



DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES

DISABILITY AND WORK: A STRATEGY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

CONSULTATION RESPONSE FROM:

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS ADVICE CENTRE (SENAC)

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 and young people with SEN and disability. In the last year, our services supported over 1200 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. 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 SENAC with a unique and comprehensive insight into the lived experiences of the parents, children and young people we support and the challenges they face.

Introduction and Scope of the Strategy

SENAC welcomes the Disability and Work Strategy for Northern Ireland and the ambition and dedication to improve employment outcomes for those living with disability.

As a charity supporting children and young people with special educational needs, SENAC's consultation response primarily focuses on the aspects of the strategy relating to SEN.

We welcome the scope of the Strategy to include young people with special educational needs in education transitioning from school and educational settings into employment. The Strategy's commitment to facilitate a positive transition into employment for young people with SEN, and to provide them with 'the best possible chance to thrive in work,' indicates a commitment not only to support entry into employment but also to ensuring support to sustain employment, an equally important aim. This commitment has the potential to be transformative in the lives and future prospects for these young people. While SENAC supports this commitment, more detail and

information on how this will be implemented and resourced will be appreciated once the Implementation Plan for the Strategy is published.

Enabling more opportunities and pathways to employment for those with SEN transitioning from education to work is a significant area requiring improvement. In 23/24 over 8% of school leavers with SEN were unemployed compared to 2% of school leavers with no SEN (DE). Through SENAC's services we are aware of the lack of opportunities for employment and the challenges faced by those leaving school to access a meaningful future in work, training and even further education as often the support required for individual needs is not available.

Collective Approach

SENAC endorse the principle of collective responsibility and collaborative working embedded throughout the Strategy. This will be essential to the success of providing the inclusive and relevant support for the young people on their transitions journey.

In relation to young people with SEN the Strategy references the Minister of Education's SEN Reform Agenda and Delivery Plan (2025-30). The SEN reform aims to address many of the barriers faced by young people with SEN including pathways to employment. The success of the Reform Agenda will therefore impact on the success of the Strategy in relation to young people with SEN. Reform cannot be achieved by the Department of Education and the Education Authority alone and the Reform Delivery plan outlines the role of other government departments and agencies. The Department of Health, and Health and Social Care Services in particular has a key role to support the Education Authority and DE provide specialist and therapeutic support and interventions young people with SEN require. It is positive therefore that collective working underpins the Disability and Work Strategy emphasising the importance of a collective response to achieve the aims of strategies that impact on the lives of young people in many ways, interconnecting the aims and intentions of different government departments and highlighting the need for a co-ordinated and integrated effort from all relevant stakeholders.

We welcome the recognition that parents of young people with SEN should be part of the collective response. Parents play a key role in the SEN decision-making process, supporting and advocating for their child. Being part of the transition planning will enable parents to have informed discussions with the young person on their choices, aspirations and the level of support they may require.

It is positive that the Strategy emphasises that young people with SEN will remain at the heart of transition planning and implementation. Their views, wishes, and support needs must inform the choices made to develop and progress their transition journey. Their involvement and consideration of their views must be meaningful and evident in the actions taken and decisions made that they are being listened to. Low expectations of what a young person with SEN can achieve can often create another barrier to progress and what might be achieved with the right support. More opportunities should be provided to enable young person's engagement in all discussions/meetings with employers, careers officers etc and where required adjustments or support needed to aid communication is provided.

Personalised Support

SENAC supports the theme of the Strategy that personalised employment support is essential to the successful delivery of the Strategy's aims. This approach mirrors the statutory SEN system applied within schools. It is an individualised support framework based on the principle that

within special educational needs is a broad range of individual needs and personal challenges that can only be appropriately provided for when tailored to the needs of each child through a Personal Learning Plan or Statement of SEN. While this individualised approach is the strength of the SEN Framework, it also presents significant challenges in terms of resources and implementation. The many barriers within education which restrict a child's access to appropriate SEN provision and the pressures on the SEN system resulting in failure to deliver for each child has been the focus of many recent reports. Although SENAC agrees that an individualised approach to employment support is necessary, we want to highlight that challenges within the SEN system show that even a robust legal statutory framework can fail without proper resources and execution. The Minister of Education's SEN Reform Agenda (2025) highlights the increasing complexity of need within the post-primary population with many young people with SEN presenting with more than one need. Within post-primary are 24,500 young people with 35,000 recorded needs. This complexity along with the increasing number of children with SEN in education makes personalising employment pathways for young people with SEN very challenging and requires consideration for future planning. Nevertheless, the Strategy must address these issues by ensuring adequate resourcing, support and guidance for employers, collaborating with schools, creating better pathways, and working in partnership with young people.

Enabling personalised support and pathways will provide increased engagement with the young people and encourage their ability to make informed decisions which will improve choices for employment with support tailored to their needs and successful transition to work.

A personalised approach must also be accompanied by greater efforts within education, employment and work environments to continue to promote the social model of disability, increasing awareness that disability should be regarded as the physical, social and cultural restrictions created by society. It is the environment which needs adjusted, changing values and practices to remove barriers to participation enabling more inclusive environments.

Timely and Appropriate Support and Guidance

SENAC endorse Commitment 4 within the Strategy to provide appropriate and timely guidance for young people with SEN and their parents to ensure they can make informed decisions about their future beyond school. The commitment to 'explore additional supports which could be developed and implemented at an earlier point to support the transition to employment' will also be a significantly positive action. Providing support and guidance at the earliest stage would provide greater opportunity to identify individual needs and ambitions, more time to consult with the young people and identify and involve those within employment who can contribute to the planning and delivery of a successful transition. Earlier engagement can also provide more opportunity to build relationships, identify the strengths and aspirations of the young person, build their confidence and skills and develop the tailored advice and guidance required.

SENAC supports the necessity for a specialised careers advice and support service, as outlined in Commitment 5 of the Strategy with access to this support and guidance available at an earlier stage in education prior to the formal transition stages. Given the complexity of need and the increasing number of young people with SEN in post-primary education the capacity of these services should reflect the need.

Given the current lack of Transition and Careers Officers within the Education Authority a specialised careers service should also be an enhanced service to ensure each young person has

equal opportunity for advice and guidance for their transition. Currently children and young people with SEN can experience inequity within education dependent on the resources and expertise available within their school. The risk of such inconsistencies or restricted access to careers services must not be replicated in the implementation of this commitment within the Strategy by ensuring the capacity of services and support available is aligned with demand.

Reducing barriers/Preparation for Work

There are still considerable challenges to be addressed within education to reduce the barriers to learning, ensure equitable educational opportunities and a more inclusive educational environment for children with SEN. Improving access to appropriate SEN provision will enable more positive educational outcomes which will impact on employment opportunities. Currently the attainment gap between young people with SEN and their peers without SEN remains concerning. 23/24 figures from the Department of Education show within mainstream education, 77.5% of pupils without SEN achieved at least 5 GCSE's compared to 40.4% of pupils with SEN and 31.9% of pupils with Statements of SEN.

The Minister of Education's SEN Reform Agenda and Delivery Plan (2025-30) aims to address the existing barriers which may improve educational outcomes and future work prospects for those with SEN. The success of the Disability and Work Strategy for young people with SEN will be maximised if the Department of Education receives support from Government to adequately resource and strengthen the education system's capacity to meet special educational needs. By improving educational outcomes, these measures will help facilitate a more effective transition into employment for young people with SEN.

Reducing barriers for young people with SEN to improve educational outcomes should also be accompanied by programmes and opportunities to develop skills for work tailored to the needs and strengths of the young people. Supported work experience placements, targeted employability training, and partnerships with local employers should be enhanced and resourced within schools. Developing interpersonal skills, building self-confidence and self-esteem should also be fundamental to work programmes for these young people. Best practice in this area which is evident in many schools should be shared and replicated. Embedding such opportunities within education will equip young people with SEN to navigate more successfully the journey to employment.

Further Information

Additional information regarding implementation details, funding, and the identification of review processes or progress milestones associated with the broader ambitions outlined in the Strategy will be welcomed.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Consultation and consideration of our response.

Heather Larkin, Education and Policy Officer

SENAC, Graham House, Knockbracken Healthcare Park

Saintfield Road, Belfast BT8 8BH www.senac.co.uk