Every Child's Right to Inclusive Education

Specialist Provisions in Mainstream Schools (SPiMs)

Briefing Report

July 2025

NICCY
PROMOTING THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

Contents

Introduction

The Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was established in accordance with 'The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order' (2003) to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland (NI). Under Articles 7(2) and (3) of this legislation, NICCY has a mandate to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services relating to the rights and best interests of children and young people by relevant authorities. The Commissioner is also to have regard to all relevant provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) placements crisis, which has resulted in children with SEND being denied their education rights, has been a significant cause for concern over recent years as funding cuts and constraints have continued to delay progress in reform of the system. In response to the placements crisis, the Education Authority (EA) commenced emergency planning in 2020, with a particular focus on addressing a shortfall of suitable placements in special schools at early years and foundation key stage. This led to the expedient expansion of what were termed 'specialist provisions in mainstream schools' (SPiMS), which the EA have opened at pace in nursery, primary and post-primary schools.[1]

In the period 2022 to 2024, 212 new specialist provisions were established across 108 schools as part of the Education Authority's area planning work**.** Department of Education (the Department) census data shows that by 2023/24, 3,830 pupils were enrolled in SPiMS, an increase of almost 200% since 2018/19.[2] Data provided to the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) by the EA showed 594 operational SPiMS classes across 226 schools and four private nurseries. [3] A further breakdown of the data, presented in Table 1 below, shows that the most common provision types are specialist provision social communication (SPSC) and specialist provision learning (SPL).

[1] Along with the rapid increase in SPiMS, it is worth noting that there has been a change in terminology in recent years; previously, SPiMS were referred to as learning support centres (LSCs), autism units or various other terms.

[2] Planning for Provision 2024-26

[3] Data provided by the Education Authority, February 2025

Table 1: Breakdown of specialist provision types

Provision type	**No. of operational classes**
Specialist provision social communication (SPSC)	253.5
Specialist provision learning (SPL)	224.5
Specialist provision for Early Years and Foundation (EYF)	69
Specialist provision speech and language (SPSL)	33
Non-school early years provision	5
Specialist provision behavioural (SPB)	4
Specialist provision hearing impairment (SPH)	3
Specialist provision physical (SPP)	2
Total	**594**

It is projected that an additional 958 specialist provision places, comprising 678 primary school places and 280 post primary school places, equivalent to at least 80 additional classes, will be required in the period 2024 to 2026. It is also expected that this trend will continue in the longer term, with an estimated additional 3,584 places over the period 2023/24 to 2031/32, from 3,830 to 7,414.[4]

Work by the EA continues to be undertaken to identify schools with both a willingness and the potential accommodation to establish new SPiMS, particularly in areas of geographical and sectoral pressures. The Department's SEN capital investment programme continues to fund relevant building work.[5] The Department has further committed to review quality and appropriateness of SPiMS, including evaluation of Specialist Provision Early Years Foundation (SPEYF) classes, identified as an early action in their SEN Reform Agenda Delivery Plan 2025.[6]

The right to inclusive education

Inclusive education is central to achieving high-quality education for children and young people with SEND, without discrimination, and on an equal basis with others. It is recognised as a fundamental right for all children, as outlined in key international frameworks including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Articles 28 and 29) and the UN

[4] Planning for Provision 2024-26
[5] Leaflet - SEN Capital Investment Programme.pdf
[6] SEN Reform Agenda - Delivery Plan 2025.pdf

Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)[7]. Article 28 of the UNCRC, which was ratified by the UK Government in 1991, states that all children have the right to an education and should be provided with equal opportunities, while Article 29 states that this education must allow for and encourage the development of the child's personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.[8] Article 12 of the UNCRC places a clear obligation to ensure that the voice of the child is heard and that children are able to fully participate in education. These articles are essential in ensuring education is accessible to all and frame education as a key tool for promoting both personal development and societal inclusion.

Article 24 of the UNCRPD, ratified by the UK Government in 2009, provides the right for persons with disabilities to access an inclusive education system at all levels. Through its substantive General Comment No. 4 on the right to inclusive education, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) highlights that realising this right entails a transformation in culture, policy and practice in all educational environments to accommodate differing pupil requirements and identities, alongside the removal of key barriers that impede that possibility.[9] Importantly, the Committee noted a reciprocal relationship between inclusion and quality, whereby an inclusive approach can make a significant contribution to the quality of education.[10] Inclusive education is integral to the full and effective realisation of other rights and, conversely, can only be realised if certain other rights are upheld. States parties must remove barriers and promote accessibility and availability of inclusive opportunities for persons with disabilities to participate on an equal basis with others in play, recreation and sports in the school system and in extracurricular activities, including in other educational environments (Article 31).[11]

The Committee encourages States parties to adopt the universal design for learning approach and to work progressively towards the full realisation of Article 24. The core features of inclusive education are set out as follows:

- A whole systems approach;
- A whole educational environment;
- A whole person approach;
- Supported teachers;

[7] For more information, please see Article 24 (Available at: Article 24 – Education | United Nations Enable)
[8] 'Convention on the Rights of the Child', Article 29, resolution 44/25,
[9] The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities adopted General Comment No. 4 on the right to inclusive education in 2016. (Available at: General comment No. 4 on Article 24 - the right to inclusive education | OHCHR)

[10] UNCRPD Committee's General Comment No.4 on the Right to Inclusive Education. (Available at: www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CRPD/GC/RighttoEducation/CRPD-C-GC-4.doc)
[11] General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts. (Available at: tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2FGC%2F17&Lang=en)

- Respect for and value of diversity;
- A learning-friendly environment;
- Effective transitions;
- Recognition of partnerships; and
- Regular monitoring, which should include persons with disabilities.

Our approach

With the rapid expansion of SPiMS classes in recent years, and the receipt of a growing number of SPiMS related enquiries and complaints by our Office, this work was undertaken with a view to learning more about how effectively SPiMS placements are meeting children's needs and education rights.[12] While, at strategic level, the narrative around placements for children with SEND is often focused on the number of children placed or unplaced, we were particularly interested in qualitative elements such as the appropriateness, quality and inclusiveness of SPiMS placements. A key aim was to find out what stakeholders perceived to be working well, and to identify gaps and areas for improvement with a view to making recommendations to relevant authorities.

The themes outlined in this report draw on data gathered during visits to SPiMS across primary and post-primary schools in Northern Ireland (NI), as well as meetings with key stakeholders including advocacy groups, parents, teaching union representatives and education staff, including school principals, special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs), teachers and classroom assistants. In the period April 2024 – April 2025, Chris Quinn, Commissioner for Children and Young People, accompanied by Dr Arlene Robertson, Policy and Research Officer, visited 22 SPiMS, across 10 schools. Visits involved talking informally with pupils and staff, briefly observing lessons and viewing indoor and outdoor facilities. They also entailed in-depth discussions about SPiMS and wider SEND related issues, with principals, SENCOs, and/or relevant staff members.

In March 2025, NICCY also held a roundtable with the Equality Commission NI and the Children's Law Centre during which participants' views on SPiMS and transformation of the SEND system more broadly were sought. The event was attended by advocacy groups, academics, parents, and other key stakeholders, and relevant themes are reflected in this report.[13]

It is important to note that this targeted and exploratory piece of work is not an evaluation of SPiMS. The themes discussed in this report reflect the views and experiences of the relatively small number of stakeholders we engaged with in undertaking this work. During

[12] For more information relating to the work of the Legal and Investigations Team, including a thematic breakdown of the types of complaints, please see the Annual Complaints and Legal Report. (Available at: Annual Complaints and Legal Report - Niccy)

[13] Equality Commission NI Corporate Plan 2025-2028
NICCY and ECNI, Advancing Equality and Rights for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disability: Event Briefing Report (2025)

visits and meetings, stakeholders often took the opportunity to raise challenges with the Commissioner, although there was also some discussion of good practice and positive aspects of SPiMS. A summary of key themes is provided, alongside recommendations for relevant authorities.

Key themes

Increased complexity of need

During school visits, education staff spoke about increasing complexity of need in SPiMS and the related challenges. Stakeholders who were working in schools with longer established or 'legacy' SPiMS had observed a shift in the overall profile of pupils in specialist classes, particularly at earlier key stages, including an increased number of pupils with severe learning difficulties (SLD) and/or complex needs. Some suggested that increased diversity and complexity of need within SPiMS is not always appropriately reflected in allocated staff to pupil ratios which can present significant challenges in effectively supporting children who are emotional dysregulated, particularly if they need to be accompanied to a separate quiet or sensory space. Teaching staff highlighted that such challenges can be exacerbated in classrooms where the overall space is insufficient for the number of children placed. While EA's information on SPiMS, detailing class sizes, staffing ratios and other elements, indicates that 'class size will retain a degree of flexibility based on the overall profile of the children placed', some felt that decision making around this could be arbitrary.[14]

Education staff working across settings, both legacy and more recently established SPiMS, perceived a growing prevalence of social, behavioural, emotional and wellbeing (SBEW) needs, speech language and communication (SLC) needs, mental health, toileting and school readiness related issues among pupils. While this was attributed to a range of factors, including growing levels of child poverty and increasing levels of 'screen time' within households, some stakeholders were particularly concerned about enduring impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly for younger children. Issues were also raised about specific groups of children, including deaf children and young people, for whom it was thought isolation during the pandemic had been particularly detrimental in terms of SLC development and had posed risks to mental health due to isolation from peers.

Appropriateness of placements

There was consensus among those we spoke to that there an ongoing crisis in placements for children with SEND. At a systemic level, it was argued that there has been a lack of forward planning by the EA and the Department to ensure suitable placements are available in the right place, at the right time. While stakeholders acknowledged that some action has

[14] Establishing Specialist Provisions in Mainstream Schools | SEND Plan

been taken in recent years, including through the rapid expansion of SPiMS, there were concerns that a growing number of children are being placed inappropriately. Further concerns were raised about delays faced by children in taking up placements in SPiMS, including those related to refurbishment works.

With regard to the perceived growth in inappropriate placements, a particular issue of concern was the misplacement of children in SPiMS due to insufficient capacity in special schools. Education staff and other stakeholders cautioned that SPiMS should not be considered as a direct substitute for special school settings, particularly for children with more profound and complex disabilities. During discussions, a few principals we spoke to associated an increasing number of inappropriate placements with a growth in the number of classroom assistants required. It was further suggested that, as more children with complex needs and SLD are placed in SPiMS, pupils with Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD) face an increased risk of misplacement in mainstream classes.

Key transition stages, including from primary to post-primary education, were identified as a time when the risk of misplacement is heightened for children with SEND. Stakeholders attributed this to a lack of planning and specific gaps in provision including a lack of post-primary SPiMS in some geographical areas; an insufficient number of SPiMS at early years stage; a shortage of Irish Medium Education (IME) SPiMS at post primary school level; gaps at specific key stages within schools to ensure transition pathways are available to current pupils; and a perceived shortage of specialist placements for children with behaviour needs.

Education staff were also concerned that EA officers do not give sufficient consideration to the overall profile of pupils in the class when placing individual children in SPiMS. There was concern, for example, that placing a child with intense behaviour needs alongside those with autism and more sensory needs can be disruptive to the day-to-day learning experiences of pupils. A separate quiet or sensory space is essential in this context.

In discussions about the perceived growth in inappropriate placements, stakeholders further highlighted the constraints they face in arranging more suitable placements for children, noting insufficient access to educational psychology. In one case, a primary school principal reported that six children across the school's two SPiMS were considered to require placement in a special school but that insufficient education psychology hours was a significant and ongoing barrier to remedying this. In this context, parents and education staff shared concerns that children can effectively become 'stuck' in a setting where they are not progressing, or are at risk of regressing, in their learning and development. Parents emphasised that they do not feel listened to or supported, even in situations when their child is in crisis.

Communication

The poor quality of EA's communication with schools, parents and advocacy groups emerged as a dominant theme in discussions about SPiMS placement related issues. Specific concerns

were expressed about a lack of honesty, transparency and, in a few cases, the perceived provision of misinformation about SPiMS by EA officers. For parents, poor communication and a lack of clear information can exacerbate uncertainty and stress as they try to navigate an unfamiliar process. There was a suggestion that this particular scenario can also lead to unrealistic expectations among parents about the suitability of the SPiM setting to meet their child's needs, as well as about overall class sizes, ratios and the specific resources available. Principals advised that parental support and guidance is urgently needed to inform them about the placement allocation process and different types of provision in their local area.

For education stakeholders, poor communication, including delayed or no response to correspondence sent to the EA about placements and other issues, was a considerable source of frustration. Teachers highlighted the challenges this creates, such as making it difficult to plan for the individual needs of children who later take up placements in SPiMS. However, some stakeholders did also speak positively of individual EA officers who had been helpful and proactive in their approach.

Going forward, there was a strong desire for enhanced school voice in relation to the placements process, which would require EA officers to place more trust in teachers and principals to make decisions about the placement of children in SPiMS. School leaders further stressed that sharing of information in relation to this process must commence earlier in the year to enable effective planning.

Inclusion

There were differing views among stakeholders on how supportive of inclusion the current SPiMS model is. Some expressed concerns about potential segregation of children with SEND within mainstream schools, while others viewed SPiMS relatively positively and highlighted benefits for schools, families, and children and young people. In general, views on SPiMS were not binary and most stakeholders perceived both strengths and areas for improvement going forward.

At a policy level, some stakeholders raised the importance of a shared understanding and definition of 'inclusion', calling for this to be set out by the Department as soon as possible. Without a long-term strategic goal for inclusion, there was concern that schools and other stakeholders lack clarity about what they should be working towards. In developing an inclusion policy, stakeholders advised attention should be given to how inclusion aligns with the purpose of education, as well as the monitoring of progress.

While there was no consensus on how inclusive the SPiMS model is, education staff emphasised that they valued the increased diversity among the school population following the establishment of SPiMS and perceived benefits for all pupils and staff. Teachers and school leaders spoke about their passion to foster the inclusion of pupils and expressed a strong desire to ensure they can reach their full potential and actively participate with their

peers. Smaller class sizes that are characteristic of SPiMS were considered more conducive to inclusion.

Parents valued the opportunity for children to attend their local school, in close proximity to where they live, with their siblings and friends, as well as increased opportunities for participation in the local community. Comparisons were made with more extensive travel distances that may be required by pupils attending special schools, which it was felt can increase the risk of children being emotionally dysregulated at the end of the school day.

Centrally locating the SPiM within the school was considered essential by different stakeholders in ensuring that children and staff are a visible part of the school community and do not feel isolated or separated from their peers. The importance of language was also raised, with some stakeholders noting that use of terminology such as 'unit' or 'SPiM', particularly at school level, risks 'othering' pupils. Some felt strongly that a more appropriate term should be used within schools, as well as at a strategic or policy level.

Appropriate outdoor space was highlighted as hugely important for children's inclusion and some schools had made modifications to school grounds, including playgrounds, to ensure that children with more complex needs had a safe and enclosed place to play. Several stakeholders highlighted the importance of this to support children's emotional regulation and their broader wellbeing.

Social participation, friendships and positive peer relationships were identified as important elements of inclusion and stakeholders suggested that extra-curricular activities, lunchtime clubs and community projects can play a key facilitating role. Education staff noted the importance of creating opportunities for children with additional needs who, because of various barriers, often do not experience the same level of opportunities for play and recreation as their peers, outside of school hours. During visits to schools, staff shared positive examples of inclusive school choirs, school trips, residentials, peer mentoring, and support practices, which provided opportunities to forge connections and friendships between pupils across mainstream and SPiM classes.

Education staff also highlighted barriers to children's social inclusion within school. There was a suggestion that some pupils, including those with sensory needs, could find noisy playground environments challenging, while specific transport arrangements, such as the use of private taxi providers, could hinder participation in after-school activities. The inclusion of children with more profound disabilities in school assemblies, residential trips and in the playground was also perceived as potentially more challenging, although staff emphasised the importance of taking an individualised approach.

Pupils, staff and advocacy groups spoke also about the risk of bullying, including alienation by peers, which it was felt can disproportionately affect pupils with SEND and impact significantly on children's self-esteem and mental health. While discussions indicated a variety of experiences, concerns were raised that older pupils with SEND may face distinctive

challenges in terms of both their inclusion and risk of bullying in mainstream schools. As the number of SPiMS in mainstream schools continue to grow, stakeholders emphasised that fostering an inclusive school culture must involve robust anti-bullying measures and enhanced education on issues including equality and diversity, disability and autism awareness, for all pupils and staff.

Stakeholders further emphasised that enhancing inclusion requires listening to children and taking action in response. Depending on age and capacity, it may be appropriate to capture children's voices through their parents or guardians. The importance of continued and rigorous monitoring and evaluation of the quality and inclusiveness of SPiMS provision, involving children and their families, was also highlighted.

Support Services

Discussions about support services focused primarily on EA's pupil support services and interventions provided by allied health professionals to pupils in SPiMS. Some stakeholders perceived EA's pupil support services as increasingly challenging to access, due to shifting criteria and higher thresholds, and that early intervention was therefore increasingly difficult. Attention was also drawn to significant time spent following up on correspondence to EA which, according to education staff, often generates no response.

'Behaviour' was a dominant theme in our discussions with education staff, and some were concerned that current service provision is not meeting need, both in terms of accessibility and the support provided. A particular source of frustration was that behaviour support services are not universally accessible to children in SPiMS, since access is determined by the child's primary need or diagnosis. Staff who had been re-directed to EA's Autism Advisory and Intervention Service (AAIS) had, in a few cases, found advice or support to be insufficiently specialist or tailored to behaviour. A few expressed dissatisfaction with the support provided, particularly in relation to cases involving children with more complex or severe behaviour needs. In such circumstances, education staff reported that they did not always feel adequately supported to mitigate the risk of children harming themselves, or other children in the classroom, when very distressed.

Health interventions

With regard to support by allied health professionals (AHPs), including speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and physiotherapy, access to therapies for children across SPiMS was described as inconsistent, and overall, hugely inadequate. We were also informed during visits that specific services such as the Regional Integrated Support for Education (RISE), which comprises early intervention AHP support for learning in pre-school and mainstream primary school settings, is not accessible to children who are enrolled in

SPiMS.[15] Stakeholders further drew attention to a significant disparity in access to health support in comparison to special schools, noting a lack of parental awareness in this respect, especially among those less familiar with the SEND system.[16] A few parents reported confusion regarding the process in place to access health therapies for children placed in SPiMS, as well as inconsistent advice upon seeking clarification from the EA.[17] In the absence of these essential services, questions were raised about how 'specialist' SPiMS actually are.

As constraints in provision of health therapies have intensified, education staff reported that priority is increasingly given to children who are perceived to have the highest level of need. Some suggested that, in the absence of early intervention support, children are at risk of suffering irreversible and/or long-term consequences in terms of their speech, language, communication and other developmental areas. This was a significant cause for concern, particularly at a time when, post-pandemic, the level of need among children is perceived to be unprecedented. During discussions, education staff and parents spoke about the impact on younger children who were born, or at early development stage, during the Covid pandemic. Concern was also expressed about deaf young people whom it was noted were cut off from their peers and therefore important opportunities to develop language and communication skills.

It was evident from discussions that schools are using a range of strategies in response to limited AHP services. Some reported that therapy interventions, such as speech and language therapy, are delivered less frequently or in shorter blocks (e.g. of four weeks) than would have been the case previously in their school. Group delivery was also used in some cases but viewed as potentially less effective, depending upon diversity of need within the group. In this context, questions were raised both about the level of unmet need in schools and whether there has been a deterioration in the quality of support that is currently being provided to children. A few parents who we engaged with raised concerns about missed windows of opportunity and the premature discharge of children from speech therapy provision.

Workforce issues

Training and support for education staff

[15] RISE NI is a regional early intervention service which supports children in pre-school educational and mainstream primary school settings by working closely with parents and education staff to help children develop the foundation skills for learning i.e. speech, language, communication, sensory-motor, visual perception, social, emotional and behaviour skills.
The SHSCT RISE NI team consists of occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech and language therapists, clinical psychologist, behaviour therapists, dietitian and therapy assistants.

[16] It should be noted however that special school leaders have reported diminishing access to AHPs over recent years.

[17] The EA have advised NICCY that the responsibility lies with Health and that they are working closely with DoH on this.

The overall view among stakeholders was that training and support for SPiMS staff, both teachers and classroom assistants, is not meeting need. There was concern that, while staff within SPiMS are increasingly teaching children with more complex needs, this has not been adequately reflected in training and support provision. Some school leaders expressed concerns about impacts on staff wellbeing, including injury, as well an increased risk of absenteeism, burnout and retention challenges.

Specific concerns were raised about classroom assistants whom it was pointed out often undertake significant responsibilities within SPiMS. Depending on the profile of the pupils in the SPiM, classroom assistants may be required to have, or develop, very specialised skills, yet receive basic pay and have little opportunity for progression or professionalisation. It was also noted that employment on contracted hours can hinder their availability for training.

Effective training on the appropriate use of restrictive practices was identified as a specific gap in current training provision for staff in SPiMS. Stakeholders reported restricted access to Team Teach training by those working in mainstream schools, noting the risk of harm for both children and staff. Some pointed to the requirement for training in addition to Team Teach to ensure the use of restrictive practices is minimised. Further identified gaps included training on 'inclusion', to ensure a shared understanding of what this means and how it can be achieved, as well as enhanced training and support for all staff on autism, disability and behaviour. It was also felt that there would be significant value in making training accessible to parents, which could help to ensure a consistent home-school approach.

Education staff who had received support via the EA's Specialist Setting Support Team (SSST) described this positively. However, some felt that support tapered off too early and there was also frustration that this resource is not equally accessible to 'legacy' SPiMS, causing a sense inequity, particularly given the increased complexity of need within some legacy SPiMS.

In making improvements to training and support going forward, it was suggested that harnessing the expertise and skills of special school staff more effectively would be of considerable benefit. This type of partnership had worked well in a school we visited, which, through developing a strong link with a local special school, had benefited from training, support, and the secondment of a special school teacher. The principal described the partnership as critical to the success of the school's SPiMS, which included pupils with SLD and complex needs. However, wider stakeholders drew attention to potential constraints on the capacity of special schools, noting this type of partnership approach could not be considered a panacea, particularly as the number of SPiMS is increased. Proposals to develop school cluster groups were welcomed and stakeholders working in the IME sector noted their desire for a sectoral cluster in the absence of a wider geographical spread of SPiMS.

Recruitment

Recruiting the 'right staff' was viewed as critical to the success of the SPiM and the importance of softer skills, such as empathy and passion, was raised in this respect. In providing a high-quality education staff to children with sensory disabilities in SPiMS, the recruitment of experienced staff with the requisite skills was viewed as critical. There was a view among education stakeholders that newly qualified teachers are not sufficiently experienced to meet the complexity of need within SPiMS classes. A particular challenge raised by stakeholders in the Irish Medium sector was a lack of data sharing by the EA which makes long term workforce planning difficult.

Transitions

With the rapid increase in the number of SPiMS across NI, there were significant concerns that current arrangements for key transitions are inadequate. Education staff, parents and advocacy groups highlighted that a lack of planning to ensure suitable and timely pathways within, between and out of school, risks the repetition of inequities faced by children at SEND at foundation stage throughout every key stage of their school journey.

Within schools, a lack of forward planning by the EA was associated with gaps in terms of placements for children moving between key stages. Some principals questioned EA's decision making, suggesting that it was not evident that sufficient attention was afforded to transition pathways when prioritising the establishment of SPiMS across schools.

Transitions to post-primary school were also considered problematic due to a relative lack of SPiMS geographically. Stakeholders were concerned that, while this transition can be an anxious time for many pupils, some were being transitioned from a primary school SPiM into a mainstream post primary placement where they were finding it difficult to cope in an inappropriate environment. Education staff identified a lack of detail within statements as a further barrier to planning for positive transitions and, in this context, noted the importance of information sharing between relevant teaching staff across primary and post-primary schools. A specific concern raised in relation to legacy SPiMS was that an unexpected shift in complexity of pupils' needs had caused uncertainty in relation to established pathways between primary school and local secondary school SPiMS.

Stakeholders also described a dearth of appropriate post-16 options for young people in post-primary SPiMS. There was a very strong sense of inequity among parents about the 'cliff-edge' transitions faced by some young people at the age of 16, in the absence of suitable school, further education, training or employment options. Although some pupils may be given the opportunity to transition to a mainstream class with a classroom assistant at age 16, or to a special school, it was noted that this approach is not always appropriate depending on pupils' needs.

A specific concern raised by parents was that provision detailed in statutory statements up to the age of 19 may be severed prematurely at the age of 16 years for some young people who are currently in SPiMS. This was an immense source of stress and anxiety for parents

who felt that young people with SEND are not being afforded opportunities to succeed on an equal basis with others. It was further noted that restricted options to remain in education up to the age of 19 affects eligibility for Employment Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and can therefore also impact young people financially. There can also be serious financial implications for parents/carers who may be compelled to take up caring responsibilities and/or exit employment.

Outcomes for children and young people

During discussions about SPiMS, stakeholders highlighted various factors that they felt were influential for children's outcomes. Education staff spoke positively about smaller class sizes and lower pupil to teacher ratios, which they felt were supportive of a nurturing, individualised and flexible approach to curriculum delivery. In taking an individualised approach, teachers were able to shift the balance of focus on the emotional, social or academic needs of individual pupils as required. Smaller classes were also considered more conducive to building teacher-parent relationships, which was perceived as beneficial for home-school communication and a taking a collaborative approach to meeting children's needs. We heard very encouraging examples of how these different factors had positively influenced pupils' emotional wellbeing, their engagement in learning, and/or their school attendance.

The SPiMS model was also considered to offer a great degree of flexibility in terms of the inclusion of pupils in mainstream classes. Education staff reported taking an individualised approach to this, with the balance of time spent between the SPiM and mainstream classes tailored towards the specific needs of each pupil. This approach was perceived to be advantageous for pupils who could 'dip their toe in' and transition to mainstream at a pace tailored towards their needs. While the potential for 'phased inclusion' in mainstream was regarded positively, some education staff pointed out that this would not be feasible for all pupils, despite advice from EA officers to work towards this.

We were also informed that, in some schools, pupils in mainstream classes who were not formally placed in the SPiM could benefit from its nurturing and tailored approach through 'reverse integration'. For example, a pupil could spend time in the SPiM if they required additional literacy, numeracy, emotional or social support. A post primary school teacher advised that the school's specialist provision could be a 'sanctuary' for mainstream pupils and therefore beneficial for their wellbeing. Reverse integration was also considered helpful in terms of promoting peer relationships and friendships among pupils across mainstream and SPiM classes, helping to foster inclusion.

In parallel with these positive aspects, stakeholders highlighted factors which could be detrimental to children's outcomes. An important factor determining the quality of educational experience, and hence outcomes, was the appropriateness of placement in a SPiM. In the case of children who were considered to be placed inappropriately, education

staff raised concerns about a lack of academic progression and in a few cases, educational regression. There were further concerns that unmet needs in this context can manifest in highly distressed behaviour, impacting on the wellbeing of the individual child and raising anxiety among other children in the classroom. We were also made aware that when a child's needs cannot be met, a decision may be taken by the school to implement the use of a reduced timetable. Stakeholders provided examples involving children who were in school for less than one hour each day, minimising their access to education and important opportunities to learn, play, socialise, form friendships, and participate in recreational activities. Wider family impacts, including financial impacts, were also noted, as these circumstances may require a parent to give up their employment.

In a more specific case, a parent associated the deterioration of her child's education and mental health with her previous experience in a post primary school SPiM. Her daughter, who has a disability, had experienced significant anxiety and learning loss, which the parent attributed to the teacher's inexperience, lack of specialist skills and expertise, and more broadly, poor school leadership. The parent was concerned that, in the context of action short of strike, the quality of provision was not effectively scrutinised, to the detriment of her daughter and her peers.

Adequate physical space, both in the classroom and outdoor, was considered of particular importance in supporting the emotional regulation and wellbeing of children. We observed considerable variation during school visits in this respect, and some education staff highlighted concerns that cramped conditions in their SPiM classrooms, inadequate sensory space, and/or outdoor space, posed a risk to children's safety and wellbeing. Insufficient consideration of overall class profile and/or insufficient staff: pupil ratios were considered to amplify risks.

Stakeholders also expressed concerns that some children and young people feel a sense of stigma associated with placement in a SPiM, 'unit' or 'special class', which can impact their self-esteem and/or the sense of belonging they feel in school. In an example involving a pupil at post-primary school, a parent advised that this had resulted in their child's reluctance to attend school. While schools we visited emphasised the importance of inclusion, and had taken various measures to promote this, direct engagement with children and young people is needed to hear their views and experiences on this, and other matters, addressed in this report.

Summary of key themes

Appropriateness of placements

- Stakeholders perceived that a growing number of pupils are being placed inappropriately. This includes pupils in SPiMS who are considered to require a

special school placement, and pupils with MLD who have been inappropriately placed in mainstream classes as places in SPiMS are allocated to pupils with more complex needs.

- Education staff were concerned that increased complexity in SPiMS is not always adequately reflected in allocated staff-to-pupil ratios, while there can be insufficient consideration of overall class profile by the EA when placing pupils.

- Perceived gaps in SPiMS provision included a lack of post-primary SPiMS in some geographical areas; an insufficient number of SPiMS at early years stage; a shortage of IME SPiMS at post primary school level; gaps at specific key stages within schools to ensure appropriate transition pathways; and a shortage of specialist placements for children with behaviour needs.

- Schools' enhanced access to Education Psychology and greater involvement in decision making was viewed as critical to ensuring that children are placed appropriately.

Communication

- Poor communication by the EA about placements for pupils with SEND is a significant barrier to effective planning by schools in advance of children taking up placements in SPiMS, and a source of unnecessary stress for children and parents/carers.

- There is a need for clear parental guidance on the placement allocation process and different types of provision, including SPiMS, in local areas.

Inclusion

- A clear definition of and vision for 'inclusion' should be set out in policy as soon as possible.

- Pupils in SPiMS can face specific barriers to social participation, which was identified as an important element of inclusion.

- Fostering an inclusive school culture must involve robust anti-bullying measures, and enhanced education on equality and diversity, disability, and autism awareness, for all pupils and staff.

- Rigorous monitoring and evaluation of the quality and inclusiveness of SPiMS, with the involvement of children and their families, is required.

Support services

- EA's pupil support services were perceived as increasingly difficult to access due to stricter criteria and higher thresholds, undermining early intervention approaches. Support provided was not always considered sufficiently specialist in supporting children with complex needs.

- Education staff highlighted that limitations in current behaviour support services could place them in a position where they did not feel adequately supported to mitigate the risk of children harming themselves, and/or others in the classroom.

- There were concerns about levels of unmet need in SPiMS, related to poor access to Allied Health Professionals (AHPs), and the risks posed to children's development.

Workforce issues

- Identified gaps in training provision for teachers and classroom assistants in SPiMS included training on the use of restrictive practices, inclusion, disability, autism and behaviour.

- Training and support provided by the Education Authority's Specialist Setting Support Team (SSST) was described positively but can taper off prematurely and is not equally accessible to staff working in 'legacy' SPiMS.

Transitions

- Ineffective planning by the EA to ensure adequate transition pathways, within, between, and out of schools, was identified as a significant source of uncertainty and stress for pupils, parents and education staff.

- A lack of post-16 transition pathways for young people in post-primary SPiMS is placing some pupils at a significant disadvantage in terms of their education and can financially impact young people and their parents/carers.

Children's outcomes

- Smaller class sizes and lower pupil to teacher ratios were considered supportive of an individualised, nurturing and flexible approach to learning, positively influencing pupils' wellbeing, engagement in learning, and attendance.

- Flexibility in terms of pupils' inclusion in mainstream classes, and 'reverse integration' of mainstream pupils in SPiMS, were considered facilitative of a tailored approach to supporting pupils' emotional, social and academic needs and positive in terms of fostering inclusion.

- Inappropriate placement in a SPiM, and/or significant gaps in required specialist skills, resources and health interventions, were associated with the risk of regression in children's learning, language, communication and other aspects of development.

- The use of reduced timetables is resulting in minimal or reduced access to education for children with SEND.

- The appropriateness of indoor and outdoor space available to children in SPiMS, although identified as critical for their learning and broader wellbeing, was variable across schools.

Conclusion

The findings detailed in this report highlight many areas where significant investment and improvement are required to ensure that education within SPiMS is truly inclusive for all pupils. Stakeholders identified challenges, related to inappropriate placements, communication, planning, transitions, resourcing, staff training, inclusion, and access to health interventions and other services, which can impact negatively on children's learning, wellbeing and development.

However, important strengths the SPiMS model were also highlighted, related to smaller class sizes, an individualised and flexible approach to learning, enhanced home-school communication, home-to-school travel distances, inclusive practices and increased diversity in the school population. Ensuring that children are appropriately placed, and that SPiMS are properly resourced, were identified as critical factors in ensuring that children can thrive and fulfil their full potential.

As the number of SPiMS in mainstream schools continue to be increased, addressing identified challenges and maximising strengths, through effective planning and communication, enhanced investment, and cross-departmental collaboration, must be prioritised by the EA and the Department.

Recommendations

1. **The EA should urgently review and improve communication and planning processes regarding SEND placements,** including taking steps to enhance the meaningful and timely involvement of schools in decision making.

2. **The EA should develop user-friendly guidance for children**, **young people and their parents/carers** on SPiMS and the wider placements process.

3. **The Department should introduce a comprehensive policy framework for inclusive education**, including a clear definition of inclusion and specific objectives it seeks to achieve.

4. **An early intervention and multi-disciplinary approach must be taken by the EA in their delivery of services for children with SEND**, including investment in workforce development, specialist support and Education Psychology. This should include a review of criteria to ensure services are accessible to pupils across all settings.

5. **The establishment of localised, specialised, multi-disciplinary teams,** integrating health services, must be prioritised.

6. **Rigorous monitoring and evaluation of SPiMS** must be undertaken by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) on a regular basis, with the involvement of pupils and/or their parents and carers.

7. **Enhanced planning and investment by the Department and the EA** is required to ensure appropriate, high quality and timely transition pathways into, between and out of SPiMS are available to all pupils.

8. **The Department must prioritise capital investment** to expand special school capacity and support the development of suitable and inclusive SPiMS environments.

9. In line with the findings of the NI Audit Office's 2024 report '*Managing the Schools' Estate'*, **the Department of Education should prioritise the strategic repurposing of underutilised elements of the school estate to expand provision for special schools and specialist units.**

10. **The Department and the EA should explore and invest in an enhanced role for special schools and the EA's SSST team** to ensure that all education staff, across 'new' and 'legacy' SPiMS, are adequately trained, guided and supported to meet the diverse needs of pupils. Identified gaps in training and support related to inclusion, disability, autism, behaviour and the use restrictive practices should be addressed.

11. **The Department and the EA should take action to capture and analyse disaggregated data on the use on reduced timetables**, including prevalence, duration and reasons for use, and the impact on children, young people and their families.