



Northern Ireland
Audit Office

Landscape Review of the Education Authority: Progress report on implementation of recommendations

**Report by the Comptroller
and Auditor General**

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**For further information about the
Northern Ireland Audit Office:**

Northern Ireland Audit Office
106 University Street
Belfast, BT7 1EU

028 9025 1000
info@niauditoffice.gov.uk
www.niauditoffice.gov.uk

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Dorinnia Carville *Northern Ireland Audit Office*
Comptroller and Auditor General 08 July 2026

Contents

List of Abbreviations		6
Executive Summary		7
Part One:	Background and Introduction	15
	Introduction	16
	Education Authority background	16
	Landscape Review of the Education Authority	17
	Initial response by DE and EA to the Landscape Review	17
	Governance arrangements to progress joint Action Plan	19
	Review of progress – 2025	19
	Funding and resourcing	21
	Report Structure	21
Part Two:	Future form, function and financing of EA	22
	This theme focuses on three recommendations that required DE and EA to revisit EA’s future form, function and financing	23
	Progress in implementing the recommendations is underway but is dependent on EA’s wider improvement programme, which does not have a definitive timeline for completion	23
	Recommendation 1 has been Partially Achieved	24
	Recommendations 2 and 3 called for an external review to determine EA’s future structural model and for EA and DE to establish the correct budget for EA. Neither has been achieved, and the related actions are ongoing	25
	Recommendation 3 of the Review highlighted capacity issues in terms of Human Resources and gaps in strategy and workforce planning were undermining EA’s delivery	27
Part Three:	EA Capacity and Capability	29
	This theme contains a series of recommendations on improvements required to support organisational effectiveness	30
	Work to deliver the recommendations and outcomes is ongoing, but none have been fully achieved to date	30
	EA developed a five-year strategic People Plan to strengthen its child and pupil centric approach	31

EA has taken action to improve communication and stakeholder engagement including by developing a Communications Strategy	31
The Review recommended that all front-line services are reviewed with three services to be prioritised	32
Delivering the data strategy and other associated recommendations is being delayed by resourcing challenges	33
EA needed to strengthen its organisational learning and leadership capability to deliver the required changes	34
Part Four: Demonstrating stronger accountability	35
This theme includes five recommendations on governance, accountability and relationships to support EA's future effectiveness	36
Progress in implementing the recommendations has been much slower than planned, with only three recommendations recently achieved	36
Implementation of an agreed Partnership Agreement was delayed by over two years	37
The approach to assurance needed to be strengthened	38
The Review found shortcomings in the current sponsorship model which remain largely unaddressed	38
A full review of the structure and composition of the Board was recommended but has not yet started	39
Appendices	41
Appendix 1: Summary of Key Recommendations within the Landscape Review of the EA	42
Appendix 2: Recommendations shown by project and actions from the joint DE/EA Action Plan	47
Appendix 3: Progress on implementation and status update on Recommendations	50
NIAO Reports 2026	68

List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ALBs	Arm's Length Bodies
DE	Department of Education (the Department)
EA	Education Authority
EdIS	Education Information Solutions
EGT	Education Governance Team
GAR	Governance and Accountability Review
HM Treasury	His Majesty's Treasury
HR	Human Resources
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
NDPB	Non-Departmental Public Body
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
NI	Northern Ireland
OD/ODL	Organisational Development / Organisational Development and Learning
PAC	Public Accounts Committee
PA	Partnership Agreement
RAG	Red, Amber, Green (status rating)
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SRO	Senior Responsible Owner

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

Introduction and Background

1. In 2021, the Department of Education (DE) commissioned its first review of the Education Authority (EA) since it was established in 2015 to replace the former Education and Library Boards. Reviews of this nature are a key tool to ensure Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs) operate effectively, efficiently and deliver value for money for the taxpayer.
2. The Independent Review, conducted by Baker Tilly Mooney Moore, commenced in November 2021 and was published on 22 June 2022 as the '[Landscape Review of the Education Authority](#)' (the Review). Its scope considered the effectiveness and governance of the EA, and the extent to which it is effectively able to deliver against stated Northern Ireland (NI) Executive and departmental priorities.
3. Publishing the report, the then Education Minister said:

"My Department is fully committed to working with the EA to progress the issues identified in the report, and to shape the continuing improvement of the organisation. Officials in the Department and the EA are already developing implementation plans, informed by the report's recommendations, to respond to the issues raised..... I acknowledge that it will take time to complete the actions within these plans, however I wish to assure members that addressing these issues is a priority for both my Department and the EA in order to improve outcomes for our children and young people"¹.
4. The Review identified significant shortcomings in EA's operations, including slow transition from legacy structures, unclear roles and responsibilities and limited confidence in EA's leadership within the education sector.
5. Key issues identified in the Review included: stakeholder engagement; communication; workforce planning; and the need for more child-centred services. Addressing these required clarifying EA's functions, identifying the optimal delivery model and aligning budgets with strategic objectives.
6. The Review made 13 core recommendations (**Appendix 1**), grouped into three themes:
 - **Future Form, Function, and Financing** – revisiting EA's structure and funding model;
 - **Capacity and Capability** – strengthening organisational effectiveness; and
 - **Demonstrating stronger accountability** – improving governance, accountability and relationships.

1 DE website publication of '[Landscape Review](#)' of the Education Authority and Ministerial Statement to the Assembly 22 June 2022

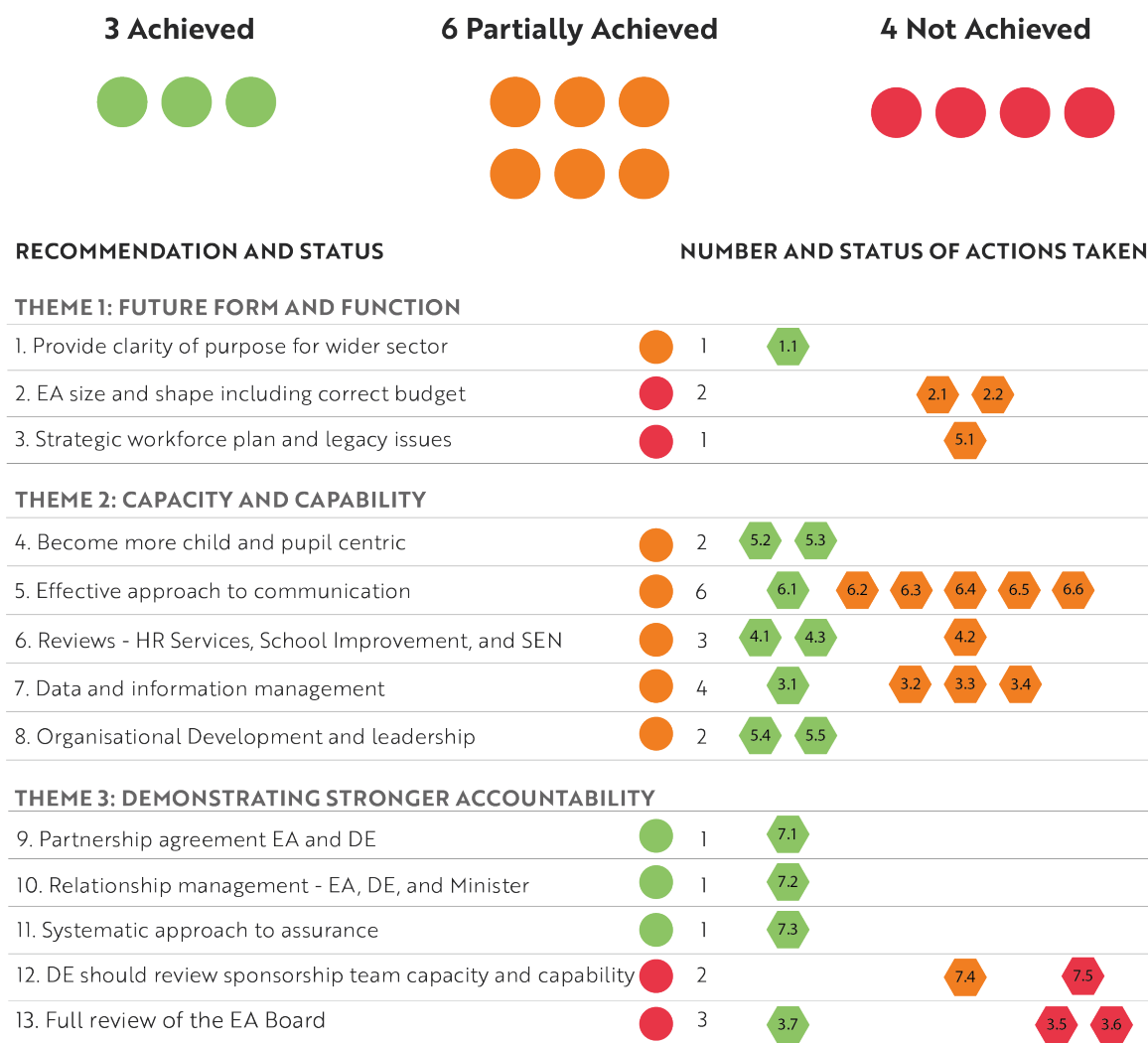
Response by the Department and Education Authority

7. Following the Ministerial Statement and further consideration of the Reviews' recommendations the Department concluded it would not be possible to implement all 13 recommendations as originally written. This was due to resource constraints and the uncertainty arising from the ongoing 'Independent Review of Education' and the broader political context at the time. Instead, DE and EA accepted the underlying intent of the recommendations and committed to addressing the issues identified. A joint Action Plan was subsequently developed in February 2023, comprising 29 actions across seven project workstreams to take this forward. However, in the absence of a Minister, there was no formal agreement on the proposed approach or ministerial sign-off of the Action Plan.
8. Whilst a project approach was initially taken, key project management pillars – such as defined budgets, timelines, and measurable outcomes – were absent. The Project Initiation Document stated that the Action Plan would be published and regularly reported internally to the Department and EA, as well as periodically, as necessary, reported externally. Whilst there was no firm commitment, transparency on progression of recommendations to satisfy the needs of key stakeholders such as the NI Assembly was considered to be a desired outcome.
9. Initial governance arrangements were put in place including an Oversight Group, chaired by the DE Permanent Secretary. This was established in April 2023 with a view to meeting quarterly. Reporting to EA's Board and Committees was inconsistent however, with limited updates on specific recommendations. It was intended to provide regular updates to the EA Audit Committee, but this did not happen, with the one update provided being to the Performance and Engagement Committee, in May 2024. External reporting to other key stakeholders did not happen. We were told that there was no Education Committee to report to when the Action Plan was being taken forward and, when a new Minister of Education was appointed, the focus shifted towards the progression of the new Minister's priorities under the TransformED NI strategy.
10. Overall, reporting focused internally on activities and outputs related to actions rather than on demonstrating impact or outcomes achieved against the initial review recommendations. Baseline data, expected benefits and success measures were not defined, making it difficult to track progress against the review recommendations or assess the overall effectiveness of actions taken.
11. Following the appointment of a new Chief Executive in April 2024, the EA conducted a progress review and produced a 'Position Paper' in February 2025. This summarised project and action status but did not assess progress against recommendations. The Department subsequently stood down the Oversight Group (which had not met since June 2024) and closed the seven projects and Action Plan, with outstanding actions now to be completed as part of business-as-usual activity.
12. In May 2025, the Minister was informed that DE would monitor remaining actions through routine Governance and Accountability Review (GAR) meetings. After the November 2025 GAR, EA advised that the actions they were responsible for were either complete or substantially complete. DE accepted this position for all but ten actions, which it considered should remain open (**para 1.25**).

Progress with the implementation of the recommendations

- 13.** Although addressing the issues and recommendations of the Landscape Review was stated as a priority, the overall pace of implementation has been slow. Assessing progress against the recommendations and outcomes intended has proved difficult for several reasons:
- recommendations were not actually accepted in full. Instead, the intent of the recommendations were accepted and DE and EA committed to addressing the issues identified in the Review. However, the outcomes intended were not set out clearly and transparently;
 - DE and EA did not monitor or report progress against each individual recommendation or their associated benefits and outcomes. Reporting has instead focused on deliverables within the agreed action plan;
 - there was no benefits realisation plan linking recommendations, actions and projects, limiting the ability to assess overall impact and effectiveness;
 - baseline data from the time of the Landscape Review was not always available or clearly defined, restricting the ability to measure progress over time; and
 - in some areas, benefits are expected to materialise over a longer timeframe due to the scale of change, required/envisaged.
- 14.** **Figure 1** below sets out a summary of progress and RAG (Red, Amber, Green) status against each of the 13 recommendations in terms of whether we consider them to be:
- Achieved (Green);
 - Partially Achieved (Amber); or
 - Not Achieved (Red)
- Further evidence is provided at **Appendix 3**. It also summarises whether the agreed actions associated with each recommendation have been completed.
- 15.** In some cases, whilst agreed actions had been completed, we were unable to conclude that any recommendation had been fully implemented and 'Achieved'. In our view, to be marked as achieved the actions taken need to have addressed the recommendation in full and there must be clear evidence to demonstrate that their intended effects and desired outcomes have been measured and delivered.

Figure 1: Overview of the status of the 13 recommendations made and associated actions to address them



16. Key actions related to recommendations where substantive work has not started included:

- **Recommendation 12:** A review of DE’s sponsorship arrangements was deprioritised from the start due to resource constraints. Internal Audit also recently issued a ‘Limited’ assurance opinion on sponsorship controls in October 2025. A further review of sponsorship arrangements is planned for 2026-27; and
- **Recommendation 13:** A review of the EA Board composition was deferred from the outset. DE then requested an externally led Board Effectiveness Review in June 2025 which did not happen. DE has since agreed to revisit the issue in March 2027. Whilst there have been changes to Board members since the review, the structure and composition has remained.

17. The Department told us that it intends to take forward a new quinquennial/Landscape Review of the EA in 2027, in line with best practice to undertake such a review every five years. This will set a fresh baseline of where the EA is currently positioned.

Conclusion and Recommendations

- 18.** Four years after the publication of the Landscape Review of EA, and over three years after an action plan was agreed by DE and EA, progress to fully implement the recommendations has been slow. This represents a missed opportunity to address longstanding issues in a timely and effective manner, particularly given the Minister, at the time, stated that addressing them was a priority for both DE and EA. To date, reporting has also not clearly demonstrated how the actions taken have delivered the effects or outcomes intended by the recommendations.
- 19.** Benefits realisation planning and assessing outcomes are critical to public sector transformation because they shift the focus from merely delivering project outputs to ensuring those outputs create actual, measurable value and positive change for citizens. It is important the Department and EA can clearly demonstrate the value for money of the Review it commissioned and that the actions taken in response to the review are delivering tangible long-term impacts. This requires identification and clear demonstration of the benefits achieved, the extent of improvement, and efficiency savings achieved.
- 20.** More detail on individual recommendations and actions taken is set out in each part of this report and in detail at **Appendix 3**.
- 21.** We identified the following key issues:
- there has been a lack of active project management and reporting on each recommendation from the outset;
 - the complex project structure and the way the recommendations were translated into actions mean governance and accountability over how DE and EA oversaw and reported on the implementation of the review's recommendations was not clear and transparent;
 - baselines, benefits and improvements intended by each of the recommendations, and how they were to be measured and reported on in terms of outcomes were not clearly defined;
 - insufficient outcome and benefits focussed reporting;
 - after an initial period, the implementation of the recommendations and associated actions was treated as business-as-usual rather than a priority; and
 - there have been significant delays.
- 22.** Since the Review was published in 2022 and subsequent actions taken, there has been significant transformational activity and initiatives announced by the Minister for Education - particularly through the TransformED NI strategy which was launched in March 2025. While these developments may encompass elements of the original Landscape Review recommendations, and in some cases subsume them within wider programmes, it remains important, from a value for money perspective, that the contribution and impact of the Landscape Review can be clearly identified. This requires a transparent line of sight between the Review's recommendations, the actions taken in response, and the outcomes achieved. Where recommendations are progressed through broader transformation initiatives, their intended outcomes should still be clearly defined, measured, and reported to ensure that the effectiveness of the Review, and the benefits derived from it, can be properly assessed.

23. In relation to the DE and EA response to date, we recommend:



Recommendation 1

There was a lack of clarity and transparency in how the Department responded to the recommendations arising from the Review. **Where an independent review is commissioned at public expense, the Department's formal response should clearly set out which recommendations are accepted, which are rejected, and how any modified or unaccepted recommendations will be addressed. This should include any alternative actions proposed and how the Department will assess whether the intended outcomes and benefits have been achieved.**



Recommendation 2

The Landscape Review represented a significant investment of time and resources. To maximise its value, stronger arrangements should have been put in place to support effective governance and implementation from the outset.

We recommend that DE and EA undertake a lessons-learned review of the project management of the Landscape Review, focusing on governance arrangements, baseline setting, and the approach to monitoring progress and outcomes. The findings from this lessons-learned review should be used to strengthen the design and oversight of future independent or periodic organisational reviews.



Recommendation 3

The Landscape Review's Recommendations 1–3 required the EA to be re-purposed and 're-financed'. However, no detailed plan or timeline has yet been established. **A comprehensive implementation roadmap should be developed and agreed, which aligns with ongoing related work on EA's financial sustainability.**



Recommendation 4

There remains an ongoing need to resolve legacy terms and conditions issues and to establish a clear, strategic vision for Human Resources, Organisational Development and frontline services. **We recommend that the EA's workforce and organisational capability is strengthened through the development of a sector wide long-term Strategic Workforce Plan.**



Recommendation 5

The Department and EA has been slow to address accountability and governance issues, citing resource constraints. **We recommend that DE:**

- **reviews its current sponsorship arrangements and strengthens sponsor team capacity, where necessary, within the next 12 months;**
 - **fully implements the arrangements set out in the new Partnership Agreement and, in conjunction with EA, reviews its effectiveness after 12 months;**
 - **ensures that future Governance and Accountability Review (GAR) processes include a focus on outcomes, risk management, and early escalation of issues; and**
 - **agrees with EA to undertake a fully transparent, externally facilitated EA Board Effectiveness Review, within the next 12 months (by June 2027), supported by a clear programme of follow-up actions, an implementation plan, and structured reporting to the Department.**
-

Part One:

Background and Introduction

Background and Introduction

Introduction

- 1.1 The 'Landscape Review of the Education Authority' (the Review) was published in June 2022. The Review made 13 recommendations (**Appendix 1**) signalling the need for significant transformation. The Minister noted that the Department and EA were committed to progressing the issues identified.
- 1.2 The Ministerial Statement to the Assembly, 22 June 2022, acknowledged that implementing the actions would take time but emphasised that addressing the issues was a priority for both the Department and the EA in order to improve outcomes for children and young people.
- 1.3 The aim of this report is to set out:
- the action taken to address the Review's findings and associated governance arrangements;
 - progress to date against the recommendations; and
 - whether intended improvements have been clearly defined, measured and delivered.

Education Authority background

- 1.4 EA is a non-departmental public body (NDPB) sponsored by the Department of Education. It was established under the Education Act Northern Ireland 2014, following the merger of the former Education & Library Boards, and became operational on 1 April 2015. It is responsible for the delivery of primary and secondary education services and for youth services to meet the needs of children and young people.
- 1.5 EA spends most of Northern Ireland's annual education budget with operating expenditure of over £3 billion. As well as funding over 1,100 schools it employs around 44,000 people. Approximately 85 per cent of EA annual expenditure is incurred on payroll costs, including pay for teachers and school support staff.
- 1.6 The EA's Senior Management structure comprises the Chief Executive's Office and five directorates:
- Education
 - SEND and Youth
 - Operations and Estates
 - People
 - Finance and Corporate Services

Landscape Review of the Education Authority

- 1.7** The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) in their Report on Impact Review on Special Educational Needs (25 February 2021) recommended in full that DE should commission an independent review of the EA to assess its effectiveness. The Minister agreed to this in March 2021. This was the first such review of the EA since its establishment in 2015. The review examined EA's effectiveness, governance and delivery against Executive and departmental priorities.
- 1.8** This review adhered to guidance set out in the Public Bodies: A Guide for NI Departments (2008), which requires regular review of NDPBs to assess whether they remain the most effective model to deliver services and how their performance can be improved.
- 1.9** Baker Tilly Mooney Moore were awarded the contract in October 2021. The Review commenced in November 2021 and was published on 22 June 2022.
- 1.10** The Report made 13 recommendations, some with several parts, focused on three themes:
- (i) the future form, function and financing of the EA;
 - (ii) EA capacity and capability – improvements required to support organisational effectiveness; and
 - (iii) governance, accountability and relationships which will support future EA effectiveness.
- The recommendations in full are included at **Appendix 1**.

Initial response by DE and EA to the Landscape Review

- 1.11** Following publication, DE and EA told us that a 'project' approach was adopted initially to develop and oversee the delivery of the 13 recommendations. In some cases, the Department told us there were limitations to which the recommendation could be taken forward as prescribed within the Report and therefore an alternative course of action was proposed that would seek to satisfy the intent of the recommendation. They considered this approach would best support organisation, implementation and reporting of the delivery of the recommendations.
- 1.12** DE and EA leadership teams developed and agreed a joint Action Plan in February 2023 to address the Review's recommendations. Whilst this outlined the actions that DE and EA agreed to take to address the recommendations, it did not clearly identify or define the intended benefits, baseline measures, or arrangements for assessing progress.
- 1.13** The Action Plan was to be delivered through seven project workstreams and included 29 actions to give effect to the recommendations of the Review. Projects were not organised based on individual recommendations but grouped broadly thematically as set out below:
- Clarity on Role and Function of EA;
 - Service Delivery Model for all EA functions and services (including alternative models);
 - EA Performance, Data and Governance;
 - End-to-End Reviews (including Special Educational Needs, School Improvement Services and Human Resources support services);
 - EA People;
 - EA Culture, Communication and Engagement; and
 - DE and EA Partnership Agreement.

- 1.14** A senior responsible owner (SRO) was identified for each 'project workstream' which were to be delivered within existing resources. **Appendix 2** sets out each of the projects and the linkages between these and each of the initial Review recommendations and actions.
- 1.15** The 'project' approach made it harder to monitor and assess progress against each of the 13 recommendations. The high-level nature of many recommendations meant they were cross cutting and often interdependent in nature. As a result, there were complex linkages with projects and agreed actions often cutting across multiple recommendations. In terms of causality and linking actions to impacts and outcomes it was difficult to isolate and see these clearly. The absence of baselines at the outset also made it difficult to assess the impact of actions and improvement in outcomes.
- 1.16** EA informed the Department that budget savings required and a recruitment freeze would delay certain actions, with no clear timeline for completion. Consequently, actions set out in the agreed joint Action Plan were divided into:
- 'Phase 1' – to be undertaken during 2023-24 prioritised and focused on what were considered the most critically important actions including:
 - defining the role and function of the EA;
 - an EA People Strategy and Plan;
 - Organisational development and communications; and
 - end-to-end reviews of major services provided by the EA.
 - 'Phase 2' – for those less-critical actions that could be delivered once budget and resources became available.
- 1.17** The Action Plan, jointly agreed by the then EA Chief Executive and DE Permanent Secretary, was published on the Department's website in February 2023. However, at that time, there was no Minister of Education to formally approve it. Target completion dates were established for actions prioritised for implementation in 2023–24 as part of Phase 1, with the remaining actions to be taken forward in Phase 2. The Action plan was subsequently updated in June 2024 to include proposed dates to progress those actions delayed to Phase 2.



Recommendation 1

There was a lack of clarity and transparency in how the Department responded to the recommendations arising from the Review. **Where an independent review is commissioned at public expense, the Department's formal response should clearly set out which recommendations are accepted, which are rejected, and how any modified or unaccepted recommendations will be addressed. This should include any alternative actions proposed and how the Department will assess whether the intended outcomes and benefits have been achieved.**

Governance arrangements to progress joint Action Plan

- 1.18** Under the initial 'project approach' taken there was regular reporting between DE and EA against projects and actions, but recommendations were not reported on. A joint 'Oversight Group' with senior representatives from DE and EA and chaired by the then Permanent Secretary was established in April 2023 and met quarterly until June 2024. At these meetings, the appropriate SRO for each 'project' provided a progress update against projects and associated actions. These arrangements were stood down in June 2024.
- 1.19** The Project Initiation Document stated that the Action Plan would be published and regularly reported internally to the Department and EA, as well as periodically, as necessary, reported externally to ensure transparency on progress. Whilst there was no firm commitment, transparency on progression of recommendations to satisfy the needs of key stakeholders such as the NI Assembly was considered a desired outcome.
- 1.20** In practice, reporting focused on projects and actions rather than recommendations, and no external progress updates were issued to key external stakeholders on the progress against implementing the Review's recommendations. We were told that there was no Education Committee to report to when the Action Plan was being taken forward and, when a new Minister of Education was appointed, the focus shifted towards the progression of the new Minister's priorities under the TransformED NI strategy.
- 1.21** It was intended to provide continued updates to the EA Audit Committee, but this did not happen. One update was provided to the Performance and Engagement Committee in May 2024, with a summary provided at the subsequent Board meeting. However, specific workstreams such as the End-to-End Reviews, the EA People Plan, and the Communications Strategy, continue to be considered at Board and Committee level as part of ongoing decision-making.



Recommendation 2

The Landscape Review represented a significant investment of time and resources. To maximise its value, stronger arrangements should have been put in place to support effective governance and implementation from the outset.

We recommend that DE and EA undertake a lessons learned-review of the project management of the Landscape Review, focusing on governance arrangements, baseline setting, and the approach to monitoring progress and outcomes. The findings from this lessons-learned review should be used to strengthen the design and oversight of future independent or periodic organisational reviews.

Review of progress – 2025

- 1.22** Following the appointment of a new Chief Executive in April 2024, the EA conducted a review and a 'Position Paper' was formally submitted to the Department in February 2025. This was used by the DE Permanent Secretary and EA Chief Executive to inform a decision on the future direction of the Action Plan.
- 1.23** The position paper was considered by the Department's Top Management Group who expressed concerns about the evidence of impact achieved as a result of action taken by the EA to date. Notwithstanding those concerns, the Department formally stood down the Oversight Group (which had not met since June 2024) and the Action Plan was formally closed down. Outstanding actions were to be completed as business-as-usual activity.

- 1.24** In May 2025, the Minister was provided with the position paper and advised that DE would continue to seek assurances and monitor progress against the remaining actions through Governance and Accountability Review (GAR) meetings.
- 1.25** Following the November 2025 GAR meeting, EA advised DE that the actions they were responsible for were either complete or substantially complete. In January 2026, the Permanent Secretary informed the EA Chief Executive that DE determined that ten actions should remain open. DE agreed that three of these could be subsequently closed down following agreement of the Partnership Agreement and a Board Members Code of Conduct. Subject to further updates, data and information related actions are expected to close within 2026. This leaves two actions being carried over into 2027: one relating to Recommendation 2 and one concerning the external Board Effectiveness review under Recommendation 13. See **Figure 2**. This excludes a couple of actions which are not yet completed in relation to Recommendation 3 (need for a strategic workforce plan and finally addressing legacy terms and conditions) as well as Recommendation 12 which is specific to DE.

Figure 2: Summary of EA related recommendations and actions that DE consider still open

Recommendation		Actions	
2	EA function, size and shape including correct budget Opportunity to identify the correct budget for EA that properly allows it to carry out the services and activities identified and redress once and for all the systemic and ongoing annual budgetary pressures and the subsequent issues manifested as a result	2.1 and 2.2	EA has reviewed each service area and considered need (met and unmet) and current resources (people and budget). Heads of Service and Assistant Directors will take forward improvement initiatives where required, the reporting of these will be managed through already established business planning and performance information reporting.
7	Data and Information Management	3.2 and 3.4	EA advises that it is in the process of updating its Data Strategy and is creating a new Artificial Intelligence (AI) strategy. There have also been a number of changes following restructuring and there are still critical gaps in capability. Therefore, the EA anticipates that the business case for the proposed Insights Centre of Excellence will be progressed again in due course.
7	Data and Information Management	3.3	Action remains open until all work on Information Asset Registers is completed – expected to be completed by the end of June 2026.
13	Governance arrangements within EA and the structure and composition of the EA Board to be reviewed	3.5 and 3.6	A Board Effectiveness Review has been deferred until 2027-28.

Funding and resourcing

- 1.26** A key outcome of the recommendations was to define EA's functions and services, identify an effective delivery model, and establish a sustainable budget aligned to strategic objectives. The Review highlighted the opportunity to establish a right sized structure and workforce model supported by a sustainable budget.
- 1.27** The Review expressed concerns about EA's funding and resourcing levels, concluding that the EA is likely underfunded relative to its responsibilities and that it has not yet fully established the baseline costs or resourcing requirements needed to deliver its services effectively.
- 1.28** The Review also reported how EA's budget position remains heavily reliant on in-year allocations to manage financial risk, with significant block grant allocations required through monitoring rounds and internal department exercises. It felt that the financial strategy is "unsustainable". This position remains unchanged as the EA and schools continue to rely on in-year allocations to remain within budget.
- 1.29** The Department told us that the quantum of funding gap is growing rapidly. 2025-26 in-year allocations were over £300 million and the opening 2026-27 funding gap is approximately £600 million. Some £215 million of the 2025-26 in-year allocation for education was met by a Reserve Claim by the Executive from HM Treasury.
- 1.30** The Department also told us that establishing the correct budget and effectively re-financing the EA will be considered as part of DE's Structural Reform Programme Board. This was established as part of the Five Year Education Budget Strategy, which has identified proposals to address medium- to long-term financial sustainability, including the alignment of available resources with statutory duties and priorities. The programme strands are intended to inform and underpin the development of a deliverable approach to the fundamental "re-purpose and re-finance" transformation envisaged by the Landscape Review.

Report Structure

- 1.31** The 13 recommendations were grouped into three broad themes, which form the structure of this report:
- **Part Two:** Future form, function and financing of EA
 - **Part Three:** EA capacity and capability; and
 - **Part Four:** Demonstrating stronger accountability.
- 1.32** Our methodology included review and analysis of both published and unpublished information provided by the Department of Education and the EA, as well as meetings and discussions with senior officials.

Part Two:

Future form, function and financing of EA

Future form, function and financing of EA

This theme focuses on three recommendations that required DE and EA to revisit EA's future form, function and financing

- 2.1** The Review found that many stakeholders across the education sector did not fully understand the Education Authority's role, purpose or remit, and that EA had not established baseline costs, creating uncertainty about the sustainability of its operating model. It concluded that this created an opportunity to reassess and "right size" the organisation to align with statutory functions.
- 2.2** Recommendations 1, 2 and 3² relating to the future form, function and financing required a fundamental re-set of the EA including:
- clarifying the purpose, roles and responsibilities, service and functions provided;
 - determining the correct size, structure and focus of the organisation going forward; and
 - identifying an appropriate and sustainable budget for the EA.

Progress in implementing the recommendations is underway but is dependent on EA's wider improvement programme, which does not have a definitive timeline for completion








- 2.3** Although significant work has been undertaken in the four years since the Review published, the recommendations to determine EA's size, shape and strategic focus have not been fully implemented. Of the three actions agreed, only part of Recommendation 1 – a desktop review clarifying EA's purpose – has been completed in September 2023.
- 2.4** Building on the recommendations set out in the Review, alongside those from the Independent Review of Education, EA is currently engaged in a wide-ranging, multi-year 'Improvement Programme' focused on transforming educational outcomes, special educational needs (SEN) provision, and organisational performance. A central component of this work has been a review of all services and the development of further Improvement initiatives.
- 2.5** Completion of the current wider EA Improvement Programme is required to deliver the intended recommendations. Reporting on the delivery of agreed improvements at service level will form part of established business planning and corporate performance reporting processes. EA told us it will prepare a consolidated report based on data collected from the reviews and service improvement plans. However, due to the extensive scope and complexity of these reviews, the process is expected to take significant time, and definitive milestones or timelines for complete implementation are not yet established.
- 2.6** Whilst this work should help determine the appropriate form and function of EA, at this point in time there is not yet a clear roadmap how DE and EA plan to address the core objective of Recommendation 2 - establishing the correct budget and effectively 're-financing' the EA. The Department told us that this will be considered as part of DE's Structural Reform Programme Board – see **para 1.30**.
- 2.7** Budget pressures and the ongoing funding gap highlighted in the Review continue to present significant challenges to achieving full implementation and delivering the intended outcomes.

² Recommendation 3 had six parts and four of them (3 (i, ii, iii) and 3(vi)) have been included under Recommendation 2 as the action to address them is the same as the actions to deliver Recommendation 1 and Recommendation 2 in full.

2.8 Figure 3 below summarises our assessment of progress against the future form, function and financing recommendations and associated actions, with further detail provided in Appendix 3.

Figure 3: None of the three recommendations under the theme of Future Form and Function have been Achieved. One of the four actions has been completed.



RECOMMENDATION AND STATUS	NUMBER AND STATUS OF ACTIONS TAKEN
1. Provide clarity of purpose for wider sector 	1 
2. EA size and shape including correct budget 	2  
3. Strategic workforce plan and legacy issues 	1 

Note: Recommendation 2 includes four parts of Recommendation 3 (i, ii, iii, and vi) as DE and EA decided to take a different approach rather than have a full-scale external review. It also includes the second part of Recommendation 1 as DE and EA decided that the form and function element should be taken forward as part of Recommendation 2 work.

Recommendation 3 which had seven elements was split across separate themes and recommendations based on associated actions and projects as outlined in action plan. For the purposes of this report Recommendation 3 action and status therefore includes just part iv of the recommendation – need for a Strategic Workplace plan and standardised and harmonised conditions of employment for all EA employees.

Parts v and vii of Recommendation 3 are covered by actions under Recommendation 4 and Recommendation 7.

Recommendation 1 has been Partially Achieved

2.9 The Review reported that wider sector support is critical to EA’s success. However, it also highlighted significant confusion across the education sector regarding the EA’s role and remit.

2.10 Recommendation 1 aimed to ensure clarity on EA’s purpose and functions and set expectations for how these should be delivered. It comprised of two parts:

1. Provide clarity of purpose on what precisely is needed to be delivered; and
2. Reflect upon form and function to determine the size, shape and focus of the organisation going forward.

2.11 DE, with EA input, conducted a desktop review mapping statutory functions and policy requirements against EA responsibilities and services provided to identify gaps in their shared understanding.

- 2.12** As part of **Recommendation 1** in the Review, the EA was expected to identify its core functions and services and outline the service delivery model for each, including intended outcomes, policy objectives, unmet need, and current resources. While the statutory duties were clearly defined and aligned to policy requirements, DE noted that it was more challenging to determine the appropriate form and function of services without the EA undertaking a baseline exercise to determine the existing level of service and associated costs. In many cases, legislation specifies what must be delivered but not how it should be delivered or to what standard, limiting the extent to which this element of the recommendation could be addressed through a desktop review.
- 2.13** DE and EA agreed that the second part of Recommendation 1 – examining form and function of services to determine the size, shape and focus of the organisation – could not be addressed through a desktop review. They concluded that this work should instead be progressed through the project and actions to address Recommendation 2. In September 2023, the project reported to the Oversight Group that both DE and EA had a clear and shared understanding of EA’s statutory duties.
- 2.14** Although confusion across the wider education sector about EA’s role and remit was a key finding underpinning Recommendation 1 in the Review, the agreed Action Plan did not include work to address this. As a result, reporting remained internal between DE and EA and did not extend to the broader education sector, where understanding and clarity were noted as limited in the Review. EA has recently appointed a new Head of Communications who will lead work to strengthen communication and messaging with stakeholders.

Recommendations 2 and 3 called for an external review to determine EA’s future structural model and for EA and DE to establish the correct budget for EA. Neither has been achieved, and the related actions are ongoing

- 2.15** **Recommendation 2** required identifying the correct budget for EA to address ongoing budgetary pressures. This has **not been achieved**.
- 2.16** **Recommendation 3** (parts i, ii, iii, and iv) required a comprehensive external review of EA’s structural model. Actions to address Recommendations 2 and 3 were aligned as they required the same work.
- 2.17** The joint DE/EA Action Plan (**para 1.12**) agreed two actions to address these recommendations – together with the outstanding second part of **Recommendation 1**:
- EA to define form, function and service delivery models; and
 - an external facilitator was to lead an initial DE/EA workshop on alternative delivery models, at a high-level (to then be followed up with prioritised end-to-end service reviews against Recommendation 6), and the required structure of the EA.
- 2.18** Both actions remain in progress, and it is not clear how DE and EA will address the fundamental aim of Recommendation 2 which is to identify the correct budget and ‘re-finance’ EA.

The external review of EA and the externally led DE / EA workshop did not progress as originally intended

- 2.19** DE and EA considered a full external review of the EA's future structural model to be unfeasible due to budgetary constraints. Instead, the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Permanent Secretary, agreed to pursue an alternative approach. The Chief Executive initiated a strategic planning review including a review of senior structures supported by workforce and organisational analytics across directorates. This work provided an assessment of current structures and allowed EA to consider opportunities for greater collaboration, efficiency, and effectiveness.
- 2.20** A new senior management structure was approved by the EA Board on 12 December 2024. Chief Officers were appointed, with the full team in place from September 2025. Chief Officers are reviewing directorate structures and portfolio to identify opportunities to improve collaboration, efficiency and effectiveness alongside the Service Improvement Plans (**para 2.24**). EA continues to work with the Department on a range of areas for improvement including the stabilisation of its senior leadership structure.
- 2.21** In March 2024, EA issued its first School Leader Survey, establishing a baseline for measuring future outcomes and improvement. Responses highlighted several priority areas including communication, access to information, training, and service responsiveness. EA Directorates have since developed action plans to address these issues.

Significant work has been undertaken by the Chief Executive's Office to address Recommendations 1, 2 and 3

- 2.22** The Review's recommendations 1, 2 and 3 required that every service line should be reviewed to determine the most appropriate and sustainable financial delivery model and that these should be done internally and form a key part of ongoing transformation efforts. The review of all services started in November 2024 but is still ongoing and now falls under the EA's wider Improvement Programme.
- 2.23** In November 2024, the EA initiated a comprehensive review of all services to give the senior leadership team greater clarity on the organisation's specific roles, functions and responsibilities. Building on this, a detailed assessment of each service began in March 2025. The findings from this work will inform the development of improvement initiatives which will be reported against through business planning process.
- 2.24** Wider strategic reviews across services were undertaken in 2025-26 for implementation in 2026-27. This included evaluating the current models, delivery requirements, budget constraints and funding arrangements. Service Improvement Plans were developed alongside the strategic reviews of each service and were completed in May 2026. These considered form and function of service along with capacity and the identification of levers needed to improve effectiveness and efficiency.
- 2.25** EA told us that delivery dates have been agreed by each Directorate Management Team, reflecting the scale and scope of the planned improvements. Improvement actions will be managed through EA's established business planning process and performance captured through corporate performance process. Progress will be reported through the appropriate business planning reporting arrangements in 2026-27. The Department has received a high-level update on how this work is being taken forward.

- 2.26 EA told us that the Chief Executive provides regular updates to the Permanent Secretary on improvement initiatives that EA is taking forward.



Recommendation 3

The Landscape Review's Recommendations 1–3 required the EA to be re-purposed and 're-financed'. However, no detailed plan or timeline has yet been established. **A comprehensive implementation roadmap should be developed and agreed, which aligns with ongoing related work on EA's financial sustainability.**

Recommendation 3 of the Review highlighted capacity issues in terms of Human Resources and gaps in strategy and workforce planning were undermining EA's delivery

- 2.27 The Review found that:

- EA's structure, delivery model and staffing no longer aligned with organisational needs, with limited strategic workforce planning and unclear resource allocation.
- EA lacked a comprehensive Human Resources (HR) strategy and associated approach to workforce planning, which adversely affected organisational and school performance. The HR function also was under-resourced and lacked the necessary capability and skills, with insufficient recognition of the importance of resourcing and people-related matters.

A strategic workforce plan is not yet in place and is unlikely to be developed in the short term

- 2.28 **Recommendation 3(iv)** required a strategic workforce plan with an associated resourcing model for service delivery. This recommendation has **not been achieved** and there is no timescale or plan to complete it.

- 2.29 In December 2024, EA and DE hosted a Workforce Planning Conference with school and corporate leaders. This resulted in eight recommendations and the establishment of a cross-sector working group, which subsequently developed an initial workforce planning action plan for 2025–26. Also proposed was establishing a sector-wide workforce planning resource and a medium- to long-term strategy. However, no additional funding has been made available to support the development of a strategic workforce plan. In the absence of any centralised or committed funding, there are no medium- or longer-term plans to deliver a Workforce Planning Strategy at this time.

- 2.30 The EA is however taking forward work in several areas including: succession planning, talent development and other actions to respond to organisational needs.

Outstanding legacy 'terms and condition' issues remain unresolved

- 2.31 One major issue identified in the Review was the limited progress on harmonising legacy terms and conditions and resolution of legacy issues. Actions in relation to **Recommendation 3** required a quick resolution of these issues, with an associated business case to be developed. This has **not been fully achieved**.

2.32 EA told us that the Pay and Grading review resolved the pay/grading issues, but not the wider terms and conditions issues. Given the significance of the changes proposed, it was agreed that this would be taken forward via a phased approach. It is anticipated that legacy terms and conditions will be addressed in advance of the procurement and implementation of the EA One replacement (HR/Payroll) system which is planned to be in place by March 2032.

Part Three:

EA Capacity and Capability

EA Capacity and Capability

This theme contains a series of recommendations on improvements required to support organisational effectiveness

- 3.1 The Review highlighted concerns about EA’s effectiveness in engaging with stakeholders. Communication and relationship management were also deemed unsatisfactory, requiring significant improvement to build trust and confidence with key parts of the wider education system.
- 3.2 Under the DE/EA Action Plan (para 1.13), five recommendations and 17 actions were grouped under the theme of Capacity and Capability. Three elements of Recommendation 3 were also included, as it was agreed by DE and EA that they required the same actions. This again makes it hard to isolate progress and outcomes and benefits achieved for each recommendation.

Work to deliver the recommendations and outcomes is ongoing, but none have been fully achieved to date

- 3.3 Progress has been made on all recommendations under the Capacity and Capability theme, but each of the **five recommendations** are considered to be **Partially Achieved** to date as there is not yet clear evidence to demonstrate that their intended effects or desired outcomes have been delivered. Full implementation of some of the actions have been delayed due to ongoing resource constraints. A summary of progress is provided in **Figure 4**, with detailed information in **Appendix 3**.

Figure 4: None of the five recommendations under the theme of Capacity and Capability have been Achieved. Almost half of the actions have been completed

0 Acheived 5 Partially Achieved 0 Not Achieved



RECOMMENDATION AND STATUS	NUMBER AND STATUS OF ACTIONS TAKEN
4. Become more child and pupil centric	● 2 5.2 5.3
5. Effective approach to communication	● 6 6.1 6.2 6.3 6.4 6.5 6.6
6. Reviews - HR Services, School Improvement, and SEN	● 3 4.1 4.3 4.2
7. Data and information management	● 4 3.1 3.2 3.3 3.4
8. Organisational Development and leadership	● 2 5.4 5.5

Note: Recommendation 4 and the actions to address it also cover Recommendation 3(v)
 Recommendation 7 and the actions to address it also cover Recommendation 3(vii)

EA developed a five-year strategic People Plan to strengthen its child and pupil centric approach

- 3.4** EA aimed to address **Recommendation 4** – calling for a more child- and pupil-centric approach – through a five-year strategic People Plan. This also aimed to address **Recommendation 3 (v)** which highlighted that EA’s approach to HR matters required attention and that a HR strategy was urgently needed.
- 3.5** The two actions decided in the joint DE/EA action plan to address the Recommendation have been completed but the recommendation is marked as **Partially Achieved** as there is not yet clear evidence to demonstrate that their intended effects or desired outcomes have been delivered. Whilst early results indicate some improvements in metrics such as absence, turnover, and complaints, full cultural change is expected to take 3–5 years. It is therefore not possible for us to currently assess how adequate the actions taken to address Recommendation 4 have been in EA becoming more child and pupil centric in its approach. The EA challenged the basis on which this conclusion was drawn but acknowledged that no measures of “child centricity” had been developed and that it remains unclear how such a concept could be measured or quantified.
- 3.6** As an up-to-date HR strategy was not in place, EA engaged external facilitators and consulted with the Department and key stakeholders to create an Interim People Plan to cover 2023–2024. This was introduced in May 2023 and served as a bridge to the full five-year strategic plan, the ‘We are EA’ People Plan 2024–2029, launched in June 2024.
- 3.7** This established a structured approach to supporting and engaging staff, replacing informal and ad-hoc practices. The plan outlines practical, annual actions practices with the aim of ultimately enhancing staff experience and improving outcomes for children and young people. EA will measure progress through annual pulse surveys, HR metrics and annual reporting.

EA has taken action to improve communication and stakeholder engagement including by developing a Communications Strategy

- 3.8** The Review identified significant weaknesses in stakeholder communication and engagement across all groups, including children, parents, schools, staff, youth services, the Department, and sectoral partners. Key improvement priorities include: adopting a child centred approach; strengthening relationships with schools; involving stakeholders in service improvement; increasing awareness of EA’s role and impact; enhancing internal communication and staff engagement; demonstrating visible leadership; and improving media and political engagement.
- 3.9** **Recommendation 5 is Partially Achieved.** EA has completed several actions, including development of a Communications Strategy. However, full achievement of the recommendation will depend upon whether the outcomes and impact of the Communications Strategy and associated actions can be clearly demonstrated.
- 3.10** Three priority actions were successfully delivered under Phase 1 of the joint DE/EA Action Plan:
- Call Management Project;
 - Customer Service Charter; and
 - EA NI School Leadership Forum.

- 3.11** The remaining actions were incorporated into a three-year EA Communications Strategy (2026-2029), and approved by the EA Board's Strategic Planning and Policy Committee in December 2025. The Strategy sets out seven key pillars for improving EA's communications and engagement with all of its stakeholders over the next three years. Actions under each pillar will be reviewed annually to ensure they remain relevant and effective. A new Assistant Director of Communications has been appointed to lead this strategy and strengthen organisational communication and engagement.
- 3.12** A School Leader User Satisfaction Survey, issued in February 2025, established a baseline for assessing EA's communication and responsiveness. This was completed again in March 2026. Annual surveys will track progress and inform ongoing service enhancements. It is too early to assess the impact of these actions.

The Review recommended that all front-line services are reviewed with three services to be prioritised

- 3.13** In order to ensure a fit for purpose and child centric approach to service delivery **Recommendation 6 and Recommendation 3 (vi)** called for independent reviews of all frontline services, services, and supporting processes to ensure that they are appropriately resourced and skilled. Priority however was to be given to three services:
- HR services;
 - School Improvement services; and
 - Education Welfare Services.
- 3.14** Furthermore, the Review believed that initial reviews should be conducted independent of EA. Whilst recognising that this has a cost impact, they felt that an external review would not take resource away from existing services which may be under pressure and would also provide the capacity for independence and degrees of objectivity.
- 3.15** The joint DE/EA Action Plan agreed that externally validated reviews (considering policy, services, user experience) would be undertaken of all frontline services with an initial focus on the following: HR; School Improvement services; and SEN. While action has been undertaken under each of the three areas in the action plan, **Recommendations 6 and 3(vi)** are considered **Partially Achieved**.
- 3.16** External independent reviews were deemed unaffordable. Instead, the Department and EA undertook to conduct joint end-to-end reviews of School Improvement Services and SEN services. The review of Education Welfare Services was not included as a comprehensive review had already been completed in November 2022. Instead, EA and DE agreed that a comprehensive 'end-to-end' review of SEN, covering policy through to service delivery – was essential due to ongoing challenges and ongoing transformation work.

Two external reviews of HR services have been completed

- 3.17** An external review of HR services provided for schools and teachers was a priority given the services' frontline role and strategic importance. Two external reviews were completed in March 2023: a HR Function review and a Recruitment review. Both identified significant staffing shortfalls compared to industry standards and recommended improvements in accessibility, advice and processes - noting that full implementation would require additional resources.

- 3.18** A People-Focused HR Programme, overseen by a dedicated board, was launched to implement the 58 recommendations arising from the two HR reviews. The programme closed in June 2025, with ongoing improvements transitioned to 'business-as-usual'.

A School Improvement End-to-End review shifted the focus following the launch of the TransformED NI strategy

- 3.19** In 2023, the Department launched an End-to End review of School Improvement, the purpose of which was to refresh the Department's 2009 School Improvement policy 'Every School a Good School'. The review sought to analyse delivery of the policy and develop a revised framework and improved delivery model.
- 3.20** DE told us that review progress has been slower than anticipated due to resourcing constraints and competing priorities. Following the launch of the TransformED NI Strategy (March 2025), the review pivoted to focus on the development of the draft policy, delivery plan and operational support model. There is therefore no final report on the End-to End review available, but a new School Improvement policy will be issued for consultation in autumn 2026. Then, a new system evaluation framework will be developed and new school improvement policy published by March 2027.

SEN End-to-End review

- 3.21** The End-to-End review of SEN aimed to ensure timely, appropriate support for children with SEN and assessed alternative delivery models. It established an evidence base that informed the SEN Reform Agenda and 5-year Delivery Plan, designed to implement the recommended processes and system improvements. These actions were developed following stakeholder engagement, including contributions from parents, practitioners and academics.
- 3.22** In March 2026, a summary report was published which identified service gaps and provided a clear rationale for proposed system-wide reforms.

Delivering the data strategy and other associated recommendations is being delayed by resourcing challenges

- 3.23** Data is a strategic asset, and its effective use is essential for improving outcomes in education. **Recommendations 7 and Recommendation 3(vii)** highlighted the need for a robust data and information management system to support informed decision-making. The Review identified persistent issues with data availability, accessibility, and sharing. It called for a shift from basic data collection to using data as a tool for measuring service quality and improving outcomes for children. Achieving this requires more than technology: it demands strong data governance, including quality, standards, protection, and sharing protocols.
- 3.24** A project with four actions was set up to address these recommendations. The Data Strategy was initially developed in December 2020, with a second version finalised in November 2023. The EA told us a third version is currently being refreshed and is expected by September 2026. The remaining three actions, including full implementation of the strategy, are ongoing but again have been delayed due to resource constraints. **Recommendations 7 & 3(vii)** are therefore considered **Partially Achieved**.

- 3.25** The Data Strategy 2024-2026 sets out a roadmap for implementing an integrated approach to data and information management across the EA and wider education sector. It aims to improve data maturity to support service delivery, targeting a transition from 'developing' to 'established' within three years and achieving an 'advanced' state within five years. The Strategy relies on dedicated resources in data architecture, governance, and the Education Information Solutions (EdIS) data platform. Whilst there has been progress, EA advised this has been impacted by limitations in funding and staffing, as well as challenges relating to the data platform, have impacted progress. The cessation of an EdIS contract has led to a substantial delay, spanning several years, in the development of the data platform.
- 3.26** A business case has however been recently drafted to enable delivery of this Data Strategy 2024-2026 roadmap and is currently undergoing internal approval. EA told us that this includes a number of potential new posts to reflect the planned redesign of future data platform and services procurement, and the development of the new AI Strategy. These will be reviewed in due course. In addition, the new Data and AI Strategies 2026-2030 include an action to review and define the data and AI operating model during 2027-2028.

EA needed to strengthen its organisational learning and leadership capability to deliver the required changes

- 3.27** The Review highlighted major capacity constraints and gaps in HR and Organisational Development and Learning (ODL). Limited investment in organisational development hindered EA's ability to establish a consistent operating model. **Recommendation 8** targeted these weaknesses. Two actions were designed to resolve this issue, both of which have been implemented by the EA. Whilst early indications and feedback have been positive, outcomes cannot yet be clearly demonstrated as impact measures are still in development. This is a challenging area, as leadership capacity and capability, culture and relationship change is difficult to measure quantitatively.
- 3.28** The ODL service was restructured to prioritise OD Consultancy in support of DE's 'Every CHILD' priority. Governance and reporting arrangements were established, and the service was launched in January 2024. Delivery is currently managed by four ODL Partners across schools and corporate EA.
- 3.29** The small team is operating near capacity, which may affect its ability to meet all requests within desired timelines. With no previous baseline for OD consultancy, the current goal is to achieve year-on-year growth, particularly in school engagement. Evaluation measures are in place to assess satisfaction and the impact of consultancy and leadership development initiatives. Progress on leadership programmes is continuing.



Recommendation 4

There remains an ongoing need to resolve legacy terms and conditions issues and to establish a clear, strategic vision for HR, Organisational Development and frontline services. **We recommend that the EA's workforce and organisational capability is strengthened through the development of a sector wide long term Strategic Workforce Plan.**

Part Four:

Demonstrating stronger accountability

Demonstrating stronger accountability

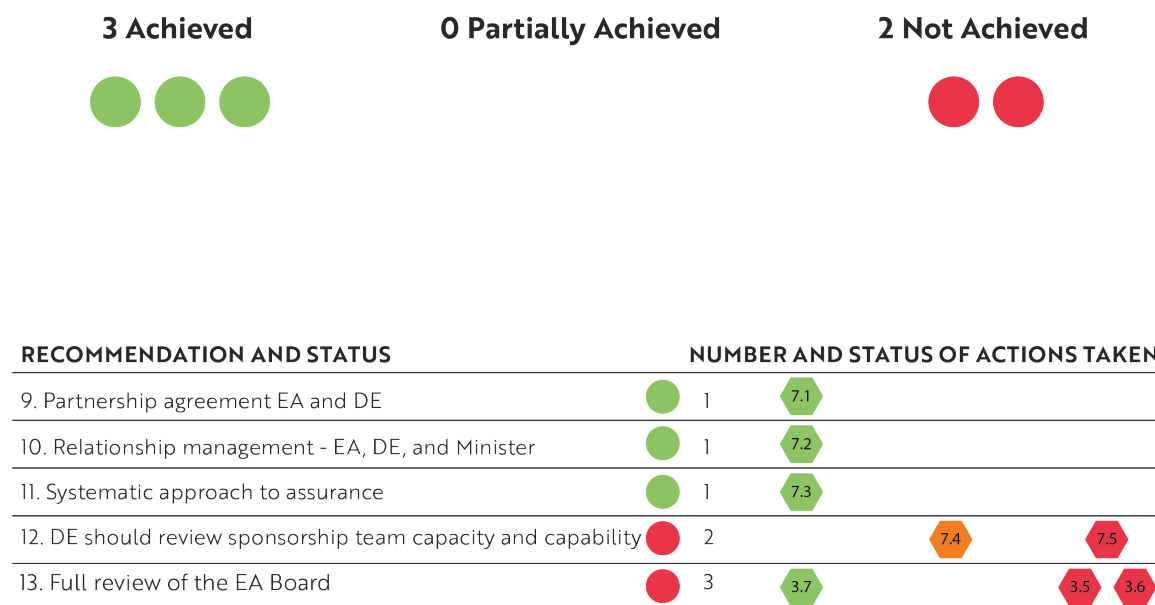
This theme includes five recommendations on governance, accountability and relationships to support EA's future effectiveness

- 4.1** Strong accountability is essential for good governance, ensuring effective public service delivery, responsible financial management, and value for money. The Review noted progress by the EA in establishing oversight and governance frameworks but identified further improvements were needed. It made five recommendations, with eight actions subsequently agreed between DE and EA.
- 4.2** A significant gap highlighted was the lack of a clear accountability line between EA and the Minister. The review also advised DE to reassess its sponsorship arrangements with EA. Additionally, despite the EA Board's composition being set in primary legislation, the review recommended a full evaluation of the Board's structure and suitability – even if this required testing the legislation.

Progress in implementing the recommendations has been much slower than planned, with only three recommendations recently achieved

- 4.3** Progress on the five **Recommendations (9, 10, 11, 12, and 13)** has been significantly slower than anticipated. The original Action Plan targeted completion by the end of 2023. At June 2026, three of the recommendations can be considered to have been fully implemented or achieved.
- 4.4** One of the key actions agreed – development of a Partnership Agreement (PA) between DE and EA – was agreed and signed by DE and EA in March 2026. This largely addressed **Recommendations 9, 10, and 11** which we therefore consider Achieved. However, the effective working relationships expected from a strong partnership agreement will take time to embed before the intended benefits are fully realised. It is therefore important that in line with good practice as set out in NIAO's Partnership Working: Departments and Arm's Length Bodies report (March 2026) that there is an annual review of the PA.
- 4.5** Whilst some action has taken place, **Recommendations 12 and 13** are in our view **Not Achieved** as both remain largely unaddressed at this time:
- **Recommendation 12** called for a review of the Department's sponsorship arrangements including the capacity and capability needed; and
 - **Recommendation 13** required a comprehensive review of the EA Board's structure and suitability.
- 4.6** DE stated both these reviews were deprioritised due to resource constraints. Work to progress them is planned within the next 12 months.

Figure 5: Three of the five recommendations under the theme of Demonstrating Stronger Accountability have been Achieved. Substantive work has not yet started on two actions



Implementation of an agreed Partnership Agreement was delayed by over two years

- 4.7** **Recommendation 9 and Recommendation 10** focused on developing and agreeing a fresh PA between DE and EA. The PA also supports part of **Recommendations 11** – need to ensure that EA has in place a well-developed performance framework that sets out Ministers’ priorities within the overall Programme for Government outcomes, defined as clearly as possible how success will be measured and ideally covers expectations over several years.
- 4.8** Work on developing a new PA to replace the existing EA Management Statement and Financial Memorandum had already started at the time of the review in 2022. The Review highlighted the need for this agreement to establish a clear, shared understanding of roles, responsibilities, objectives, and delivery expectations aligned with Departmental and Executive priorities, while defining how EA will manage its relationship with the Department and the Minister and provide assurance.
- 4.9** The initial action plan targeted completion of the PA by December 2023. DE told us changes in senior management within both organisations, resource constraints, competing priorities, and the need to streamline engagement processes delayed progress. The PA was subsequently approved by the Department’s Top Management Group in May 2025 and issued to EA for endorsement. The PA was finally signed by DE and EA in March 2026, almost four years after work started. It has been operational since the start of the 2026-27 financial year.
- 4.10** The PA outlines the governance framework for EA and defines its partnership arrangements with the Department. It includes an Engagement Plan detailing formal reporting and communication protocols between both organisations.

The approach to assurance needed to be strengthened

- 4.11** The Review also identified a significant gap in accountability between the EA and the Minister. **Recommendation 11** called for a strengthened assurance approach covering:
- controllability – confirming EA’s performance against priorities, objectives, targets and performance measures agreed by Ministers; and
 - adherence to legislative and regulatory requirements.
- 4.12** The Department and EA considered that a structured assurance framework already existed, and actions therefore focused on completing the PA (**Recommendation 9 and 10**) and reviewing Governance and Accountability Reviews (GARs) and other relevant assurance arrangements as part of developing the PA.
- 4.13** **Recommendation 11** was therefore dependent upon agreement and implementation of the now introduced PA and also the strengthening of GAR arrangements. GAR meetings, held three times annually, serve as the primary mechanism for oversight.
- 4.14** Since 2024, following a review of GAR, there have been a number of amendments to the approach to assurance between DE and EA – detailed in **Appendix 3**. The DE now relies primarily on GAR meetings chaired by the Grade 3 which focus on governance, finance and risk matters. These are supported by ongoing engagement between policy, finance and governance teams. These arrangements remain under review and will be evaluated early in the 2026-27 financial year.
- 4.15** To strengthen accountability, the Minister now chairs one GAR meeting annually (first held in November 2025). Additionally, the Minister issued a letter to the EA Chief Executive outlining priorities to be reflected in the EA Business Plan for 2026-27.

The Review found shortcomings in the current sponsorship model which remain largely unaddressed

- 4.16** The EA does not have a dedicated sponsor team. Sponsorship responsibilities are managed by the Education Governance Team (EGT) within Corporate Services & Governance, alongside the Department’s Finance Directorate. The review noted that this model depends heavily on directorate policy leads for scrutiny, leaving EGT primarily in a coordinating role.
- 4.17** **Recommendation 12** required DE to assess its sponsor team’s capacity and capability to effectively manage relationships with EA and to establish an organisation structure that prioritises sponsorship activities and strengthens links with policy development.
- 4.18** The initial action plan set out two actions to be completed by December 2023 to address Recommendation 12:
- review sponsorship arrangements, and
 - assess the suitability of the current sponsorship model and what action is required to ensure the role is effective and adequately resourced.
- 4.19** The Department however advised that a comprehensive review of EA’s sponsorship model was not a priority and again cited limited resources. While acknowledging shortcomings in the current approach, the Department noted uncertainty about what alternative model would better suit EA’s unique size and complexity. Recommendation 12 has therefore not yet been implemented in full.

- 4.20** Corporate Services and the EGT commissioned DE's Internal Audit to review the Department's existing sponsorship control arrangements for EA. Internal Audit issued a 'Limited' assurance opinion in October 2025, noting that while a governance framework exists and EGT fulfils its responsibilities, current arrangements do not provide the level of oversight required. Three recommendations were made which included clearer alignment between EA corporate and business plans and ministerial priorities and performance measures, which Management has confirmed have now been addressed.
- 4.21** The EGT has since asked Internal Audit to review alternative sponsorship models for the EA. The Department intends to include this work in the 2026-27 Internal Audit programme.

A full review of the structure and composition of the Board was recommended but has not yet started

- 4.22** An external Board Effectiveness Review is a key component of good governance and accountability. NIAO's [Board Effectiveness – a Good Practice Guide \(June 2022\)](#) recommends annual self-assessments and period external reviews. [Cabinet Office guidance \(April 2022\)](#) also suggest an externally facilitated review should happen every three years. The last External EA Board Effectiveness Review commissioned by EA was in 2019. There have been changes to the Board personnel since the time of the Review, but the structure and composition has remained.
- 4.23** **Recommendation 13** called for a comprehensive review of the EA Board to assess the suitability of its current model, even if this required testing existing legislation. It required the review to examine the Board's structure, composition, member skillsets, and establish a Code of Practice to strengthen performance and effectiveness.
- 4.24** DE took a different approach to that proposed within the Landscape Review, determining that a full, formal review of the EA Board was not required at the time the Action Plan was agreed, nor did it see an immediate need to augment board expertise. Instead, it agreed with EA that this would be considered as part of any future independent review of Board Effectiveness (which DE subsequently revisited in 2025).
- 4.25** Implementation of **Recommendation 13** has now been deferred until 2027-28. The Department initially considered a Board composition review unnecessary when agreeing the Action Plan in February 2023 but agreed it could be included in a future external effectiveness Board Effectiveness Review.
- 4.26** The Department considered additional Board expertise unnecessary following the 2021 reconstitution of Board and committee structures. It noted that mechanisms exist for the EA to enhance expertise if required. Board effectiveness is monitored through annual appraisals of the Chairperson and members, supported by an annual skills audit.
- 4.27** In June 2025, the DE Permanent Secretary asked the EA Chairperson to consider commissioning an externally led Board Effectiveness Review and provided suggested Terms of Reference. EA were reluctant to incur the cost of such a review, so on the basis of assurances provided by the Chief Executive and in the context of the financial circumstances, DE agreed to defer the review, with the issue to be revisited at the March 2027 GAR meeting.



Recommendation 5

The Department and EA has been slow to address accountability and governance issues, citing resource constraints. **We recommend that DE:**

- **reviews its current sponsorship arrangements and strengthens sponsor team capacity, where necessary, within the next 12 months;**
 - **fully implements the arrangements set out in the new Partnership Agreement and, in conjunction with EA, reviews its effectiveness after 12 months;**
 - **ensures that future Governance and Accountability Review (GAR) processes include a focus on outcomes, risk management, and early escalation of issues; and**
 - **agrees with EA to undertake a fully transparent, externally facilitated EA Board Effectiveness Review within the next 12 months (by June 2027), supported by a clear programme of follow-up actions, an implementation plan, and structured reporting to the Department.**
-

Appendices

Appendix 1: Summary of Key Recommendations within the Landscape Review of the EA

The recommendations addressed recurring themes identified that required attention and were grouped into three broad yet interlinked categories:

- **Complex problems require creative solutions** relates to recommendations around the need to revisit the **future form, function and financing of EA**.
- **EA capacity and capability** contains a series of recommendations which focus on improvements required to support organisational effectiveness.
- **Demonstrating stronger accountability** section holds a series of recommendations around governance, accountability and relationships which will support future EA effectiveness.

Complex problems require creative solutions – Future form, function and financing of EA

Recommendation 1

Taking an **internal review** approach, DE with the EA need to re-visit a number of key aspects of the original design of EA in order to understand:

- Clarity of purpose. In this case, everyone concerned – ministers, the department, the agency itself – all parties should reflect upon precisely what is needed to be delivered. This review highlights that the role of EA is not well understood and the scale and complexity of its functions unwieldy. If the wider sector is not clear about the EA's purpose, while understanding whose support is essential to its success, it will be vulnerable, regardless of its performance.
- Given the scale, size and complexity of the EA model and the fact that additional responsibilities have been added to it – DE and EA need to internally and collaboratively reflect upon that form and function to determine the size, shape and focus of the organisation going forward.

Recommendation 2

By undertaking a fundamental internal review of EA, in re-visiting its purpose, in re-defining the services and provisions it is responsible for, will allow the opportunity for DE and EA to then address two fundamental issues;

- With a re-defined purpose and clarity on scope and service, there is an opportunity to identify the correct budget for EA that properly allows it to carry out the services and activities identified and redress once and for all the systemic and ongoing annual budgetary pressures and the subsequent issues manifested as a result. If the organisation is re-purposed and 're-financed', it allows the organisation then to focus on those priorities and adopt a more measured approach. There is an opportunity to make the budget process more responsive to priorities (accepting the financial constraints in place due to competing Executive priorities).

- If the organisation's budget is re-set and the affordability of what it will cost to deliver on the strategic objectives identified, then there is an opportunity to press the re-set button on the myriad of resourcing issues identified in this review (and in other reports). With a refreshed mandate and a refreshed budget there is an opportunity to right size the organisation once and for all and get the appropriate structure and workforce model in place.

Recommendation 3

With a refreshed remit and scope, with associated identified strategic (and achievable) priorities and a budget agreed to reflect the delivery of those priorities, the organisation can begin to fundamentally address delivery effectiveness issues identified within this review. We strongly recommend that;

- A full-scale **external review** of the EA is carried out to determine the future structural model of the organisation (aligned to re-purposed strategic objectives and priorities and funding envelope).
- The external review of the organisation should examine the opportunity to explore alternative delivery models and the sustainability of more commercial or income generation models. Operational delivery services such as transport and catering are expensive, delivered on single sites, are identified as hard to manage and resource, and are key services which should be reviewed to test alternative delivery (regional) models (as well as how this can be potentially done within existing legislation).
- The external review should take a lead in designing the overall structure and model for the organisation, but every service line that remains within a new structure should be reviewed to determine the most appropriate and sustainable financial delivery model and if there are alternative models (including commercial models), these should be explored, and options appraised. These should be done internally and will form key parts of ongoing transformation efforts.
- The organisation requires a strategic workforce plan with an associated resourcing model for service delivery. This resourcing model urgently requires a pay and grading review.
- EA's approach to HR matters requires attention. HR resourcing issues aside, the organisation urgently needs a human resources strategy, and this should be a priority. Mindful that this review may result in subsequent reviews, which may in turn create changes to the organisational structure of delivery model, there is still an urgent requirement to address HR and people issues identified in this report and the development of a HR strategy, even in an interim format should be delayed as a result of any other potential reviews.
- We recommend that EA identifies and takes the opportunity to review and test processes and systems to ensure they adhere to internal and external requirements and meet effectiveness and efficiency tests.
- Furthermore, this review has identified that whilst EA is making effective progress in addressing and securing a robust approach to information governance, the handling and dissemination of information (inside and outside of the organisation) is not fully developed. We recommend that EA intensifies and accelerates internal work to create a more effective system of data and information management and usage (particularly in how this integrates with EA performance and reporting).

EA capacity and capability

A recurring theme of feedback in this landscape review has been EA's effectiveness in its environment and how it interacts with its stakeholders and partners.

Recommendation 4

EA urgently needs to become more child and pupil centric in its approach. Feedback suggests that the organisation is process heavy and that these processes get in the way of a child centric service. There is an urgent need to re-focus on the needs of the child/pupil and as such, EA needs to become more dynamic in response to events. This response should be tailored to the need of the user and cross directorate teams should be agile when responding to those needs.

Recommendation 5

Requires that underpinning all efforts is a consistent and effective approach to communication. There is an urgent need to ensure that the school system gets reliable information (as opposed to swamping them with disparate information, as is the case at present); there is a need to organise the corporate message to ensure it is consistent and on the 'front foot' as opposed to being re-active and operating from a position of defensiveness.

Recommendation 6

In order to ensure a fit for purpose and child centric approach to service delivery, we recommend that all front line services are reviewed, tested and refreshed to ensure that they are appropriately resourced and skilled, and that the processes and systems they use allow them to interact with stakeholders in real time and allow EA staff to provide an improved quality of service and information. This requires a fundamental review of all frontline activities and the processes/systems to support them.

- Whilst we recognise that EA provides many frontline services, we suggest that priority is given to services such as; School Improvement services, Education Welfare Services and HR services as these are services that for a variety of reasons featured heavily in school/teacher/parent feedback.
- Furthermore we believe that initial reviews should be conducted independent of EA so that baselines can be established and needs identified. We recognise that this has a cost impact, but an external review will not take resource away from existing services which may be under pressure, and also provides the capacity for independence and degrees of objectivity.

Recommendation 7

This review has identified that EA is a serial collector of data and information and has almost created an internal information industry. Unless that information is useful, integrated and real-time – it is not effective. EA needs to ensure that it has in place an effective and integrated approach to data and information management and collection, and to integrate that data/information to inform and support better decision making.

Recommendation 8

We refer in this review to the relationship complexity of the EA operating environment and how it is our view that the current landscape perpetuates a cycle of leaders heavily involved in multiple and often low value meeting culture. We strongly recommend that for EA to successfully make the changes required for the next stage of its journey, will require it to become a learning organisation and there is a need to embed quickly the emerging Organisational Development strategy to define and support leadership capacity and capability in the organisation.

Demonstrating stronger accountability

We have identified improving levels of accountability within EA and in relation to its' accountability axis with other organisations – primarily DE. There is however work to be done in moving towards a more streamlined approach to accountability to support a more integrated flow of assurance from the Minister through the department and into the EA, so that the roles and responsibilities (under accountability arrangements) are clear and assurance is full. Recommendations therefore include:

Recommendation 9

Accountable Officers should ensure that when the new partnership agreement between EA and DE is being drafted sponsor teams work with EA to make roles and responsibilities as clear as possible, discussing the wording in the framework document to ensure a shared understanding.

Recommendation 10

DE should seek views from the EA Board Chairperson and Board members on how DE manages its relationship with the EA and in turn how EA manages its relationship with the DE and the Minister, putting in place any recommendations to improve those relationships, that might arise as a result of those reflections.

Recommendation 11

Assurance. It is our view that relationships need to be underpinned by a systematic approach to assurance. We believe that there are two broad aspects of assurance which DE and EA need to address:

- assurance that EA is performing satisfactorily against the objectives, targets and performance measures agreed by Ministers – the 'controllability' dimension of accountability and the starting point for 'controllability' is establishing what success looks like for EA.
- assurance that the body is meeting the requirements of legislation and guidance – the 'transparency' and 'responsibility' dimensions of accountability.

The recommendation follows that DE and EA should ensure that EA has in place a well-developed performance framework that sets out Ministers' priorities within the overall Programme for Government outcomes, defined as clearly as possible how success will be measured and ideally covers expectations over several years.

Recommendation 12

EA is sponsored by a team (Education Governance Team and DE Finance). It is our understanding that the DE model is reliant upon others (i.e. directorate policy leads) for scrutiny matters and therefore the EGT largely becomes a co-ordinating function as regards to EA's sponsorship. Recommendation 12 suggests that DE should review the capacity and capability needed in its teams to ensure that relationships are being managed well with EA and consider how best to organise that – through policy teams or a sponsorship hub, for instance – to ensure that there is a proper focus on sponsorship activity and a strong link with policy development. In reviewing the capacity and capability, it will be important to have nominated people who can provide support to the Departmental Accounting Officer and EA Accounting Officer.

Recommendation 13

Focuses on the governance arrangements within EA and the structure and composition of the EA Board:

- Recognising the constitution of EA Board is set in primary legislation, we nonetheless recommend a full review of the Board to determine the appropriateness of the current model (even if it tests that legislation).
- In recommending changes to the skillset present on the Board, we recommend that any review of Board composition consider the addition of co-opted or non-voting members (such as experts in particular fields) to augment Board expertise.
- In line with more general movements towards board behaviours and standards of public office, we would recommend that in the next phase of board development, consideration is given to how the existing Code of Conduct can be enhanced/applied and ensure an *modus operandi* for board members and enhance performance and board effectiveness.

Appendix 2: Recommendations shown by project and actions from the joint DE/EA Action Plan

Number	Recommendation Theme and overview	Project*	Actions
	Future form, function and financing of the EA		
1	Conduct an internal review to revisit key aspects of the authority to understand clarity of purpose.	1 2	1.1 2.1
2	Identify the correct budget for the authority and address resourcing issues.	2	2.1 2.2
3i, ii, iii	Conduct an external review in order to determine the future structural model of the authority. Every function and service that remains within a new structure (from Reco 1) should be reviewed to determine the most appropriate and sustainable financial delivery model. Includes all services but also highlighted HR and Workforce Planning	2	2.1 2.2
3vi	EA should identify and take the opportunity to review and test processes and systems to ensure they adhere to internal and external requirements and meet effectiveness and efficiency tests.		
	EA Capacity and Capability – improvements to support organisational effectiveness		
3vii	We recommend that EA intensifies and accelerates internal work to create a more effective system of data and information management and usage (particularly in how this integrates with EA performance and reporting).	3	3.1
3iv	The organisation requires a strategic workforce plan with an associated resourcing (and pay) model for service delivery. This resourcing model should quickly address outstanding legacy issues and move promptly to standardised and harmonised conditions of employment for all EA employees.	5	5.1
3v	EA's approach to HR matters requires attention. HR resourcing issues aside, the organisation urgently needs a human resources strategy, and this should be a priority.		5.2
4	The EA must become more child- and pupil-centric in its approach.	5	5.3

Reco	Recommendation Theme and overview	Project*	Actions
5	Establish a consistent and effective approach to communication.	6	6.1 6.2 6.3 6.4 6.5 6.6
6	Conduct end to end reviews, testing, and refreshment of all front-line services to ensure they are properly resourced.	4	4.1 4.2 4.3
7	The Authority must ensure that it has effective and integrated data collation approaches in place.	3	3.2 3.3 3.4
8	The Authority must embed the emerging organisational development strategy to become a learning organisation.	5	5.4 5.5
	Demonstrating stronger accountability		
9	Roles defined by the new partnership agreement between the Authority and Department should be made as clear as possible.	7	7.1
10	The Department of Education should seek the views of the chairperson and board on how the Department manages its relationship with the authority and how the authority manages its relationships with the Department and Minister.	7	7.2
11	The Authority should have a well-developed performance framework that is defined as clearly as possible.	7	7.3
12	The Department should review capacity and capability to ensure its relationship with the Authority is managed well.	7	7.4 7.5
13	Conduct a full review of the EA board to determine the appropriateness of the current model.	3	3.5 3.6 3.7

* Project workstreams noted below

Project	Project Workstream title
Project 1	Clarity on role and function of EA
Project 2	Service delivery model for all EA functions and services
Project 3	EA performance, data and governance
Project 4	End to end reviews (including Special Educational Needs, School Improvement Services and Human Resources support services)
Project 5	EA people
Project 6	EA Culture, communication and engagement
Project 7	EA partnership agreement




Appendix 3: Progress on implementation and status update on Recommendations


Progress on the implementation of recommendations from the Landscape Review of the Education Authority (the Review) on 22 June 2022.


The 13 recommendations have been included under the three themes used in the Landscape Review. DE and EA provided an update on progress to date, which we have assessed and assigned a RAG status against each Recommendation as outlined below.


At this time, we have assessed progress against the implementation of the **13 recommendations** as:

- **3 Achieved (Green)**
- **6 Partially Achieved (Amber)** and
- **4 Not Achieved (Red).**

RAG	Definition
Achieved 	<p>The recommendation has been fully implemented. Evidence confirms that agreed actions have been completed, are operational and there is clear evidence to demonstrate their intended effects and desired outcomes have been measured and delivered.</p> <p>Arrangements are in place to assess and validate effectiveness including benefits achieved, improvements realised and efficiency gains achieved.</p>
Partially Achieved 	<p>The recommendation has been partially implemented. Actions are underway and once fully completed are likely to help address the recommendations.</p> <p>This includes situations where an action – such as producing a strategy or completing a review – has been delivered but it is too recently implemented for outcomes to be measured or assessed.</p>
Not Achieved 	<p>The recommendation has not been implemented. Key actions to address the recommendation have not yet begun, or actions taken have not delivered the intended effects or outcomes.</p>


Recommendation	Progress to date	NIAO Assessment
Complex problems require creative solutions relates to recommendations around the need to revisit the future form, function and financing of EA.		
<p>1 Taking an internal review approach, DE with the EA need to re-visit a number of key aspects of the original design of EA in order to understand:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarity of purpose. In this case, everyone concerned – ministers, the department, the agency itself – all parties should reflect upon precisely what is needed to be delivered. This review highlights that the role of EA is not well understood and the scale and complexity of its functions unwieldy. • Given the scale, size and complexity of the EA model and the fact that additional responsibilities have been added to it – DE and EA need to internally and collaboratively reflect upon that form and function to determine the size, shape and focus of the organisation going forward. 	<p>To address the first part of the Recommendation to clarify EA’s purpose DE and EA undertook a desktop review, outlining relevant statutory functions and high-level policy requirements, for comparison against EA services. This was completed in September 2023 and found that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both organisations understood EA’s statutory duties. • All EA activities align with statute, policy, or corporate compliance requirements (e.g., finance and HR). • There was no evidence of unnecessary or duplicative work. • While statutory duties are clear, delivery standards and methods are often undefined due to non-specific legislation. <p>To address the second part of the Recommendation EA were to identify core functions and services and reflect upon that form and function to determine the size, shape and focus of the organisation going forward. EA will set out the service delivery model for each area, along with outcomes sought, policy objectives, need (met and unmet) and current resources (people and budget).</p> <p>Determining the form and function of services proved more complex as legislation often lacked specificity on delivery standards. Consequently, DE and EA agreed that this aspect – focused on organisational size, shape, and scope – should be addressed under Recommendation 2 rather than through a desktop review.</p> <p>DE and EA consider these actions closed as the second part has moved to Recommendation 2.</p>	<p> Partially Achieved.</p> <p>Action taken to address the first part of Recommendation 1 to clarify EA’s purpose was completed in September 2023.</p> <p>The second part of Recommendation to reflect upon form and function to determine the size, shape and focus of the organisation going forward has only been partially achieved to date and has since been moved to the Recommendation 2 project.</p>


Recommendation	Progress to date	NIAO Assessment
<p>2 By undertaking a fundamental internal review of EA, in re-visiting its purpose, in re-defining the services and provisions it is responsible for, will allow the opportunity for DE and EA to then address two fundamental issues:</p> <p>With a re-defined purpose and clarity on scope and service, there is an opportunity to identify the correct budget for EA that properly allows it to carry out the services and activities identified and redress once and for all the systemic and ongoing annual budgetary pressures and the subsequent issues manifested as a result. If the organisation is re-purposed and 're-financed', it allows the organisation then to focus on those priorities and adopt a more measured approach.</p> <p>If the organisation's budget is re-set and the affordability of what it will cost to deliver on the strategic objectives identified, then there is an opportunity to press the re-set button on the myriad of resourcing issues identified in this review (and in other reports). With a refreshed mandate and a refreshed budget there is an opportunity to right size the organisation once and for all and get the appropriate structure and workforce model in place.</p>	<p>Actions to be taken included EA setting out the service delivery model for each area, along with outcomes sought, policy objectives, need (met and unmet) and current resources (people and budget). In addition, an external facilitator was to lead an initial DE/EA workshop to build on the work undertaken at Recommendation 1, by considering alternative delivery models, at a high-level (to then be followed up with prioritised end-to-end service reviews against Recommendation 6), and the required structure of the EA.</p> <p>At a later date EA decided an alternative course of action. An external review of EA was not undertaken, and the planned DE/EA workshop did not proceed due to resource constraints.</p> <p>The Chief Executive, in consultation with the Permanent Secretary, initiated a review of EA's strategic planning and workforce analytics at directorate level. This included an analysis of organisational structures to identify opportunities for greater collaboration, efficiency, and effectiveness internally and with stakeholders. In September 2025, a new senior structure was approved and fully implemented. Chief Officers are now reviewing internal structures at Assistant Director level to enhance collaboration and efficiency.</p> <p>In November 2024, EA began a comprehensive review of all services, followed by detailed assessments in March 2025. These informed Service Improvement Plans. Wider strategic reviews were undertaken in 2025-26 for implementation in 2026-27 across services. This included evaluating the current models, delivery requirements, budget constraints and funding arrangements.</p> <p>EA told us that improvement actions will be managed through EA's established business planning and reporting arrangements in 2026-27. The Department has received a high-level update on how this work is being taken forward.</p>	<p> Not Achieved.</p> <p>Whilst there has been ongoing work Recommendation 2 and associated parts of Recommendation 3 have not been fully implemented as intended by the recommendation.</p> <p>The second part of Recommendation 1, Recommendation 2, and parts of Recommendation 3 are being progressed largely as part of EA's ongoing Improvement Programme.</p> <p>However, there is no timescale for completion. In addition there is no agreed 'roadmap' between DE and EA on the process to either:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 're-finance' EA and identify the correct budget for EA that properly allows it to carry out the services and activities identified; or • right size the organisation and get the appropriate structure and workforce model in place. <p>Full implementation is medium rather than short-term and will be challenging given ongoing budget gap.</p>

Recommendation	Progress to date	NIAO Assessment	
3	<p>Recommendation 3 had seven elements which were distinct and addressed separate parts of the organisation's functions and services. They often overlapped with other recommendations - specifically 2, 4, and 6. Individual actions to address them were tied into different projects initially and aligned with other recommendations as shown in Appendix 2.</p> <p>The Review reported that with a refreshed remit and scope, with associated identified strategic (and achievable) priorities and a budget agreed to reflect the delivery of those priorities, that EA could begin to fundamentally address delivery effectiveness issues identified within this review. They strongly recommended that:</p>	 Not Achieved	
3(i)	<p>A full-scale external review of the EA is carried out to determine the future structural model of the organisation (aligned to re-purposed strategic objectives and priorities and funding envelope).</p>	<p>This recommendation became subsumed as such within Recommendation 2 and the actions to address it as set out in the Action Plan.</p>	<p><i>Not Achieved</i></p> <p>A full-scale external review of the EA was not carried out.</p>
3(ii)	<p>The external review of the organisation should examine the opportunity to explore alternative delivery models and the sustainability of more commercial or income generation models. Operational delivery services such as transport and catering are expensive, delivered on single sites, are identified as hard to manage and resource, and are key services which should be reviewed to test alternative delivery (regional) models (as well as how this can be potentially done within existing legislation).</p>	<p>This recommendation became subsumed as such within recommendation 2 and the actions to address it as set out in the Action Plan.</p>	<p><i>Not Achieved</i></p> <p>As noted above a full-scale external review of the EA was not carried out.</p> <p>The consideration of alternative delivery models and the sustainability of more commercial or income generation models are to be considered as part of Recommendation 2 actions including the EA's Improvement Programme.</p>
3(iii)	<p>The external review should take a lead in designing the overall structure and model for the organisation, but every service line that remains within a new structure should be reviewed to determine the most appropriate and sustainable financial delivery model and if there are alternative models (including commercial models), these should be explored, and options appraised. These should be done internally and will form key parts of ongoing transformation efforts.</p>	<p>This recommendation became subsumed as such within Recommendation 2 and the actions to address it as set out in the Action Plan.</p>	<p><i>Not Achieved</i></p> <p>As noted above a full-scale external review of the EA was not carried out.</p> <p>The review of all services started in November 2024 and now falls under the EA's Improvement Programme which is being delivered as part of actions taken to address Recommendation 2.</p>


Recommendation	Progress to date	NIAO Assessment
<p>3(iv) The organisation requires a strategic workforce plan with an associated resourcing model for service delivery. This resourcing model urgently requires a pay and grading review.</p>	<p>Action taken to address the need for a Strategic Workforce Planning.</p> <p>A sector-wide Workforce Planning Conference was held in December 2024 by EA and DE. Feedback highlighted that workforce planning remains reactive, with limited strategic foresight, compounded by inflexibility in managing vacancies, declining applicant numbers, subject-specific shortages, and negative perceptions of the sector.</p> <p>The conference produced eight recommendations and led to the formation of a cross-sector working group, which agreed an initial action plan for 2025–26. This plan acknowledged the absence of a long-term strategic workforce plan and recommended establishing a dedicated sector-wide resource to develop a medium- to long-term strategy.</p> <p>EA confirmed that no additional DE funding is available for this function.</p> <p>Action to be taken to address Legacy Terms and Conditions and standardise and harmonise conditions of employment for all EA employees included negotiating with Trade Unions and to develop and submit a Business Case to DE.</p> <p>EA lacks delegated authority to amend terms and conditions; this rests with DE. A business case was submitted in March 2023 to resolve pay and grading issues and align with the new HR/Payroll system. Funding was not approved, delaying the establishment of dedicated teams.</p> <p>This workstream was incorporated into EA's People-Focused HR Programme, which identified three priority areas: Term-Time Agreements; Leave Types; and Allowances. A Service Improvement Team was created to progress legacy work as business-as-usual.</p>	<p><i>Not Achieved</i></p> <p>There has been some progress in terms of addressing workforce challenges in relation to recruitment and retention, succession planning, developing talent for critical roles, and building a Workforce Dashboard using EA One data for improved analytics.</p> <p>However, there is no plan to develop a medium-long term Strategic Workforce plan for the sector.</p> <p>Standardisation and harmonisation of conditions of employment for all EA employees will require TUS negotiation and potential investment.</p> <p>EA told us it is anticipated that legacy terms and conditions will be addressed in advance of the procurement and implementation of the EA One replacement (HR/Payroll) system which is planned to be in place by March 2032.</p>

Recommendation		Progress to date	NIAO Assessment
3(v)	EA's approach to HR matters requires attention. HR resourcing issues aside, the organisation urgently needs a human resources strategy, and this should be a priority. Mindful that this review may result in subsequent reviews, which may in turn create changes to the organisational structure of delivery model, there is still an urgent requirement to address HR and people issues identified in this report and the development of a HR strategy, even in an interim format should be delayed as a result of any other potential reviews.	This recommendation became subsumed as such within Recommendation 4 and the actions to address it as set out in the Action Plan.	<i>Achieved</i> As noted below actions have been fully implemented and HR strategy was developed.
3(vi)	We recommend that EA identifies and takes the opportunity to review and test processes and systems to ensure they adhere to internal and external requirements and meet effectiveness and efficiency tests.	This recommendation and the actions to address it as set out in the Action Plan is being progressing as part of EA's ongoing Improvement Programme under Recommendation 2 and also the end-to-end reviews that fell under Recommendation 6.	This is being addressed through the actions associated with Recommendation 2 above and Recommendation 6 below.
3(vii)	Furthermore, this review has identified that whilst EA is making effective progress in addressing and securing a robust approach to information governance, the handling and dissemination of information (inside and outside of the organisation) is not fully developed. We recommend that EA intensifies and accelerates internal work to create a more effective system of data and information management and usage (particularly in how this integrates with EA performance and reporting).	This recommendation and the actions to address it as set out in the Action Plan fell under Recommendation 7.	This is being addressed through the actions associated with Recommendation 7 below.


Recommendation	Progress to date	NIAO Assessment
<p>EA capacity and capability contains a series of recommendations which focus on improvements required to support organisational effectiveness. A recurring theme of feedback in this landscape review has been EA's effectiveness in its environment and how it interacts with its stakeholders and partners.</p>		
<p>4 EA urgently needs to become more child and pupil centric in its approach. Feedback suggests that the organisation is process heavy and that these processes get in the way of a child centric service. There is an urgent need to re-focus on the needs of the child/pupil and as such, EA needs to become more dynamic in response to events. This response should be tailored to the need of the user and cross directorate teams should be agile when responding to those needs.</p> <p>Recommendation 3 (v) - EA's approach to HR and people matters requires urgent attention. EA urgently needs a human resources strategy, and this should be a priority.</p>	<p>Actions included:</p> <p>Supported by external facilitation, EA will develop, in consultation and discussion with stakeholders, a five-year strategic People Plan for the organisation. This will include strategic aspects such as: culture and values; recruitment, reward and staff development; and ensure that a focus is maintained on the child/pupil. This plan will also focus on EA's customer service ethos and work to improve customer care.</p> <p>Between 2022 and 2023, EA conducted Workforce Conversations to give employees a voice in shaping their experience and the organisation's future, establishing a baseline for improvement.</p> <p>An Interim People Plan was introduced in May 2023 for 2023–2024, followed by the launch of the five-year 'We Are EA' People Plan (2024–2029) in June 2024. This plan sets out a strategic approach to organisational culture, capacity, and capability, with annual operational actions aimed at improving staff experience and, ultimately, outcomes for children and young people.</p> <p>The plan aligns with DE's 'Every CHILD' Corporate Plan 2023-28 priorities, focusing on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building a well-resourced education system that promotes societal benefits. • Delivering a skilled, motivated workforce supported through training and development. <p>DE and EA consider actions associated with this recommendation to be closed.</p>	<p> Partially Achieved.</p> <p>Actions agreed to address the Recommendation have been implemented but we still consider the recommendation is partially achieved</p> <p>There is no evidence yet assessing and validating the effectiveness of action taken in terms of the outcomes that EA have become more child and pupil centric in its approach.</p> <p>Whilst early indications and feedback has been positive in terms of indicators, cultural change may take 3-5 years to be fully realised so it is not possible to determine if the actions have had their intended effects or desired outcomes.</p> <p>It is important that arrangements are in place to assess and validate the effectiveness of actions taken in terms of outcomes as a result - including the benefits achieved, the extent of improvement or efficiency savings achieved.</p> <p>It is important that baseline performance levels and performance indicators and measures are monitored and reported on in order to assess improvement, further actions needed, and to continue to drive further improvement and value for money.</p>

Recommendation	Progress to date	NIAO Assessment
<p>5 Requires that underpinning all efforts is a consistent and effective approach to communication. There is an urgent need to ensure that the school system gets reliable information (as opposed to swamping them with disparate information, as is the case at present); there is a need to organise the corporate message to ensure it is consistent and on the 'front foot' as opposed to being re-active and operating from a position of defensiveness.</p>	<p>Actions taken included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing a Call Management flow project to support better access for customers to EA services; • Launching a Customer Service Charter; and • Developing the NI Principals Forum as a key means of communicating and engaging with school leaders. <p>In addition there were a number of other actions including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • development of an overarching three-year Communications Strategy including a school engagement plan, directorate communications plans, and social media strategy; • an Engagement framework; • review of central communications to schools. <p>These actions have been incorporated into the EA Communications Strategy (2025–2028) which was approved in December 2025. This aims to enhance how EA communicate and engage with schools, staff, children and young people, their families, and wider stakeholders, including Trade Union colleagues.</p> <p>In addition, a new Assistant Director of Communications has been appointed to lead its implementation and strengthen organisational engagement.</p> <p>Annual actions (Year 1 2025–26) will be reviewed annually to ensure relevance and effectiveness, with success measured through feedback mechanisms such as the School Leader Survey.</p> <p>The baseline School Satisfaction Survey, issued in February 2025, provided insights into communication and responsiveness. Results indicated areas for improvement and an action plan is underway, with further improvements expected in 2026.</p> <p>Annual surveys will track progress, and findings will inform service enhancements. A separate initiative to improve service responsiveness – complementary to the Communications Strategy – is scheduled for completion in 2026.</p>	<p> Partially Achieved.</p> <p>It is not yet possible to determine if the actions have had their intended effects or desired outcomes in terms of communications with stakeholders.</p> <p>Whilst a Communications Strategy has been developed full implementation in terms of delivering outcomes will depend upon delivering operationally on the actions within the Communications Strategy and monitoring, reporting on and acting on various performance indicators and measures including feedback mechanisms such as school survey.</p> <p>It is important that arrangements are in place to assess and validate the effectiveness of actions taken in terms of outcomes as a result - including the benefits achieved, the extent of improvement or efficiency savings achieved.</p> <p>It is important that the impact of actions taken to address recommendations are measurable and that baseline performance levels and performance indicators and measures are monitored and reported on in order to assess improvement, identify the need for further actions, and to continue to drive further improvement and value for money especially in terms of cost and efficiency.</p>


Recommendation	Progress to date	NIAO Assessment
	<p>DE and EA have closed down these specific actions in terms of monitoring and reporting back on the Landscape Review. Delivery of the Communication Strategy is through business-as-usual.</p> <p>DE and EA consider actions associated with this recommendation to be closed.</p>	


Recommendation	Progress to date	NIAO Assessment
<p>6 In order to ensure a fit for purpose and child centric approach to service delivery, we recommend that all front line services are reviewed, tested and refreshed to ensure that they are appropriately resourced and skilled, and that the processes and systems they use allow them to interact with stakeholders in real time and allow EA staff to provide an improved quality of service and information. This requires a fundamental review of all frontline activities and the processes/systems to support them.</p> <p>Whilst we recognise that EA provides many frontline services, we suggest that priority is given to services such as; School Improvement services, Education Welfare Services and HR services as these are services that for a variety of reasons featured heavily in school/teacher/parent feedback.</p> <p>Furthermore we believe that initial reviews should be conducted independent of EA so that baselines can be established and needs identified. We recognise that this has a cost impact, but an external review will not take resource away from existing services which may be under pressure, and also provides the capacity for independence and degrees of objectivity.</p>	<p>DE and EA determined that due to budget constraints it was not feasible to undertake external independent reviews. It was decided that it would be more effective to conduct 'end-to-end' reviews of key policy areas (Special Educational Needs and School Improvement), with DE and EA taking joint ownership. In addition to this, the EA agreed to take forward a review of its own HR services function, given that it was identified in the Review as a priority area. DE was content for the EA to undertake this review, with scrutiny provided by the Landscape Review Oversight Group.</p> <p>A review of Education Welfare Services was removed from the Action Plan as a review had already concluded. Whilst not identified within the Landscape Review as a priority area, SEN was included given the significant challenges being faced and given the work already underway on transformation.</p> <p>Two independent reviews of HR were commissioned by EA:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grant Thornton (final report March 2023), identifying significant understaffing and recommending up to 125 additional posts. Ernst & Young reviewed the end-to-end school recruitment process (final report April 2023), also highlighting critical resourcing gaps and recommending service improvements. <p>Following these reviews, EA launched the People-Focused HR Programme to address 58 recommendations across four projects and nine workstreams. Programme was formally closed in June 2025, with ongoing work absorbed into business-as-usual. Two workstreams— Legacy Terms and Conditions and Workforce Planning—continue separately under Recommendation 3.</p> <p>End-to-End review of School Improvement</p> <p>In 2023, the Department launched an End-to-End Review of School Improvement, the purpose of which was to refresh the Department's School Improvement Policy 'Every School a Good School' published in 2009. The review aimed to undertake an analysis of how the policy intent was realised on the ground, and how effectively and efficiently the policy was operationalised including through key levers such as the School Development Planning process and the effective utilisation of School Development Days and via the delivery of effective school improvement support services. This would result in the development of a revised framework and propose an improved delivery model that ensures high-quality education for every child.</p>	<p> Partially Achieved.</p> <p>Full implementation of School Improvement and SEN and delivery of outcomes intended will only be achieved once the new policies are in place.</p> <p>In terms of end-to-end reviews it is important to review implementation to identify improvement and anticipated outcomes.</p> <p>It is important that arrangements are in place to assess and validate the effectiveness of the end-to-end reviews in terms of their conclusions and recommendations and outcomes as a result - including the benefits achieved, the extent of improvement or efficiency savings achieved.</p> <p>Targets and associated performance indicators and measures should be established, monitored and reported on to ensure intended effects or desired outcomes are achieved and that value for money has been achieved in terms of effectiveness and also any savings in terms of cost and efficiency.</p>

Recommendation	Progress to date	NIAO Assessment
	<p>DE told us that progress has been slower than anticipated due to resourcing constraints and competing priorities. Then in the context of the TransformED NI Strategy, launched in March 2025, the End-to-End review pivoted to focus primarily on the development of the draft school improvement policy, delivery plan and operational support model. The review of School Improvement included a mapping exercise and nine workstreams all of which have now either fed into the TransformED Strategy and Delivery Plan or will inform the new School Improvement policy. There is therefore no report published on the End-to-End review of School Improvement but a new school improvement policy will be issued for consultation in autumn 2026. Then, a new system evaluation framework will be developed and new School Improvement policy published by March 2027.</p> <p>End-to-End Review of SEN</p> <p>A summary report on the End-to-End review of SEN was published on the DE website. The vision was to ensure children with SEN receive the right support, from the right people, at the right time and place, enabling them to thrive. It established a robust evidence base underpinning the SEN Reform Agenda and five-year Delivery Plan.</p> <p>Key outputs include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEN Reform Agenda and Delivery Plan (published February 2025), • SEN Reform Outcomes Framework (June 2025), Baseline data from 2025–26 will inform annual progress measurement over five years. <p>DE and EA consider actions associated with this recommendation to be closed.</p>	


Recommendation	Progress to date	NIAO Assessment
<p>7 This review has identified that EA is a serial collector of data and information and has almost created an internal information industry. Unless that information is useful, integrated and real-time – it is not effective. EA needs to ensure that it has in place an effective and integrated approach to data and information management and collection, and to integrate that data/information to inform and support better decision making.</p> <p>Recommendation 3 (vii) - We recommend that EA intensifies and accelerates internal work to create a more effective system of data and information management and usage (particularly in how this integrates with EA performance and reporting).</p>	<p>Actions to be taken included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • review the EA Data Strategy; • complete an initial discovery on how data can be integrated/shared with DE and across the wider education sector (ALBs etc); • review and update the Information Asset Register to ensure a more consistent approach to information governance; • Business Case for the full resourcing of the Insights Centre of Excellence. <p>The EA are in process of updating the Data Strategy 2024–2027 and creating a new AI Strategy. The updated Data Strategy is expected by September 2026. EA told us it includes an action to review and define the data and AI operating model during 2027-2028.</p> <p>Its primary aim is to improve and raise data maturity in support of service delivery, ensuring timely access to reliable information for decision-making that benefits children and young people. Previous assessments by Deloitte (2019) and Ernst & Young (2022) rated EA’s data maturity at 1.75 out of 5, indicating an ‘early-stage’ position. The strategy targets progression to ‘established’ within three years and ‘advanced’ within five. A business case has been drafted to enable delivery of this roadmap and is currently going through internal EA approval processes.</p> <p>Integration and data-sharing efforts continue through the DE-led Data Strategy Group, which includes EA representation, and cross-departmental initiatives, including proposals for collaboration with the Department of Health and Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. This proposal will be taken forward through a subgroup of the Joint DE / Department of Health Oversight Group which EA has provided representation for.</p> <p>Completion of the Information Asset Register review is critical to improving data protection compliance, strengthening information governance, and ensuring consistent asset management across EA.</p>	<p> Partially Achieved.</p> <p>One action – Data Strategy review - has been completed but full implementation as intended requires the strategy to be delivered in full and the other actions to be completed.</p> <p>Achieving this requires investment in people, technology, and governance but funding constraints have delayed full implementation.</p> <p>It is important that arrangements are in place to assess and validate the effectiveness of actions taken in terms of outcomes as a result - including the benefits achieved, the extent of improvement or efficiency savings achieved.</p>


Recommendation	Progress to date	NIAO Assessment
	<p>However, this has been delayed due to resource constraints and competing priorities. In March 2025, the Corporate Leadership Team approved prioritisation of the Information Asset Register Review Project for 2025–26. Full project completion is targeted for June 2026.</p> <p>Developing robust data analytics and insights is critical to EA’s transformation and service improvement. The EA One system and EdIS data platform are central to the full implementation of the Insights Centre of Excellence. However, delays in the EdIS programme have impacted progress toward a modern data and analytics architecture.</p> <p>A phased business case for the Insights Centre of Excellence was presented to Corporate Leadership Team in March 2025 but was not approved due to financial constraints. Despite this, core workstreams continue to advance EA’s data maturity just not at the pace envisaged. Following restructuring and recent stabilisation of senior structures within EA, the data team moved under Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and a new ‘Head of Data Services’ post was appointed in January 2026. The Service now also includes responsibility for AI.</p> <p>A business case has been recently drafted to enable delivery of this Data Strategy 2024-2026 roadmap and is currently undergoing internal approval. EA told us that this includes a number of potential new posts to reflect the planned redesign of future data platform and services procurement, and the development of the new AI Strategy. These will be reviewed in due course.</p> <p>DE consider three actions associated with this recommendation to be still open.</p>	

Recommendation	Progress to date	NIAO Assessment
<p>8 We refer in this review to the relationship complexity of the EA operating environment and how it is our view that the current landscape perpetuates a cycle of leaders heavily involved in multiple and often low value meeting culture. We strongly recommend that for EA to successfully make the changes required for the next stage of its journey, will require it to become a learning organisation and there is a need to embed quickly the emerging Organisational Development strategy to define and support leadership capacity and capability in the organisation.</p>	<p>Actions to be taken included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a full Organisational Development (OD) Consultancy offering which can support staff and teams across Directorates and schools to develop at an individual, team and line management level; • Build on current leadership training by developing more extensive leadership programmes for staff at all levels. <p>The OD service was restructured to prioritise consultancy support for delivering DE's 'Every CHILD' Corporate Plan 2023-28 priority. The service launched in January 2024 and is currently delivered by four OD Partners across EA and schools. While formal promotion has not occurred due to limited team capacity, request processes are in place, and connections with schools have been established through Area Learning Communities.</p> <p>In terms of Leadership Programmes all levels of the Game Changing People programme remain fully subscribed, with additional cohorts introduced in 2025 to meet demand. A "Leadership Pick and Mix" option is in development for schools, alongside a Management Masterclass series for targeted skills. Senior leaders have accessed HSC Public Sector programmes, and digital modules are available via EA Learn for self-directed learning.</p> <p>DE and EA consider actions associated with this recommendation to be closed.</p>	<p> Partially Achieved.</p> <p>Actions agreed to address the Recommendation have been implemented but we still consider the recommendation is partially achieved.</p> <p>Whilst early indications and feedback has been positive impact measures are still in development as leadership capacity and capability, culture and relationship change is difficult to measure quantitatively.</p> <p>We also note that the size of the Organisational Development Consultancy team limits what can be achieved.</p>

Recommendation	Progress to date	NIAO Assessment
<p>Demonstrating stronger accountability section holds a series of recommendations around governance, accountability and relationships which will support future EA effectiveness.</p>		
<p>9</p>	<p>Accountable Officers should ensure that when the new partnership agreement between EA and DE is being drafted sponsor teams work with EA to make roles and responsibilities as clear as possible, discussing the wording in the framework document to ensure a shared understanding.</p> <p>DE and EA planned to address both recommendations 9 and 10 through an agreed Partnership Agreement (PA).</p> <p>The new PA sets out the governance framework for EA and defines partnership arrangements with the Department, including formal reporting and communication protocols. Its objectives are to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish clear roles and responsibilities for DE and EA; • Define EA’s delivery obligations against Departmental priorities and Programme for Government outcomes; • Provide proportionate autonomy while ensuring compliance with financial and governance requirements; • Agree an annual engagement plan to strengthen collaboration and improve outcomes for children and young people. <p>Originally scheduled for completion in December 2023, progress was delayed due to resourcing constraints and the need to streamline engagement processes. The PA was approved by DE’s Top Management Group in May 2025 and issued to EA for consultation. EA engaged with the Chairperson, and with the wider Board.</p> <p>The PA was finalised by the end of March 2026 for implementation at the start of the 2026–27 financial year.</p> <p>Now that it has been introduced, DE and EA consider actions associated with this recommendation to be closed.</p>	<p> Achieved.</p> <p>Recommendations 9 and 10 were dependent on the implementation and operation of the new Partnership Agreement, which was finalised in March 2026 and has been in operation since the start of the 2026–27 financial year.</p> <p>While marked as achieved, it is important that the Partnership Agreement is assessed annually to ensure that it working as intended and to identify any further improvements needed. This is in line with good practice as set out in NIAO’s <u>Partnership Working: Departments and Arm’s Length Bodies report (March 2026)</u>.</p> <p>This should be done alongside reviewing Governance and Accountability Reviews (GARs) arrangements and the review of Sponsorship arrangements in DE.</p>

Recommendation	Progress to date	NIAO Assessment
<p>10</p>	<p>DE should seek views from the EA Board Chairperson and Board members on how DE manages its relationship with the EA and in turn how EA manages its relationship with the DE and the Minister, putting in place any recommendations to improve those relationships, that might arise as a result of those reflections.</p>	<p>DE and EA planned to address both recommendations 9 and 10 through an agreed Partnership Agreement.</p> <p>Now that it has been introduced, DE and EA consider actions associated with this recommendation to be closed.</p>
<p>11</p>	<p>Assurance – It is our view that relationships need to be underpinned by a systematic approach to assurance. We believe that there are two broad aspects of assurance which DE and EA need to address:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assurance that EA is performing satisfactorily against the objectives, targets and performance measures agreed by Ministers – the ‘controllability’ dimension of accountability and the starting point for ‘controllability’ is establishing what success looks like for EA. • assurance that the body is meeting the requirements of legislation and guidance – the ‘transparency’ and ‘responsibility’ dimensions of accountability. <p>The recommendation follows that DE and EA should ensure that EA has in place a well-developed performance framework that sets out Ministers’ priorities within the overall Programme for Government outcomes, defined as clearly as possible how success will be measured and ideally covers expectations over several years.</p>	<p>The Department and EA agreed to adapt the recommendation, as they considered that a systematic assurance approach was already in place. That said, DE told us that it seeks to continuously improve and enhance its approach to assurance and ensuring the focus is on outcomes. This was to be taken forward as part of the development of the Partnership Agreement and also included consideration of Governance and Accountability Reviews (GARs) and other relevant arrangements.</p> <p>In 2024, the Education Governance Team reviewed GARs, leading to changes in their structure and scope. The DE/EA Directors’ Meeting was reconfigured as the EA Oversight Meeting in October 2024 to provide escalation and de-escalation ahead of GARs. Following the cancellation of the autumn 2024 GAR, no GAR occurred between June 2024 and March 2025, though Oversight Meetings continued. Subsequently, the Permanent Secretary discontinued Oversight Meetings to streamline engagement, as analysis revealed over 100 separate DE–EA meetings.</p> <p>Currently, oversight is concentrated through GARs, supplemented by targeted engagements across finance, governance, and policy. This arrangement will be reviewed in the 2026–27 financial year. To enhance accountability, the Education Minister will chair one GAR annually – the first one was in November 2025.</p> <p>DE and EA consider actions associated with this recommendation to be closed.</p>

Recommendation	Progress to date	NIAO Assessment
<p>12 EA is sponsored by a team (Education Governance Team and DE Finance). It is our understanding that the DE model is reliant upon others (i.e. directorate policy leads) for scrutiny matters and therefore the EGT largely becomes a co-ordinating function as regards to EA's sponsorship. Recommendation 12 suggests that DE should review the capacity and capability needed in its teams to ensure that relationships are being managed well with EA and consider how best to organise that – through policy teams or a sponsorship hub, for instance – to ensure that there is a proper focus on sponsorship activity and a strong link with policy development. In reviewing the capacity and capability, it will be important to have nominated people who can provide support to the Departmental Accounting Officer and EA Accounting Officer.</p>	<p>DE agreed to two actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to consider the sponsorship arrangements for the EA, which will be done in conjunction with the development of the Partnership Agreement, and also taking into account the findings from elsewhere, including the recent Department for Economy review of sponsorship of its ALBs and its recommendations; and • to consider whether the existing sponsorship model is appropriate for the EA, and what action is required to ensure the sponsorship role is effective and appropriately resourced. <p>At the time, DE advised that a comprehensive review of EA's sponsorship model was not a priority due to limited resources. While acknowledging shortcomings in the current model, the Department was uncertain what alternative approach would better suit EA's size and complexity. Any future review should identify the most effective and efficient model to ensure delivery of Departmental and Ministerial priorities.</p> <p>Since then, DE's Internal Audit reviewed existing Sponsorship Control Arrangements, focusing on compliance rather than alternative models. The October 2025 report issued a 'Limited' assurance opinion, noting that while governance frameworks exist and EGT fulfils its responsibilities, current arrangements do not provide the level of oversight required. Three recommendations were made and are being addressed.</p> <p>EGT requested Internal Audit to explore alternative sponsorship models; however, this work has not yet been scheduled into the audit programme.</p>	<p> Not Achieved.</p> <p>Work on the core of Recommendation 12 has not yet started but is expected to be taken forward in 2026-27.</p>

Recommendation	Progress to date	NIAO Assessment
<p>13 Focuses on the governance arrangements within EA and the structure and composition of the EA Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognising the constitution of EA Board is set in primary legislation, we nonetheless recommend a full review of the Board to determine the appropriateness of the current model (even if it tests that legislation). In recommending changes to the skillset present on the Board, we recommend that any review of Board composition consider the addition of co-opted or non-voting members (such as experts in particular fields) to augment Board expertise. In line with more general movements towards board behaviours and standards of public office, we would recommend that in the next phase of board development, consideration is given to how the existing Code of Conduct can be enhanced/applied and ensure an <i>modus operandi</i> for board members and enhance performance and board effectiveness. 	<p>When the Action Plan was agreed in Feb 2023 DE decided that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In view of the priority of the other recommendations, DE did not propose taking forward a full review of the Board at this time. However they said it would be considered as part of any future independent Review of Board Effectiveness (Terms of Reference will be set by DE to ensure the appropriateness of current model is considered as part of the Review); and Given the significant work undertaken in 2021 to reconstitute Board structures (including new committee structures), no immediate need to augment Board expertise is required. Mechanisms are available for the EA to augment Board expertise should the Department or EA consider this necessary in the future. <p>In June 2025, the Permanent Secretary requested that the EA Chairperson consider commissioning an externally led Board Effectiveness Review and provided suggested Terms of Reference. Responsibility for commissioning the review rests with EA, who considered the proposal.</p> <p>The EA Chief Executive wrote to the DE Permanent Secretary on 22 January 2026 to advise that, whilst acknowledging the merits of an External Board Effectiveness Review and that in an ideal world, this would be undertaken once every three years, the EA are reluctant to incur the cost of such a review in the context of EA's challenging budgetary position. The Chief Executive affirmed that a recent comprehensive skills audit demonstrated a wide and varied range of expertise, indicating that the EA Board can be highly effective if structured correctly with supporting governance measures.</p> <p>The Chief Executive also outlined an ongoing review of current committee structures, the development of the Member's Code of Conduct expected to be implemented by April 2026.</p> <p>DE were content, in the financial circumstances and given the assurances provided by the Chief Executive, that the External Board Effectiveness Review could be deferred by a year, but that the issue would be revisited at the March 2027 GAR.</p> <p>In the meantime, the Department continues to take assurances of board effectiveness from existing assurance mechanisms, such as the annual Board Effectiveness Review and Board Skills Audit undertaken by the Chairperson, as well as the individual performance assessments of the Chairperson and Board Members.</p>	<p> Not Achieved.</p> <p>Work on the core of Recommendation 13 has not yet started.</p> <p>Implementation has now been deferred until 2027-28.</p>

NIAO Reports 2026

Title	Date Published
Leading and Resourcing the Northern Ireland Civil Service	27 January 2026
Raising concerns in the Northern Ireland public sector	20 March 2026
Raising Concerns: A Good Practice Guide for the Northern Ireland Public Sector	20 March 2026
Partnership Working: Departments and Arm's Length Bodies	25 March 2026
Evaluation of Programmes Addressing Educational Disadvantage	31 March 2026
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