



MEDIA RELEASE

NI Comptroller & Auditor General calls for an urgent review of Special Educational Needs

An urgent review and overhaul of Special Educational Needs (SEN) policies and processes is needed to respond to rising costs and increasing demand, according to a report on SEN in mainstream schools published today (29 September) by the Comptroller and Auditor General, Mr Kieran Donnelly CB.

Findings within the report include;

- Annual expenditure on SEN reached £312 million in 2019-20, an increase from £233 million in 2015-16. Expenditure over the last five years has totalled over £1.3 billion.
- There is an urgent need for the Department of Education and the Education Authority to evaluate the support provided to children with SEN. This will enable resources to be focused on the types of support which have the best outcomes for children.
- It is over 13 years since the Department began a review of SEN at a cost of nearly £3.6 million. This review is still not complete.

Nearly one in five pupils in Northern Ireland has a reported SEN, with 5.5 per cent of the school population having a statement of SEN. This is significantly higher than the 2 per cent of the school population anticipated by the Department. There has been a 36 per cent increase in children with a statement in the past nine years. Mr Donnelly's report recommends that the Department and the Education Authority consider the potential benefits of directing more investment towards effective early intervention measures which may, in turn, reduce the requirement for statements of SEN.

Today's publication is a follow-up to Mr Donnelly's 2017 Special Educational Needs report. That report found that neither the Department nor the Education Authority could demonstrate value for money in the provision of support to children with SEN in mainstream schools, making 10 recommendations for improvement. The report found that, while some progress has since been made, none of the 10 previous recommendations have been fully addressed.

In some areas, performance was found to have deteriorated. Delays in assessing and providing for children have increased, with 85 per cent of new statements of SEN now issued outside of the statutory 26 week limit, compared with 79 per cent in 2015-16.

Mr Kieran Donnelly commented:

"Support for pupils with SEN is a vital and valued service and the educational achievements of children with SEN are improving, which, of course is to be welcomed.

"However, there remains evidence of an inconsistent and delayed approach to assessing pupils and getting them access to the help they need. It is also disappointing that despite growing expenditure, the Department and the Education Authority are still unable to clearly demonstrate value for money.

"As we move forward, it is clear that proper evaluation of these services is needed to ensure support is sustainable and produces the best outcomes for pupils."

ENDS

THIS STATEMENT IS ISSUED ON THE STRICT UNDERSTANDING THAT IT IS NOT FOR PUBLICATION OR BROADCAST BEFORE 00.01 hrs ON 29 SEPTEMBER 2020

Notes for Editors

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). He and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. He certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. He has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. His reports are published as Assembly papers.
2. This report is available on the Audit Office website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk. The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on 29 September 2020.
3. This report is due to be examined by the Public Accounts Committee at a hearing on 15th October 2020.
4. Background briefing can be obtained from the Audit Office by contacting Colette Kane (028 9025 1064) or Suzanne Murphy (028 9025 1125).