primary school by surveying parental inclination/aspirations of parents and, from parental ballots held to consider Transformation proposals.

Question 19. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Departments definition of demand is suitable for assessing and monitoring demand?

Agree,

The strategy outlines there are catchments areas within NI that do not include an integrated school. It is welcome that the strategy will attempt to address this but also highlights the need to look further than the behavioural demand as it is outlined above. Some consideration should be given to societal understanding and aspirations for integrated education, and if this aligns or diverges from the current integrated education offerings. I wonder if the proposed research will consider public attitudes toward integrated and shared education, and if the differences in approaches and the evidence base behind them are well known. If public awareness of the aims and aspirations of

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Integrated education are elevated, societal demand could increase which in turn could provide the momentum required for other school types to consider integration to meet that demand.

Question 20. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the measures of demand outlined in the Action Plan are sufficient to measure demand for Integrated Education?

Agree,

I welcome the intent to publish a detailed report on the level of demand in June 2025 and annually thereafter. As mentioned above, it is a positive step that the strategy has embedded research at data collection at key points to further expand integrated education. I would hope that the rich information collected will be used to inform this process, and if it highlights further or different information is needed to measure demand that a dynamic approach can be adopted to enhance those yearly reports.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Siobhan O'Neill".

Siobhan O'Neill
Mental Health Champion

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dr Nicole Bond".

Dr Nicole Bond
Research Officer

Northern Ireland Humanists

VISION 2030: INTEGRATED EDUCATION STRATEGY

Response from Northern Ireland Humanists, May 2025



ABOUT NORTHERN IRELAND HUMANISTS

Northern Ireland Humanists is part of Humanists UK. Humanists UK is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people. Powered by 130,000 members and supporters, we advance free thinking and promote humanism to create a tolerant society where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We provide ceremonies, pastoral care, education, and support services benefitting over a million people every year and our campaigns advance humanist thinking on ethical issues, human rights, and equal treatment for all.

We have a long history of work in education, children's rights, and equality, with particular expertise in the religion or belief strand. We have been involved in policy development around the school and the curriculum for over 60 years. We also provide materials and advice to parents, governors, students, teachers and academics, for example through our Understanding Humanism website (understandinghumanism.org.uk) and our school speakers programme. We have made detailed responses to all recent Government consultations on education and reviews of the school curriculum in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and regularly submit memoranda of evidence to MPs, MLAs, civil servants, and parliamentary select committees on a range of education issues.

We are an active member of many organisations working in education in the UK, including the Religious Education Council for England and Wales (REC), of which we are a founding member; the Sex Education Forum; the PSHE Association; Rights of the Child UK (ROCK); and the Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE). We also participate in a range of dialogue activities with other religion and belief groups and are a member of the Interfaith Forum of Northern Ireland.

Our primary interests in education concern the curriculum (in particular RE, PSHE/RSE, citizenship, and science), collective worship/school assemblies, and state-funded religious schools.

REQUIREMENTS OF THE ACT

Question 13: To help us measure the success of the strategy, please tell us to what extent you agree or disagree that the strategy and action plan helped you understand the requirements of the Act?

Neither agree nor disagree.

The strategy and action plan outline the basic expectations set out in the Act but do not fully translate these into clear, practical measures. For instance, the statutory definition of an integrated school, as set out in Section 1(2)(a),¹ requires that these schools support, promote, and advance an intentional 'ethos of diversity, respect and understanding between those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none'. This reflects the changing demographics in Northern Ireland, with the latest Life and Times Survey reporting that 26% of people now identify as non-religious (the second

¹ Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. Section 1(2)(a) <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nil/2022/15/section/1/enacted>



largest religion or belief group after Catholics, who represent 34% of the population).⁷ However, there is little indication of how schools will be expected to meet this requirement in practice. Although the action plan contains actions related to ethos – including training, a school-based self-evaluation framework, and a commitment to review guidance – it overlooks the extent of change needed to make school practices inclusive of non-Christians, including the non-religious. This is especially true of collective worship and religious education (RE), which, in common with all other schools in Northern Ireland, currently reflect an exclusively Christian ethos.⁸ In addition to adopting ‘a Christian based rather than a secular approach’⁹ to their overall ethos, integrated schools are still required to use an RE syllabus devised by the four main churches,¹⁰ despite the *Independent Review of Education* stating this should ideally be replaced with a knowledge-based, objective version developed with ‘those of other faiths’ and ‘those with no religious affiliation’, to help pupils understand the society in which they live.¹¹

2. THE VISION OF THE STRATEGY

Question 14. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the vision for Integrated Education is fitting and in line with the Act?

Neither agree nor disagree.

The vision for Integrated Education reflects the language of the Act, but, unfortunately, both the Act and the strategy it has engendered are unambitious. While the demand for Integrated Education is well evidenced – both through polling¹² and oversubscription in the areas where integrated schools are located¹³ – the strategy fails to offer a particularly credible plan to scale provision. In part, this is because it is so dependent on meeting rather than increasing demand for Integrated Education (a provision that was watered down during the passage of the Act through the Assembly¹⁴).

⁷ Northern Ireland Life & Times Survey, 2023, <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2023/Background/RELIGION.html>

⁸ Department of Education, Religious Education and Collective Worship guidance, 2023, <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/religious-education-and-collective-worship>

⁹ NICIE (2022) Statement of Principles for Integrated Education, <https://nicie.org/what-is-integrated-education/integrated-ethos/sop/>

¹⁰ Department of Education (2007) Core Syllabus for Religious Education <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/religious-education-core-syllabus>

¹¹ The *Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland*, 2023, <https://www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk/files/independentreviewofeducation/2024-01/investing%20in%20a%20Better%20Future%20-%20Volume%202.pdf>

¹² LucidTalk: Northern Ireland Attitudinal Poll 2025, Integrated Education Fund, 2025, <https://www.ief.org.uk/our-work/research/lucid-talk-ni-poll-2025/>

¹³ Ulster University, Transforming Education in Northern Ireland, 2019, <https://view.publitas.com/integrated-education-fund/transforming-education-in-northern-ireland-briefing-papers-collection/page/74-75>

¹⁴ Humanists UK, ‘Blow to future of education as Northern Ireland Assembly votes to weaken Integrated Education Bill’, 20 January 2025, <https://humanists.uk/2022/01/20/blow-to-future-of-education-as-northern-ireland-assembly-votes-to-weaken-integrated-education-bill/>



The vision also ignores Religious Education (RE), despite the centrality of the subject to considering questions about religion, belief, and culture in the classroom. While other curriculum areas (e.g. History, PDMU, Local and Global Citizenship, etc.) are referenced, RE – which, as noted above, remains based on a syllabus devised by the four main Christian churches – is entirely omitted. This is a significant oversight, especially given that the Act defines an integrated school as one which fosters respect between those of different religions and of none. An objective, critical, and pluralistic approach¹⁰ to RE that includes humanism would better reflect the ethos outlined in the legislation and support better integration between different religious and belief groups.

3. ACTION PLAN

Question 15. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the strategic aims for Integrated Education?

Disagree.

While the strategic aims set out in the Action Plan align in principle with the duties placed on the Department by the Act, they are ultimately too cautious. The plan focuses on explaining what Integrated Education is, improving data collection, and supporting schools that express an interest in transformation. These are all welcome in themselves, but the approach remains largely reactive. Without a strategy to actively drive demand or expand provision at scale, these aims are unlikely to keep pace with current or future need.

There is clear and growing public demand for a genuinely inclusive school system, particularly among the increasing number of non-religious families in Northern Ireland.^{11, 12} Meeting this demand requires more than improved communication (with schools, parents or the wider public). Instead it requires visible political leadership, investment, and a plan for Integrated Education to become a normal and widely available part of the system.

¹⁰ This is the phrase used in human rights case law pertaining to the school curriculum, including the High Court ruling on *Fox v Secretary of State for Education 2015* (<https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/c-fox-v-ssfe.pdf>) which, although it focused on the GCSE syllabus in England, is still relevant in the context of Northern Ireland. For further detail on the wider application of the case, see Wareham, R (2022) 'Achieving pluralism? A critical analysis of the inclusion of non-religious worldviews in RE policy in England and Wales after *R (Fox) v Secretary of State for Education*' *British Journal of Religious Education*, 44(4), 455–471.

¹¹ Parents for Inclusive Education NI (2025) 'About Us' <https://parentsforinclusiveeducationni.org/about>

¹² A recent legal case, which has been heard by the Supreme Court who will issue a judgment in the coming weeks, further illustrates how the current, exclusively Christian nature of the RE curriculum and collective worship is unsatisfactory for many non-religious families (see *Summary of Judgment in JR87*, <https://www.judiciaryni.uk/judicial-decisions/summary-judgment-re-jr-87>). Although this case focuses on a controlled school, given their overarching Christian character, similar situations are just as likely to occur in integrated schools which, on the basis of their avowed inclusive character, should provide an alternative to this status quo.



At present, the strategic aims show a commitment to improving what already exists, but not to ensuring that every child in Northern Ireland has access to an inclusive, integrated school. Without bolder strategic ambition, the pace of progress will remain too slow to reflect the changing demographics and expectations of society.

It is also unclear how the strategic aims will solve the recent problem of the Education Minister denying a school's application to become integrated despite clear and vocal parental and community demand.¹³ The decision to simply ignore the fact that almost 79% of parents supported integration at Bangor Academy and 82% at Rathmore Primary School¹⁴ was justified on the grounds that NICIE guidance recommends a 40/40/20 split in integrated schools.¹⁵ It is unclear how integration can progress if Ministers interpret these principles as ironclad, allowing no room for change or for regional demographic variation. There needs to be a clear strategic aim to define minimum requirements for integration, take context into account, and consider legislative changes to support these clarifications and updated ratio guidance.

Question 16. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Actions proposed in the Action Plan deliver on the Department and EA's duty to encourage, facilitate and support Integrated Education?

Neither agree nor disagree.

While the Action Plan includes welcome steps to support and facilitate Integrated Education – such as improved guidance, transformation funding, and better data collection – it does not go far enough to fulfil the statutory duty to encourage it.

As noted in previous responses, the overall approach remains overly reactive. The Call for Transformation appears to offer a more structured and visible mechanism than some of the other proposals, but it lacks detail and will still depend on schools or communities initiating the Transformation process themselves. While the plan includes demand profiling in under-served areas, this is not (yet) matched with a fully worked out strategy to increase provision in such areas or to overcome the barriers that may prevent Transformation.

While we recognise that the development of such a strategy is partly contingent on the various reports and actions cited in the action plan, this still marks a significant gap given the rising demand for inclusive education across Northern Ireland. The fact that the work the Department says it will commission NICIE to undertake engaging with stakeholders in under-served areas is only

¹³ Gilvan, P. (2025) 'Paul Gilvan [Minister for Education]: Why I turned down schools proposals for integrated status', *News Letter* 10 January 2025, <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/opinion/columnists/paul-gilvan-why-i-turned-down-schools-proposals-for-integrated-status-4937783>

¹⁴ Kenwood, M (2025) 'Bitter council row erupts over Minister's refusal to grant integrated status to two schools' *Belfast Telegraph*, 14 February 2025, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/bitter-council-row-erupts-over-ministers-refusal-to-grant-integrated-status-to-two-schools/a1844794249.html>

¹⁵ NICIE (2022) *Statement of Principles for Integrated Education*
<https://nicie.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/NICIE-Statement-of-Principles.pdf>



scheduled to commence in September 2025, with no deadline for completion listed, is particularly concerning. A strategy that actively encourages Integrated Education needs to set more ambitious targets, promote Integrated Education as a mainstream option, and take steps to address structural constraints within the system as a matter of urgency.

At present, the proposed actions may help to improve on existing provision, but they fall short of the ambition needed to expand Integrated Education in an impactful and meaningful way.

Question 17. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed targets?

Strongly disagree.

We have selected 'strongly disagree' for this question because many of the most important targets are missing, unclear, or deferred. The accompanying data and benchmarking documents provide vital baseline information about current provision and change over time, but do not set out concrete goals for increasing Integrated Education provision in future. This includes the absence of specific targets for new schools, pupil places, and rates of transformation. The Action Plan refers to a suite of indicators and a red/amber/green system for monitoring progress, but there is no clarity on what constitutes meaningful progress – for example, how much of an increase in pupil places or transformed schools would qualify as 'green'?

This is a significant weakness in the Action Plan. If the strategy aims to expand access to Integrated Education, specific, measurable, time-bound targets – which make it clear what success looks like – are essential.

Question 18. Are you aware of any other issues, actions or targets not currently included within the Strategy or Action Plan that might be included?

Yes.

As noted in our earlier responses, the strategy fails to mention Religious Education (RE). This is surprising given the formative role this subject – when taught in a critical, objective, and pluralistic manner – can play in educating pupils about religion and belief and in helping to foster community cohesion. We suspect this omission may be due to the peculiar way in which the RE syllabus has been devised in Northern Ireland, with the four main churches responsible for an almost exclusively Christian curriculum.¹⁰ This syllabus covers other world religions only in one module in the post-primary phase and entirely omits non-religious worldviews such as humanism.

With this in mind, a target should be included to move towards pluralistic, knowledge-based RE that is inclusive of a range of religions and humanism in Integrated Schools. In addition, the current assumption of a Christian ethos in integrated schools should be reviewed. A further target should be introduced to ensure that integrated schools are no longer defined by a residual Christian

¹⁰ Department of Education (2007) Core Syllabus for Religious Education <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/religious-education-core-syllabus>



character, but instead reflect the diversity required by Section 1(2)(a) of the Act – which includes those of different religions alongside the non-religious.

4. DEMAND

Question 19. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Department's definition of demand is suitable for assessing and monitoring demand?

Strongly disagree.

We strongly disagree that the Department's definition of demand is suitable. It relies heavily on interpreting parental admissions preferences in existing schools, but this conflates actual choice with available choice. Parents selecting non-integrated schools does not necessarily mean they do not want Integrated Education – it may simply reflect the absence of local provision or a lack of accessible alternatives. This is particularly problematic in areas where integrated schools are extremely oversubscribed, as parents may not even list them among their preferences if there is no realistic prospect of securing a place. Consistent polling has shown the majority of people in Northern Ireland want integrated education to be the main model of schooling. In 2024, a poll found 67% of people agreed that 'Integrated schools- which intentionally educate together children every day in the same classrooms, inclusive of different religions, gender, and race- should be the main model for our education system.'¹⁷ But when only 7% of schools are integrated, it would not follow that the majority of parents would not be able to make the choice to have an integrated school as their preference, even if they want integrated education. Integrated schools are limited and not in all areas of Northern Ireland, there will be schools closer and more convenient, children may have built friendships in non-integrated primary schools that can only be upheld in non-integrated secondaries, older siblings or cousins may be in non-integrated schools. School preference cannot be used to determine demand for integrated education in an environment where there are insufficient integrated schools to outweigh other factors for school preference.

The current definition compares a potential situation (what parents might choose if Integrated Education were accessible) with a real one (what they are able to choose now). And, although it includes 'societal demand' – measured through surveys and successful parental ballots – it risks failing to properly account for unmet or suppressed demand, particularly among non-religious families and others poorly served by existing options. It is also unclear how the different types of demand (societal and behavioural) will be weighted in practice. Recent decisions – such as the refusal to approve transformation proposals from Bangor Academy and Rathmore Primary School despite overwhelming parental support – suggest that current enrolment data and the presence of a 'reasonable' number of Catholic and Protestant pupils are being used to override broader indicators of interest.¹⁸ This interpretation fails to recognise that minority representation often

¹⁷ IEF, LucidTalk Northern Ireland Attitudinal Poll 2024. <https://www.ief.org.uk/our-work/research/northern-ireland-attitudinal-poll-2024/>

¹⁸ Bain, M (2025) 'Minister's decision to deny integrated status to NI's biggest post-primary 'has made things very difficult' for schools seeking switch', Belfast Telegraph, 13 March 2025, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk>.

increases after transformation and can take time to achieve.^{19,20} A more appropriate framework would include explicit guidance on how real-world behaviour will be fairly balanced with community-wide indicators, and allow for future potential, rather than simply accepting existing circumstances.

Question 20. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the measures of demand outlined in the Action Plan are sufficient to measure demand for Integrated Education?

Strongly disagree.

As outlined in our response to Question 19, the core problem lies not only in the measures themselves but in how they are applied. While the Action Plan identifies both societal and behavioural indicators, there is no clarity on how these will be weighted or interpreted in practice.

Recent decisions suggest that behavioural data – such as existing enrolment patterns – are given disproportionate emphasis, even where broader indicators point to clear demand. Without guidance on how the different measures will be used together, the current framework risks reinforcing limited access rather than revealing unmet need.

For more details, information, and evidence, contact Northern Ireland Humanists:

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[uk/news/education/ministers-decision-to-deny-integrated-status-to-nis-biggest-post-primary-has-made-things-very-difficult-for-schools-seeking-switch/a479802155.html](https://www.nicie.org.uk/news/education/ministers-decision-to-deny-integrated-status-to-nis-biggest-post-primary-has-made-things-very-difficult-for-schools-seeking-switch/a479802155.html)

¹⁹ NICIE (2025) 'Statement on Bangor Academy & Sixth Form College and Rathmore Primary School', 8 January 2025, <https://nicie.org.uk/statement-on-bangor-academy-and-sixth-form-college-and-rathmore-primary-school/>.

²⁰ IEF (2025) IEF Response to the Minister of Education, 10 January 2025, <https://www.ief.org.uk/2025/01/10/response-the-minister-of-educations-decision/>



Pivotal is submitting this short response to the consultation, in addition to filling in the online survey.

Pivotal is an independent public policy think tank, based in Belfast. We have completed in-depth research examining integrated education and how it relates to wider questions of division and integration in schools, housing and wider community life. This research includes conducting focus groups and surveys with young people, interviews with practitioners and experts, and policy and literature reviews. Our main reports on these subjects can be found here, starting with the most relevant and recent twin reports:

- 1) [Achieving greater integration in education and housing](#)
- 2) [Achieving greater integration in Northern Ireland: young people's voices](#)
- 3) [Reconciliation and deprivation: twin challenges for Northern Ireland](#)
- 4) [Youth voices: life, study and work in Northern Ireland](#)
- 5) [Youth solutions: improving education, training and employment in Northern Ireland](#)
- 6) [Youth solutions for building better communities in Northern Ireland](#)

Young people who participated in our research were broadly supportive of greater integration, and recognised its potential societal benefits of integrated education, but they had limited experience of the sector and many of them doubted what it alone could achieve within their own divided communities. There was, however, a consensus that shared youth facilities and groups in the community should be a policy priority. They highlighted the positive impact these shared experiences can have, suggesting that there is a need for a focus on youth services where young people can meet and mix, alongside promoting more integration in schools.

The central conclusion of our research is that there should be a target to significantly increase the proportion of pupils who attend schools with a significant enrolment of pupils from both of the main traditions in NI. This can only be achieved by a growth in both the integrated sector and the amount of mixing and sharing occurring in all models of school. There is evidence of many non-integrated schools that teach a diversity of pupils across the traditional divide, but these schools remain largely geographically clustered, and the exception. We do not see the need to choose between the integrated sector and supporting more diversity in all schools – instead there is a need for both, if the dial on integration is to be shifted more substantively.

Our research highlighted that for many young people living in single identity areas integration continues to be viewed as a positive long-term aspiration but something for future generations, not for now. We welcome the steps contained within Vision 2030 that envisions how integration could be more strongly developed within schools now, not later.

Pivotal agrees that 'Vision 2030 - A strategy for Integrated Education' reaffirms the importance of government support for the sector, integrated education's potential to contribute to a more shared future for wider society, and the need for data to measure and monitor demand for integrated education and measure progress.

We agree that the strategy and the action plan both aid an overall understanding of the Integrated Education Act, especially in relation to the DE's responsibility to access demand for the sector and produce targets to measure if this existing demand is being met. The document also adds to

an understanding of many other issues, such as the complexity of measuring demand for integrated education, the need to review the transformation process, the impact of admissions criteria on the sector, and how sustainability of the school estate will be reviewed and incorporated into policy.

The detailed approach specified to reach a better understanding of the demand for integrated education is especially welcomed. The targets and support for annual research are both key. The benchmark data and importance given to monitoring included in the strategy are also important.

We note, however, that Vision 2030 also reflects how some aspects of the Act, and subsequently DE's duties and responsibilities, remain ambiguous and unclear. This is not a criticism of these documents, or their intentions, but we believe it is important to recognise that key parts of the Act remain contested and open to different interpretations, and that this weakens the overall effectiveness of this or any strategy.

This is most clear in relation to the implications of the Act's clause that integrated status is dependent on "reasonable numbers" of Protestant and Catholic pupils. As recent prominent cases suggest, this clause lacks clarity and points to a wider ongoing debate about the appropriate criteria for integrated status, in an era of changing demographics when demand is uneven across Northern Ireland. The "numbers" criteria also has implications for the review of the ethos of the sector.

We consider that there is also need for further clarity on the duties and responsibilities that flow from the phrase "encouraging, facilitating and supporting" integrated education. Vision 2030 rightly notes the importance of meeting existing demand for integrated education, but is there a responsibility for DE to work towards a growth in demand for the sector? Alternatively, some may argue that it is sufficient to comply with the Act by facilitating better awareness of the sector, facilitating access to the transformation process, supporting the administration of the sector, and encouraging the success of existing schools and those who meet the criteria to transform. In this way, some of the ambiguities of the Act are reflected in the strategy.

Pivotal welcomes Vision 2030's provision for a review of the attitudes towards transformation within maintained and voluntary schools. Our research highlighted that for the sector to grow substantially more schools from outside the controlled sector will need to transform. There are also implications for choice and community perceptions if, as is the case now, overwhelmingly it is schools seen as 'traditionally Protestant' that transform.

Pivotal also welcomes the commitment to work with The Executive Office, other government Departments and their agencies to support ongoing implementation of TBUC and the agenda of a more united and shared society. A firm conclusion from our research is the need to more firmly plan for integration by developing housing and education policies closely together. The dynamic relationship between residential segregation and divisions in school enrolments has the potential to maintain divisions and indeed extend them, despite the intentions of individual Departmental policies.

A joint-up approach to area planning, incorporating shared housing and inclusive schools is required to build a more shared and integrated future. Furthermore, we recommend the incorporation of infrastructure into this agenda, through prioritising more connections between communities, literally building a more united community.

The changing age profile of NI should be central to questions of sustainability, integration and sharing within the school estate. The declining number of school-age children, and the corresponding need for more sustainable schools, increases the urgency of achieving greater integration and sharing.

We recognise the role that shared education plays in this agenda – from multi-school shared activities and resources, through to the potential of more shared campuses. We recommend that participation rates in shared education projects need to be supported, especially in those areas most impacted by division.

New diversity means that for many younger people integration relates primarily to newcomer families and ethnic minority communities. The rising proportion of self-identifying 'Others' in NI adds further complexity and suggests that a 'two communities' model of measuring integration is outdated. Discussion of integration needs to more fully encompass these changes and should be included within reviews of the integrated sector's ethos.

Pivotal
23 May 2025

INTO's Response to the DE Consultation on Vision 2030 - A Strategy for Integrated Education

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) is the largest Teachers' Union in Ireland with over 50,000 members. 7,200 of those are teachers in Nursery, Primary and Post-primary schools in all sectors in Northern Ireland.

This response is on behalf of these 7,200+ members.

Nuala O'Donnell is the contact for this consultation within INTO.

The Strategy for Integrated education presents information about the education system in Northern Ireland but ignores a lot of information in relation to the current demographics here in most if not all schools where pupils from all backgrounds, cultures and religions are now enrolled.

The definition of integrated education in the legislation, as

'The education together, in an integrated school, of:

Those of different cultures and religious beliefs and none, including reasonable number of both protestant and Roman catholic children or young persons;' is outdated and seeking to perpetuate a system of designating people as catholic or protestant.

A lot can be learned from the **Educate Together** sector in the Republic of Ireland. Educate Together operates a national network of 97 primary schools and 21 second-level schools in Ireland, catering to over 40,000 students. Their Mission is:

'Educate Together is an agent for change in the Irish State education system seeking to ensure that parents have the choice of an education based on the inclusive intercultural values of respect for difference and justice and equality for all. In Educate Together schools, every child will learn in an inclusive, democratic, co-educational setting that is committed to enabling and supporting each child to achieve their full potential while at the same time preparing them to become caring and active members of a culturally diverse society.'

Educate Together schools are state-funded and teach the National Curriculum. They are non-fee-paying schools and are open to students of all backgrounds. They are co-educational and have no school uniforms. But they are much more than that: Educate Together schools work hard to instil a sense of equality and justice in students. They embrace the input of parents, students, staff and the wider community to improve the school in every way possible. They are committed to enabling students to achieve their full potential. All students are encouraged to explore their full range of abilities and are provided with equal opportunities regardless of their identity. Educate Together schools put students at the heart of all policies and practices. All children have equal access to school and no one religion or worldview is given priority over another in Educate Together schools.

This is what the education system in Northern Ireland should be seeking to provide for all pupils and no longer be counting how many children from catholic and Protestant backgrounds are in their schools.

Action 9. What is concerning in the published strategy and Action Plan for integrated education is the focus completely on integrated education to the exclusion of all others. All schools governance structures require to be reviewed. (pg 24)

How can the ethos of Integrated education be evaluated against other sectors if the DE is only working with NICIE and IE stakeholders? (pg 24)

Action 13. What is the purpose of an 'Excellence in Integrated Education Award scheme'? This is a potential workload issue for teachers in Integrated schools over and above their normal teaching duties and as such could not be supported. (pg 25)

Will the research on the Impact of Integrated Education on Northern Ireland society over time be a comparative study? How will this be conducted and evaluated? (pg 25)

As stated earlier a system of designating people as catholic or protestant should no longer be the aim for education in NI, the definition requires reviewing and updating, with a name change to be a truly inclusive education system. (pg 27)

Action 8. Support Services for all schools and access for other sectors to EA services has been a demand from the INTO and NITC for a long time, and featured in many of the recommendations of the 2020 workplace reviews, yet to be implemented. To single out one sector above others is not acceptable. (pg 29)

Action 12. Why should there be a self evaluation 'Framework for Integrated Education' toolkit, when there is an ETI self-evaluation framework, for all schools. This is counterproductive and potentially increasing the workload of principals and teachers in integrated schools at a time when it is recognised that workload needs to be reduced. (pg 31)

Action 14. INTO welcomes the action for Inclusion to be included in Initial Teacher Education for all teachers for all sectors of education, not just in the integrated sector. Shared education has supported inclusion in many areas over the years and it is hoped this will continue for many years to come, across all schools and sectors. (pg 31).

Action 18. It is not just integrated schools which explore controversial issues in a diverse classroom. Other schools have very diverse classrooms and there are many examples of good practice in NI schools which should also be shared with integrated and other schools. (pg 32)

Resourcing (pg33 & 34) It is hoped that integrated schools builds will not be progressed at the expense of other schools which have been waiting for considerable periods. As mentioned in our response, the fabric of the buildings and the facilities/services that subsequently enable to be offered can have a significant impact on parental choice and this needs to be factored into any examination of parental preferences, along with SEN and extracurricular offers and wrap around care.

Peace Summit Partnership

Peace Summit Partnership Response to Vision 2030 – A Draft Strategy for Integrated Education

Executive Summary

The Peace Summit Partnership welcomes Vision 2030 – A Draft Strategy for Integrated Education as a step toward embedding educational integration in Northern Ireland's peacebuilding agenda. The strategy's acknowledgement of parental voices, the Integrated Education movement, and historical context are commendable. However, substantial concerns remain regarding missed deadlines, the absence of updated demand data, lack of meaningful performance benchmarks, and severe underfunding.

The Partnership calls for a revised strategy that ~~prioritises~~ accountability, clarity, and sustainability. Recommendations include establishing measurable targets across all indicators, resourcing NICIE and schools adequately, aligning ministerial decisions with statutory obligations, and overhauling Area Planning to better reflect integrated, local needs.

Integrated Education is not just a policy objective—it is a peacebuilding imperative. Vision 2030 must move from aspiration to action, grounded in equity, data, and the courage to build a more united future.

Key Commentary and Recommendations

The Peace Summit Partnership ~~recognises~~ the strengths of Vision 2030, including its historical overview, attention to pupil voice, and efforts to embed integration in teacher training. However, the Strategy falls short in several critical areas:

- Delays in implementation more than three years after the Act became law
- Lack of updated and comprehensive data on public demand
- Weak accountability structure: only 3 of 25 indicators have set targets
- Undermining decisions from the Minister, including rejection of transformation proposals and reallocation of funding
- Insufficient financial commitments to NICIE and strategy implementation

Recommendations

- Establish clear, time-bound targets for all 25 indicators, including for nursery provision and social diversity.
- Use robust and up-to-date demand data (e.g., Life and Times Survey, Parental Admissions Survey).
- Provide realistic funding to NICIE and schools undergoing Transformation.
- Align Departmental actions with the legal commitments under the Integrated Education Act (2022).
- Reform Area Planning to ensure cross-sectoral, evidence-led school provision.

Key References and Links

- [Vision 2030 – A Draft Strategy for Integrated Education](#)
- [Integrated Education Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2022](#)
- [BBC Article: Minister rejects school integration proposals](#)
- [TransformED NI Strategy and Delivery Plan \(PDF\)](#)