

Media Release



Evaluation of Programmes Addressing Educational Disadvantage

Despite incurring a combined annual spend of over £100m, the Department of Education cannot currently demonstrate that major programmes aimed at reducing educational disadvantage are successful or delivering value for money. That is among the conclusions of a report published today (Tuesday 31 March 2026) by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Dorinnia Carville's report on Evaluation of Programmes Addressing Educational Disadvantage examines evaluation of seven programmes, including:

- Targeting Social Need (TSN)
- Sure Start
- Extended Schools Programme
- Full Service Programme
- WRAP Programme
- SEND Transformation Programme
- Education Transformation Programme

While acknowledging that educational outcomes can be determined by a number of factors, many of which fall outside the Department's remit, the report identifies several weaknesses in current evaluation arrangements.

These include the following:

- Limited stakeholder engagement in designing meaningful and proportionate evaluation arrangements
- Fragmented and inconsistent approaches to evaluation across the range of programmes, limiting the Department's ability to understand what works, and where to channel future investment.
- Significant variation across the programmes in the quality, completeness and reliability of data collection to enable evaluation. This was most notable in TSN, where data collection through the TSN Planner remains heavily reliant on self-assessment.

The report notes progress in specific areas of evaluation relating to individual projects (for example SureStart and Extended Schools). However, it concludes that the Department cannot demonstrate, at a programme or intervention level, whether intended outcomes are being reached or value for money achieved.

Commenting on the report's findings, Dorinnia Carville said:

"Supporting all pupils to participate fully in education is recognised in the Programme for Government as fundamental to promoting a more inclusive, healthy and productive society. This review has focussed on programmes that are highly significant, both in terms of their levels of expenditure and their importance in supporting disadvantaged pupils during their educational journey. Proper, meaningful evaluation is, therefore, crucial. As well as ensuring value for money, it allows the Department and wider sector to make informed investment decisions for the future, identifying programmes or approaches which could be further enhanced or which require improvement. Such robust decision-making is especially important in what is currently a challenging financial environment for schools and education bodies, as well as for those experiencing disadvantage.

While acknowledging improvements in the evaluation of some individual programmes, a more consistent approach, based on existing best practice, is required. This report recommends the Department reviews evaluation arrangements across programmes to ensure these are effective and linked to achieving positive outcomes in overcoming educational disadvantage."

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Notes for Editors

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). She and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. The C&AG certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. She has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. Her reports are published as Assembly papers.
2. The report and good practice guide will be available on the Audit Office website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk. The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on Tuesday 31 March 2026.
3. The Targeting Social Need and SureStart programmes were previously a focus of a 2021 NIAO report (and a 2022 report by the Public Accounts Committee) on Closing the Gap: Social Deprivation and Links to Educational Attainment.
4. The report does not provide a full detailed assessment on whether the programmes reviewed are achieving value for money.

THIS STATEMENT IS ISSUED ON THE STRICT UNDERSTANDING THAT IT IS NOT FOR
PUBLICATION OR BROADCAST BEFORE *00.01 hrs* ON TUESDAY 31 MARCH 2026