

# Media Release



## Assessing the Quality of Education in Northern Ireland

While the education system in Northern Ireland continues to deliver areas of strong performance, significant weaknesses in assessment data and restricted school inspections have limited the ability to fully understand the quality of education being provided. These are among the conclusions of a report published today by the Comptroller and Auditor General, Dorinnia Carville.

The report on 'Assessing the Quality of Education in Northern Ireland' reviews how the Department of Education gains assurance on educational quality across more than 1,400 schools and early years settings. It stresses the need for clearer definitions, better data and stronger mechanisms to safeguard high standards for all pupils.

Among the issues highlighted is the lack of a clear definition of 'quality of education'. While the concept is well understood in principle, the Department has not articulated a formal definition in policy or corporate documents, making monitoring extremely challenging. Currently, there is a heavy reliance on examination results, but the report notes significant gaps in the information available. While GCSE and A-level results provide robust data at Key Stages 4 and 5, there is little assessment data for pupils before GCSE level, and some pupils are not represented in examination returns at all. This means policymakers cannot evaluate progress or intervene early enough to address underachievement.

Today's report also cites ongoing disruption to school inspections by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). Over the last decade Action Short of Strike (ASoS) has severely restricted inspectors' ability to observe teaching and learning. Between 2018 and 2023, only 13 primary schools received a full inspection unimpacted by ASoS. No post-primary schools received a full inspection in that period. As a result, ETI frequently reported that they were "unable to assure" stakeholders about the quality of education being provided.

Additionally, the report highlights that ETI is the only organisation that evaluates child protection arrangements during inspection. As a result of disrupted inspections, fewer schools were identified where safeguarding needed improvement, increasing the risk that vulnerable pupils were not receiving adequate support. A lack of classroom observation has also

prevented ETI from fully evaluating SEN provision during this period. Given rising numbers of SEN pupil and EA expenditure on SEN reaching £620 million in 2024–25, the report warns that robust oversight of SEN has been undermined.

Commenting on the findings, Comptroller and Auditor General Dorinnia Carville said:

*"A high-quality education system is essential for children, families and wider society. This report acknowledges that there is much to be proud of in our education system – GCSE and A-level results have improved, and Northern Ireland has performed well in international assessments. However, significant information gaps and prolonged disruption to inspection have limited assurance on the quality of provision across our schools."*

*"Good data, effective inspection and clear accountability are the cornerstones of system improvement. The Department's TransformED NI strategy includes ambitions for making such improvements. These include proposals for earlier assessment, additional attainment measures, and reforms that will align Northern Ireland with the legislative protections for inspection seen in other UK regions. I look forward to seeing the new strategy delivered and a fuller picture of performance developed."*

*"My recommendations seek to ensure that the Department can define, measure and support high-quality education for every child, including those who are most vulnerable and disadvantaged. This is also vital in ensuring value for money in the almost £3 billion spent on the education system here every year."*

ENDS

### **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](http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk). The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on Thursday 02 April 2026.