



Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-informed policy and law-making within Northern Ireland



From Entitlement to Enforceable Rights: Strengthening Post- 19 Pathways for Learners with Special Educational Needs in Northern Ireland

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Stranmillis University College

24 June 2026

Introduction

Key Question:

How can post-19 pathways for learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) be strengthened so that rights, provision and outcomes are brought into closer alignment?

Introduction

The Presentation draws on three recent externally funded research projects:

1

Purdy, N., Gibson, K., Johnston, N., Symington, E. & Reid, C. (February 2025). *Comparative Analysis of Legislative Frameworks for Post-19 Education and Skills Provision for Young People with Disabilities and SEN*. Department for the Economy (NI)/Stranmillis University College: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement.

2

Gibson, K., Purdy, N., McCrudden, K., Symington, E. & Shields, M. (April 2025). *Pathways to Inclusion: Exploring Higher Education Opportunities for People with Intellectual Disabilities in Northern Ireland*. Northern Ireland Office, as part of the Step-Up Programme, administered by the Department for the Economy (NI)/Stranmillis University College: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement.

3

Purdy, N., Boddison, A., Symington, E., Ballentine, M., Johnston, N. & Tate, K. (December 2025). *TRANSFORM: Exploring Pathways and Barriers for Young People with Disabilities Transitioning from Education to Employment in Northern Ireland*. Epic Futures/Stranmillis University College: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement.



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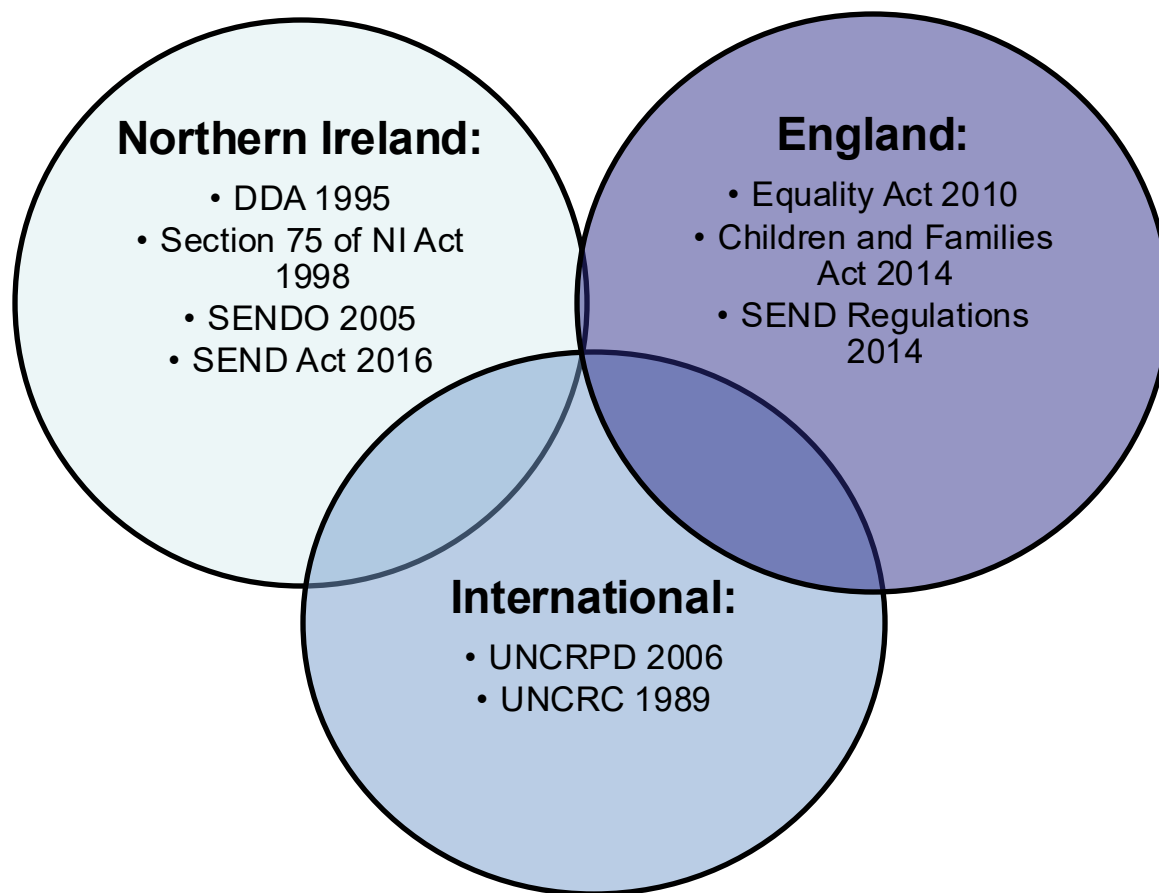


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Legislative context for post-19 SEN provision



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Realities of Current Post-19 SEN Provision in NI

Insights from Recent Research (2025–2026)

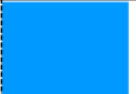
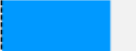
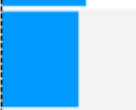


A post-19 “cliff edge”



Absence of inclusive higher education models in Northern Ireland

Findings from the Epic Futures TRANSFORM Project (2026)

What areas of support do you feel are most lacking? (Tick all that apply)	n	%	
Health and social care support after age 19	29	74%	
Information and advice for parents	25	64%	
Transport	23	59%	
Suitable local training or education options	20	51%	
Joined-up planning between services	19	49%	
Work placement or employment opportunities	17	44%	
None of the above	1	3%	
Other	0	0%	
Answered	39	100%	

Parental survey of pupils preparing to transition from special school

What challenges has your child faced since leaving school? (Tick all that apply)	n	%	
Poor transition planning	16	76%	
Lack of suitable opportunities	15	71%	
Lack of support from Health and Social Care	13	62%	
Limited transport	13	62%	
Lack of support in training or work setting	10	48%	
Health or mental health issues	8	38%	
None	1	5%	
Other	0	0%	
Answered	21	100%	

Parental survey of pupils who have recently transitioned from special school

Findings from the Epic Futures TRANSFORM Project (2026)



TRANSFORM

Exploring Pathways and Barriers for Young People with Disabilities Transitioning from Education to Employment in Northern Ireland

February 2026



Prof Noel Purdy OBE, Prof Adam Boddison OBE,
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- *“There’s a cliff edge... and there are absolutely no laws to make anyone step in”.*
- *“For complex needs, there's just very, very little provision”.*
- *We have this horrible situation where he's been excluded basically from education and training and a career because there [are] no physical facilities”.*



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Responsibility for supporting young people with SEN spans several departments:

- The Department of Education
 - Department for the Economy
 - Department of Health
 - Department for Communities
-
- *“Collaborative and co-funded cross-departmental pilots to try to provide pathways for these young people for whom our existing systems don’t work” (DfE, 2025).*



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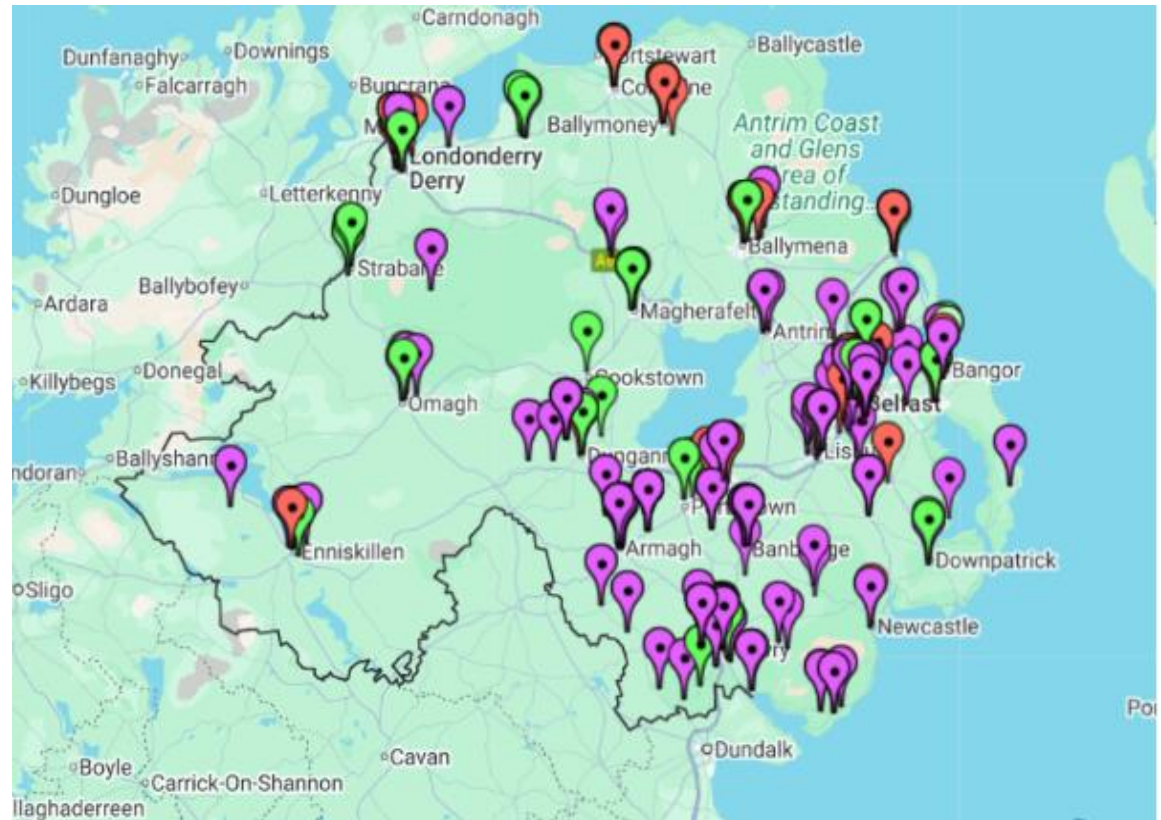
Mapping SEN Provision

In the end, 333 provisions were identified across Northern Ireland:

134 Day Opportunities
(Purple)

125 Educational Opportunities
(Green)

74 Employment Opportunities
(Red)



Map of Employment Opportunities, Educational Opportunities and Day Opportunities discovered during research



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Key Barriers

Northern Ireland's post-19 SEN transition system remains fragmented, inconsistent, and insufficiently responsive to the needs of young people and their families.

Key barriers include:

- Limited and poorly matched progression pathways
- Geographical inequalities
- Fragmented services
- Weak interdepartmental coordination

These issues contribute to poorer educational, employment, and social outcomes for young people with SEN in Northern Ireland.

Recommendations for Improving Provision

1. Create a centralised provision map
2. Strengthen cross-departmental accountability
3. Reform legislation and strengthen rights
4. Expand and regulate provision
5. Plan for future demand

Conclusions

- Northern Ireland's post-19 SEN framework remains fragmented, with weak accountability and reliance on discretionary provision.
- Young people and families continue to experience a post-19 “cliff edge”, uneven support and limited cross-departmental coordination.
- The proposed UNCRPD Bill could strengthen accountability by placing a statutory “due regard” duty on public authorities.
- Rights-based reform requires enforceable duties, coordinated planning, transparent data, adequate resourcing and clear routes to redress.
- Comparative evidence from England and Wales shows that legislation must be matched by effective implementation to deliver meaningful outcomes.





Northern Ireland
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