This article describes how children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities are supported in mainstream education. It covers the age range 0-19.

A new SEN framework is being developed by the Department of Education, the first element of which was the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland) 2016. The Act and its provisions will commence when the other elements of the new framework are implemented. These other elements will include new SEN regulations, a new statutory Code of Practice and training on the framework. Until then, the existing Code of Practice and associated framework, described in this article, remain in place.

Further information about the legal framework, which covers SEN provision in both mainstream and special education settings, is included in the ‘Introduction’ to this chapter.

**Definition of the target group(s)**

**Learning difficulties and disabilities**

Section 3 of The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 states that a child has special educational needs (SEN) if they have ‘a learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision to be made’ for them.

A child has a learning difficulty if he or she:

- 'has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of his / her age;
- has a disability which either prevents or hinders him or her from making use of educational facilities of a kind generally provided for children of his / her age in ordinary (mainstream) schools.‘

A child under compulsory school age (below the age of four) has a learning difficulty or disability if the above definition is likely to apply when he or she reaches compulsory school age.

The Order defines special educational provision for a child over the age of two as ‘educational provision which is additional to, or otherwise different from, the educational provision made generally’ for children of the same age in mainstream provision. In the case of children under two, this is educational provision of any kind.

**Categories of special educational needs (SEN)**

Schools use a list of categories to record information about their pupils with special educational needs.
(SEN). This information is for their own use and for the annual school census. Following a review of the categories in 2017/18, the Department of Education published a new list for schools’ use from January 2019. The new guidance identifies five main categories of SEN or difficulty, each of which are broken down into more specific areas.

Cognition and learning:

- dyslexia or specific learning difficulty – language / literacy
- dyscalcula or specific learning difficulty – mathematics / numeracy
- moderate learning difficulties
- severe learning difficulties
- profound and multiple learning difficulties.

Social, behavioural, emotional and well-being:

- social and behavioural difficulties
- emotional and well-being difficulties
- severe challenging behaviour associated with severe learning difficulties or profound and multiple learning difficulties.

Speech, language and communication needs:

- developmental language disorder
- language disorder associated with a differentiating biomedical condition
- communication and social interaction difficulties.

Sensory:

- blind
- partially sighted
- severe / profound hearing impairment
- mild / moderate hearing impairment
- multi-sensory impairment.

Physical needs:

- physical.

The guidance acknowledges that many pupils with SEN will have more than one type of special educational need or difficulty. It requires schools to use the categories to record information on a pupil’s greatest (or primary) need, and, where appropriate, pupils’ secondary needs (although there is no limit to the number of SEN categories which can be recorded).

Collecting and recording this information about children with SEN aims to provide sound comparative information to inform special educational planning and policy development, to identify funding needs, and to monitor trends and provide answers to queries about data.

A child does not have a learning difficulty or disability solely because the language in which he or she is or will be taught is different from a language which is spoken at home. This is set out in Section 3 of The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996.

Being gifted or talented is not regarded as a special educational need – see the article on ‘Support Measures for Learners’.
Specific support measures

Until the new Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice [2] is finalised and implemented alongside the new SEN framework, specific support measures for pupils with SEN in mainstream education are provided within the framework of a five-stage approach, as set out in the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs [8] (2005). Support includes school-based measures and external advice and support services.

The five-stage approach

In recognising that there is a continuum of special educational needs (SEN), the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs [8] (2005) sets out a five-stage approach to the identification of children with SEN, the assessment of their SEN, and the making of whatever special educational provision is necessary to meet those needs.

The first three stages of the five-stage approach are based in school, supported by the school's special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) [9].

a. Stage 1: teachers identify and register a child’s SEN and take initial action, consulting the SENCO.

b. Stage 2: the SENCO takes lead responsibility for collecting and recording information and for co-ordinating the child’s SEN provision, working with the child’s teachers.

c. Stage 3: teachers and the SENCO are supported by specialists from outside the school in making provision for a child’s SEN.

Where children are judged to require more specialist intervention, they undergo a statutory process of assessment by the Education Authority (EA) [10], as part of stages 4 and 5.

a. Stage 4: the EA considers the need for a statutory assessment of a child’s SEN and, if appropriate, makes a multi-disciplinary assessment.

b. Stage 5: the EA considers the need for a statement of special educational needs and, if appropriate, makes a statement and arranges, monitors and reviews provision.

Statements of special educational needs

A statement of special educational needs (SEN) is a statutory document which details the needs of a child or young person up to the age of 19; lists the special educational provision required; names an appropriate school or other arrangements; and, if necessary, gives details of the non-educational provision required. It is made following a statutory assessment of the young person’s needs, and will usually be made where the Education Authority (EA) determines that the special educational provision necessary to meet these needs cannot be provided within the resources normally available to mainstream schools. A statement of SEN must be reviewed at least every 12 months.

Further information on the process of statutory assessment and on statements of special educational needs is available in Parts III and IV respectively of the 2005 Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs [8] (pages 25-51).

Special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs)

All grant-aided [11] mainstream schools in Northern Ireland should have a designated teacher with responsibility for coordinating and overseeing special educational needs (SEN) provision. In a small school, this special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) may be the principal (headteacher). The
role of the SENCO is both strategic in terms of developing SEN policy and provision, and operational. It includes:

- the day-to-day operation of the school’s SEN policy;
- responding to requests for advice from other teachers;
- coordinating SEN provision and ensuring appropriate liaison with all teachers who will teach a child with SEN;
- maintaining the SEN register with records on pupils with SEN;
- liaison with parents of children with SEN;
- establishing the SEN in-service (training) requirements of staff and contributing, as appropriate, to their training;
- liaison with external agencies.

The SEN ‘Resource File’ [12]’ and the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs [8] (2005) (pages 7-8) provide further information on the role of the SENCO, which is not statutory. It was introduced under the Code of Practice which grant-aided schools must have regard to.

Note: The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 [3] introduced a statutory requirement for schools to designate a teacher as learning support coordinator. The learning support coordinator will have responsibility for coordinating the provision of education for those pupils who have SEN and the role will replace that of the SENCO. The 2016 Act and its provisions are yet to be implemented. For further information on the new legislation, see the ‘Introduction’ [4]’ to this chapter.

Inclusion in curriculum and assessment arrangements

Inclusion in the curriculum

The Northern Ireland Curriculum [13] sets out the minimum requirements at each key stage [14] of education and is considered the starting point for planning a school curriculum that meets the needs of individual pupils. ‘Access statements’ in the curriculum documents aim to ensure that teachers have high expectations for all children and young people. The ‘Access Statement to Ensure Equality of Opportunity for All’ in the Key Stage 3 curriculum framework [15], for example, states that all teachers ‘should provide suitably challenging opportunities for each young person to take part fully and effectively in lessons, to experience success in learning, and to achieve as high a standard as possible’ (page 23). This includes those children and young people with special educational needs (SEN).

The access statements (page 3 of the Primary curriculum framework [16] and page 23 of the Key Stage 3 framework) suggest how learning opportunities can be adapted or modified as necessary to provide relevant and challenging work appropriate to individual pupil needs. They set out that, in most cases, the action necessary to respond to an individual’s requirements for curriculum access will be by differentiating tasks and materials appropriately to the age and requirements of the pupil, and by working closely with other agencies who may be supporting the child. They state also that many pupils with disabilities can access the curriculum alongside their peers with little need for additional resources beyond the aids or equipment they use as part of their daily lives.

The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) provides a range of curriculum resources [17] to support teachers in meeting the diverse needs of pupils with SEN. These resources aim to offer teachers support in the planning, teaching and assessment process within the classroom.
The curriculum can also be disapplied for some students with SEN.

**Inclusion in statutory assessment**

In many cases, pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities are assessed by their teachers in the same way as their peers. This includes participation in the statutory **Northern Ireland Curriculum** [18] assessment arrangements. These involve:

- annual teacher assessment in the areas of learning, the cross-curricular skills (communication, using mathematics, using ICT), and in thinking skills and capabilities;
- annual teacher reporting of pupil progress with reference to the **Levels of Progression** [19] for the cross-curricular skills;
- end-of-key-stage assessment (at ages 8, 11 and 14) in the cross-curricular skills.

Some pupils may be exempted from this statutory assessment, including:

- pupils with a statement of SEN who have been assessed as having severe learning difficulties;
- pupils whose statement of SEN explicitly exempts them from all or part of the assessment arrangements;
- pupils who, in exceptional circumstances, are exempted on a temporary basis by the principal (headteacher), on the basis that participation in the statutory assessment arrangements would be inappropriate.

Details of the circumstances and procedures for making temporary exceptions are set out in **Circular 1990/45** [20]. In addition, government guidance on the **Key Stages 1 and 2 - Assessment Arrangements 2017-18** [21] (page 2), and on the assessment arrangements in **Key Stage 3** [22] (page 2), details the exemptions which may apply.

**Alternative assessment arrangements**

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has also developed a range of **assessment frameworks** [23]. These are for use with students with special educational needs (SEN) who are unable to access the statutory assessments in primary or secondary education, or the available secondary or post-16 qualifications (see below). They include the following frameworks.

- **Prerequisite Skills (or Q Skills)** [24] assessments, which build towards Level 1 of the Levels of Progression in the cross-curricular skills of communication, using mathematics, and using ICT. Q Skills aim to offer a broad and inclusive framework for assessing learners taking into account their age, cognitive ability, learning difficulties and other complex needs. The requirements outlined in the Q Skills assessments align with those of the mainstream statutory assessments in the cross-curricular skills.
- **Quest for Learning** [25], which is a guidance and assessment resource for teachers and classroom assistants working with learners with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD).

**Access arrangements for external qualifications**

Assessment at the end of Key Stage 4 (age 16) and in post-16 education is through external qualifications such as **GCSEs** [26] and **A Levels** [27].

GCSEs, which are the qualifications most commonly taken at age 16, are designed to accredit a wide range of achievement. Although higher GCSE grades are an important benchmark for progression, the qualifications also accredit achievement at lower levels.
Access arrangements allow students with special educational needs (SEN), disabilities or temporary injuries to access these external qualifications. Such arrangements, which may involve readers, scribes or Braille question papers, for example, aim to allow examination candidates to demonstrate what they can do without changing the demands of the assessment or disadvantaging other students. The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) produces guidance on access arrangements, reasonable adjustments and special consideration which applies to all qualifications offered in schools and colleges.

In addition, for pupils judged not ready for GCSEs, there are Entry Level qualifications. These constitute the first levels of the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) and aim to encourage progression to, for example, Level 1 / Level 2 qualifications such as GCSEs. See the subheading ‘Certification’ in the article on ‘Assessment in General Lower Secondary Education’ for more information.

**External services**

Schools have access to external services provided by the Education Authority (EA). These include:

- educational psychology services (see the article on ‘Guidance and Counselling’)
- parent support services
- special educational needs (SEN) teaching and support services
- behavioural support services
- education welfare services.

Schools can also access specialist advice and training as well as a range of external professionals and services. Specific training for staff focused around the needs of particular pupils may be commissioned. Similarly, it may be necessary to regularly access specialist advice to provide effective provision for a pupil.

Where schools make use of external SEN teachers to support pupils with visual or hearing impairment, these teachers much have a specialist qualification in education for the hearing or visually impaired. The approved courses are listed in Annex B of Circular 2007/22.

External services provided by the Health and Social Care (HSC) service include Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and speech and language therapy. CAMHS operate at three levels: universal, targeted, and specialist. Universal services are for all children and young people; targeted services provide early interventions for vulnerable children and young people; and specialist services are available for children and young people with complex, severe and / or persistent needs. Specialist services work across agencies covering education, social care and youth offending and are targeted at children and young people with the highest level of need. See the subheading ‘CAMHS’ in the article on ‘Guidance and Counselling’.

Speech and language therapy is generally provided by the HSC service. However, if it is a requirement of a statement of special educational needs, the Education Authority becomes responsible. Speech and language therapy can be regarded as educational or non-educational provision, depending on a child’s health and development history.

Education, health and social care services have statutory duties to co-operate to ensure effective provision for children and young people with SEN. See pages 11-13 of the 2005 Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs.
Support for pupils with medical conditions

Schools also support pupils with medical needs who may or who may not also have special educational needs (SEN). The Department of Education provides guidance to schools on supporting pupils with medication needs, although there is no overarching legal duty requiring school staff to administer medication.

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