



Draft NI Programme for Government Consultation Response from the Special Educational Needs Advice Centre (SENAC)

‘Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most’

Draft Programme for Government 2024-2027

1. About SENAC

The Special Educational Needs Advice Centre (SENAC) is a regional charity providing independent advice, information, and advocacy on the statutory special educational needs (SEN) system to families of children with SEN and disability. In the last year, our services supported over 1000 families.

Since 2003 SENAC has provided a range of services for parents/carers and their children to secure access to the necessary education provision for children’s individual learning needs including a confidential SEN Adviceline, a SEN Tribunal Representation Service and Children’s Education Advocacy Service. SENAC also delivers community-based SEN workshops to a range of community and family support groups building and maintaining engagement and support of the SEN community throughout Northern Ireland. Each year we receive referrals to our services from on average over 80 different organisations as well as referrals from practitioners within Education and Health. This provides a unique and comprehensive insight into the lived experiences of the parents and children we support and the challenges they face. This consultation response therefore reflects SENAC’s views informed by our case work, services, and the experiences of those we support.

SENAC welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Draft Programme for Government (PfG). Our response relates only to those aspects and priorities

relating to children and young people with special educational needs and disability.

2. PfG Priority: Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs

SENAC welcomes the inclusion of the priority commitment to improve the support available to children and young people facing challenge to their lives and learning due to special educational needs. For too long the issues and barriers within education which have hindered educational access, progress and opportunity for the children has not been adequately recognised or addressed. It has been concerning that despite the overwhelming body of evidence over many years of the systemic failure of the application of the legal rights and the statutory framework intentioned to identify and provide for children's individual needs, effective reform has not been progressed.

The commitment in the Programme for Government (PfG) to support high quality education for all children, especially those with special educational needs is therefore positive. It is hoped that as the task to provide better support for the children has now been prioritised within the Programme for Government, that the current SEND Transformation programme and SEND Projects already underway including the Department of Education's End to End Review will be supported and crucially, receive the necessary investment to bring progress and positive change for the children.

While acknowledging the Programme for Government sets out the overall vision for change and does not within this draft highlight specific targets or actions to achieve the goals there are a number of specific references SENAC hope can be addressed more explicitly within the final draft of the PfG and action plans:

2.1 Tackling the inequalities experienced by children with Special Educational Needs and Disability

To better the support for children and young people with SEN and disabilities identifying the inequalities they experience and the circumstances which compound such inequality should be highlighted more explicitly within the final Programme for Government with targeted action plans. The Equality Commission NI in their 2024 'Advancing Equality in Education for Children

with SEN' recommended the need to target and track the inequalities experienced. The Commission highlighted inequalities experienced by children with SEN regarding access to education, attainment, attendance, and experiences of bullying. The inequalities highlighted and the ECNI recommendations within their report should be referenced within the final PfG to ensure policy reform is informed and evidenced by identifying the inequalities, and the failures within current policy and practice which can create inequality and disadvantage in many aspects of education. This will provide assurance that SEN reform at its core takes policy responsibility for tackling and reducing inequality. The right to education is compromised for many children, not just with the delay in accessing an appropriate school placement which the PfG rightly highlights as an issue to be urgently addressed, but children with SEN are at greater risk of being subject to exclusionary practices, informal suspensions, reduced timetables and shorter school days, have poorer attendance and experience lower attainment levels.

2.2 Children with special educational needs 'out of school' and children's mental health.

SENAC have been most concerned about the growing number of children within our advice services unable to attend school. In the last 3 years the number of children SENAC have supported who are out of school has tripled.

There has generally been an increasing awareness in the last couple of years of the increasing number of children with SEN unable to attend school due to school related anxiety. For many of the children SENAC advocate for it has been confirmed that the anxiety was related to either an inappropriate school placement for their needs or the lack of appropriate SEN provision to support them. This has resulted in their inability to cope in school and deteriorating mental health. These vulnerable children and young people are often out of school for long periods with little or no educational support in the home, or the specialist provision available to enable a return to school.

There can be many factors which contribute to the breakdown of a school placement and a child developing anxiety related to school but given the growing concern for these children 'missing' from education SENAC would urge this be addressed in the final PfG. This requires a commitment to identify the numbers of children with SEN currently 'out of school', the

factors causing the inability to attend school, and the lack of educational support into the home including addressing the lack of capacity within the Exceptional Teaching Arrangements Service to support these children. It is also important to identify within this cohort of children how many also have Statements of Special Educational Needs and the Education Authority's response to these children for whom they have a legal duty to arrange the SEN provision in school. Support and guidance are also required for schools on how to maintain support and engagement with the children at home and the capacity to resource and enable a transition back to school based on the child's individual needs.

Children's Mental Health Services also have a major role supporting the children out of school and their recovery, but yet again capacity within this service hinders children's access to help, the opportunity to return to school or to meet the criteria for Exceptional Teaching Arrangements. Addressing children's mental health services both in the community and within schools cannot be underestimated as a requirement to support SEN reform. Compromised mental health is a characteristic often experienced by children and young people with SEN, not just those unable to attend school.

'When children's special educational needs are not met, this can have a range of negative impacts on their education, mental health and wellbeing which may include social isolation, bullying, anxiety, self-harming, suicidal thoughts, delayed social development and academic progression, and negative impacts on self-esteem and self-confidence.' (NICCY 'Too Little Too Late' Report 2020)

The families SENAC support also reports experiencing similar negative impacts not only on the children and young people's well-being but the parents, siblings and the family as a whole can be impacted by the stress and worry for their child.

To have access to mental health support, initiatives, and advice for schools and the children and young people should also be a priority for the Programme for Government.

2.3 Commitment to implement SEN Recommendations and the current SEN and Disability (SEND) Transformation Programme

While it is positive that the PfG references the 200 recommendations collated from the various reports published over the last few years on the failings of the application of the SEN system and the impact on the children and their families, an explicit statement to commit to ensuring the recommendations will be implemented would demonstrate Government's commitment to ensure action plans and funding for SEN improvement will be adequate to implement the recommendations. The significant number of recommendations published have demonstrated the extent of the failures within SEN and Education and requires a corresponding adequately funded response from the PfG.

DE and the Education Authority have accepted all the recommendations, and through the current projects of the SEND Transformation Programme are working towards implementing the recommendations. The PfG however, does not clarify how the 'enabling actions' listed in the document correspond to the ongoing projects currently being delivered within the SEND Transformation programme. Clarification is required in the final PfG to outline if further actions plans will be implemented or if the SEND reform actions and projects currently being progressed by DE and the Education Authority are the complete response to achieve positive change.

2.4 Access to Specialism

It is widely accepted and evidenced that schools do not have the capacity and specialist skills to assess and provide for the diversity of individual needs of those children and young people with SEN and disability. The increasing number of children presenting with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties also brings additional challenge for teachers and school staff to manage and support the children within the school environment. The Independent Review of SEN Services and Processes (2023) found only 47% of staff within schools were trained to provide behavioural support and only 33% trained in sensory needs. This report also highlighted the view from the children and young people interviewed that *'all staff in school should be better trained to understand the needs of children with SEN and to support them better'*. This reflects what SENAC often hears from the families using our services that not only does the child often feel

their needs are not understood or get the help they need to learn but the teachers require advice which is not easily accessible or available to them.

The statutory SEN system is a framework of support **for individual needs** which means the statutory response must be adequate to meet the diversity of need for each child. This places a responsibility on training for staff, adequate specialist knowledge within the EA Pupil and School Support Services and on initial teacher training. With the current reform of Pupil Support Services underway SENAC are concerned that the new integrated approach to these services may not provide the level and nature of specialism required. A commitment in the PfG to continue to consult with schools and the EA to ensure specialists corresponding to the diverse individual needs are available and, monitor their impact along with further training for school staff would provide assurance that more specialism in education will be enabled. In particular, areas such as trauma informed practice, understanding sensory needs and behavioural needs, and a wider ability to support children with specific learning needs related to dyslexia and dyscalculia are all areas parents using our services report to us require more knowledge and skills within the classroom.

2.5 Data Collection

Many of the recent reports on SEN which have been published since 2020 have referenced within the report or recommendations the need for improvement in the collection of data relating to SEN and the sharing of data. The Independent Review of SEN Processes and Services (2023) recommended: *'There should be better co-ordination and sharing of data across all education and health agencies to facilitate better planning and development of services for children and young people with SEN and complex needs. There should be a detailed review to remove any barriers to data sharing and ensure that relevant, up to date information is available to those who are responsible for planning services for young people and that the correct data sharing agreements are in place.'*

It is therefore positive to note the PfG intends to ensure data is a key tool to inform the reform of policy and practice. The current lack of data on many aspects of SEN compromises the effectiveness of policy reform. Given the changing SEN landscape and the complexity and diverse needs of the

children and their varying backgrounds, improving data collection in many aspects of SEN is a policy imperative. For example, NICCY's 'Too Little Too Late' 2020 report recommended *'robust data is required to identify the causes of the variance in rates of suspension and expulsion between children with and without SEN'*.

Data relating to children unable to attend school, children on a reduced school day or those subject to informal suspensions are other examples of data not available.

The ability to access data which can inform trends relating to variables or pupil-level data is limited. There is also a lack of published data relating to the specific processes and decision-making within SEN.

It is hoped within the final PfG and action plans more specific information will be provided on how data collection will be improved and applied.

2.6 Child Poverty

The lack of specific reference to addressing child poverty or a commitment to delivering an Anti-Poverty strategy within the draft PfG is concerning. The Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality Report 2021-22 found the long-term trend shows that children have a higher risk of living in poverty than the other population groups. Children with special educational needs can experience higher rates of socio-economic disadvantage and many of the families who use SENAC's services live in communities experiencing social and economic disadvantage and deprivation. To improve the lives of all children consideration should be given to the inclusion of a priority specific to addressing poverty within the final PfG.

3. Working in Partnership

3.1 Cross-Departmental Working

The commitment in the PfG to cross-Departmental working and the agreed joint vision and mission for change is welcomed. This is especially important for children and young people with SEN whose needs are dependent on the involvement of both Health and Education. It was positive to note in the PfG that the need for these Departments to work together and co-operate to

identify, assess and make provision for the child's needs was highlighted. It is crucial that effective co-operation can be sustained as despite the introduction of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 difficulties and a lack of co-operation and communication is still reported by SENAC service users and evident in our case work.

It is crucial therefore that implementing the recommendation from the Independent Review of SEN Services and Processes (2023) that *'DoH should work with Trusts to identify and address the challenges associated with providing Allied Health Professional support and services to pupils with SEN in school and in doing so develop effective communication channels between schools and Trusts'* should be a priority in the actions related to this aspect of the PfG plans.

Additionally, the Report noted *'effective co-operation and collaboration between Health and Education is critical for the provision of services to schools and pupils and the timely completion of assessments.'* This is reflective of the experiences many parents using SENAC services report, particularly in the delay of progressing statutory assessments. Achieving effective co-operation through the PfG would make a significant difference to meeting the needs of the children and is critical to achieve if the PfG hopes to deliver on the promise of *'the right support from the right people, at the right time, in the right place'*.

3.2 Parent Partnership

We welcome the theme of partnership and collaborative working throughout the draft PfG and the commitment to stakeholder involvement in the priority areas and action plans *'in the design, delivery and rolling review of impacts.'*

Parents of children with SEN and disability are at the heart of the statutory SEN decision-making processes and with their children are key stakeholders to be consulted on any reform of SEN. Although the PfG makes general reference to the children's families and support networks it would have meaningful to parents who advocate tirelessly to ensure their child's educational needs are assessed and provided for to have been specifically mentioned within the PfG and the crucial role they play in progressing the SEN system for their child. It is often the parents exercising their role and rights which progresses their child's journey through the SEN system to secure SEN provision. The reference within the PfG to rebuilding trust and

confidence in the SEN system should have given recognition that it is particularly parental confidence they must rebuild.

The PfG should also highlight the need to improve the Education Authority's communication and engagement with parents contacting the EA in relation to their child's progress through the Statementing process and the need for EA to provide greater transparency in their decision making on assessment and SEN provision offered.

As action plans relating to the final PfG are implemented it is hoped effective and broad stakeholder engagement with parents, children and the wider SEN community will be a priority to inform planning and change, not simply informing parents of changes but deliver on the promise to involve stakeholders in the design of action plans etc.

3.3 Voluntary and Community Sector

It was disappointing given the range of services and support provided from the Voluntary and Community Sector that the draft PfG did not provide greater reference on working with the sector in the future plans.

4. Conclusion

SENAC appreciate the opportunity to respond to the draft Programme for Government and consideration of our response and the issues we have highlighted to help improve the lives and education for the children we support. We welcome any further engagement as the Programme for Government and Action Plans are progressed.

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