

Educational Underachievement – Expert Panel Survey

Summary

The Expert Panel has launched a survey seeking written views and evidence on links between educational underachievement and social disadvantage.

The survey will run from Monday 14 September 2020 until **midnight on Friday 16 October 2020** inclusive. Please note that responses received after the deadline may not be considered.

You are strongly encouraged to use the online link for submission of your views and evidence.

Questions

1. What is your name?

Deborah Howe, Equality Commission for NI

2. Please provide an email address

dhowe@equalityni.org

3. Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?

Organisation

4. Please provide the name of your organisation and outline briefly its context/aims and scope.

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland is a non departmental public body established by the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Our powers and duties derive from a number of statutes which have been enacted over the last decades, providing protection against discrimination on the grounds of age, disability, race, religion and political opinion, sex and sexual orientation. We also have responsibilities arising from the Northern Ireland Act 1998 in respect of the statutory equality and good relations duties which apply to public authorities.

The Equality Commission and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission jointly perform the role of Independent Mechanism in Northern Ireland to promote, protect and monitor the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The Equality Commission also has a statutory role in overseeing the commitment by the United Kingdom Government, in the Protocol of Ireland / Northern Ireland, to no diminution of rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity.

Our sponsor Department is The Executive Office which carries responsibilities for equality policy and legislation in the Northern Ireland Executive.

Whilst socio-economic disadvantage is not a specified ground under the equality legislation, the barriers and inequalities experienced by equality groups can be exacerbated by poverty and social exclusion. The Commission continues to proactively highlight the link between poverty and social exclusion, and the inequalities faced by individuals protected under the equality legislation and stresses the need for urgent action to address poverty and social exclusion experienced by a range of equality groups.

The points set out below are made with respect to our statutory equality remit.

5. Are you responding as? Please choose from the options below:

Child/ Young Person

Parent / Carer / Family member

Education professional

Member of general public

Other (please provide details below)

Statutory Body – Equality Commission. Please see response to question 4 above.

6. What would you say are the main causes of educational underachievement?

1.1 The Equality Commission has identified a range of factors that impact upon educational achievement. Our 2017 *Statement on Key Inequalities in Education*¹ found that while overall levels of attainment were increasing, attainment gaps by gender, religion, ethnicity and disability were also widening.

1.2 Barriers to accessing education undoubtedly impact upon attainment outcomes. For example, children and young people, including Travellers, Roma and Newcomers and children with disabilities, may be unable to access an education fully due to language, physical accessibility or institutional barriers.

Equality groups, social disadvantage and type of school attended

1.3 Whilst socio-economic disadvantage is not a specified ground under the equality legislation, it is clear that the barriers and inequalities experienced by equality groups are exacerbated by poverty and social exclusion. At every stage of schooling, Northern Ireland's poorest children are likely to do worse, and make less progress than their better-off classmates².

¹ ECNI (2017) [Statement on Key Inequalities in Education in Northern Ireland](#)

² JRF (2020) [Poorer children's educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviours?](#)

- 1.4 Free school meal entitlement (FSME), a strong indicator of social disadvantage³, is closely linked to low levels of academic achievement. For example, 49.5% of FSME school leavers achieve at least 5 GCSEs at A*–C standard (including English and Maths) compared to 70.8% of those without FSME⁴.
- 1.5 Similar or worse patterns of attainment can be observed for certain equality groups when an equality lens is applied to FSME.
- 1.6 By way of illustration, although there has been some improvement in overall attainment, a trend of underachievement and lack of progression persists for those entitled to free school meals (FSME), particularly boys, notably Protestant boys. Protestant male pupils entitled to free school meals have the lowest rates of attainment in respect of GCSE and A Level results when compared to either female or Roman Catholic peers. They also have the lowest proportions of school leavers moving on to higher education.
- 1.7 A further issue impacting on educational attainment is the type of school attended. 13.7% of pupils at grammar schools are eligible for FSM, compared to 30.7% of the pupil population across all school types⁵. Grammar schools therefore have a skewed intake of low-income children⁶.

Post primary transfer

- 1.8 The Commission has, for a sustained period, noted its concern about the use of academic selection at eleven years old as a method for determining transfer to post-primary education⁷. A 2016 JRF briefing on poverty in Northern Ireland⁸ reported *‘strong evidence that selective systems of education, using examination methods such as the Transfer Test, have a negative impact upon the attainment of children from low-income backgrounds’*.
- 1.9 Aligned to this, data demonstrates that a number of Section 75 groups are over-represented within free school meal entitlement. Language and awareness barriers have also been identified for Newcomer children.
- 1.10 In 2017, the Department of Education’s Strategic and Policy Development Forum⁹ highlighted negative impacts of academic selection, including evidence that it led to some primary school children becoming uninterested in learning in Year 6. This finding is echoed in the Executive

³ Salisbury, Robert, Sir (2015) Educational performance in Northern Ireland: the current state of play, the Policy Forum for Northern Ireland conference on Education in Northern Ireland: raising standards, school accountability and leadership, page 8

⁴ DENI / NISRA (2020) Qualifications and destinations of Northern Ireland school leavers 2018/19

⁵ DENI / NISRA (2020) School meals in Schools 2019/20

⁶ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2016) Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland

⁷ ECNI (2009) [Response to the Department of Education – Transfer 2010](#)

⁸ JRF (2016) A Prosperous, poverty-free Northern Ireland, p. 9

⁹ DE (2017) Report of the Strategic Forum Working Group on Inclusion and Prosperity

Office's ILIAD (Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation) report¹⁰. This has implications for the Department's ability to close the performance gap and increase access and equality¹¹.

Traveller, Roma, Newcomer and Refugee children

- 1.11 Some BME groups face barriers such as a lack of English proficiency; stereotyping and low expectations; and an inability of mainstream schools to meet the needs of individual pupils¹². Although the statistical base is small, evidence shows that many Traveller and Roma children consistently leave school early with few or no qualifications.
- 1.12 The Taskforce on Traveller Education¹³ recommended that the 2013 Traveller Child in Education framework:
- “...must be adequately monitored and resourced and should include target dates and responsibilities for delivery of improvements in Traveller access, attainment, attendance, enrolment and advancement. Actions should be taken on firm evidence with collection and further analysis of data to enable monitoring of outcomes and evaluation of actions.”*
- 1.13 A monitoring and review group was to be established, but has not been to date. The absence of the group limits the ability to meet this recommendation to ensure desired outcomes are articulated and measured.
- 1.14 Newcomer children¹⁴ face a number of barriers to educational achievement, including limited English language ability, lack of knowledge of the education system, racist bullying and social exclusion.
- 1.15 Young refugees and asylum seekers face complex challenges in the education system. It is recognised that refugee and asylum seeking children have specific needs linked to their prior experience of formal education and interruptions in their education.
- 1.16 A 2010 Home Office report¹⁵ found that 14% of new refugees, the majority of them being women, had spent no years in formal education. Refugee and asylum seeking children often have very limited English Language skills and may have experienced trauma and other serious stresses before coming to Northern Ireland.

¹⁰ TEO (2017) [Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation](#)

¹¹ RAISE (2016) Academic Selection, a brief overview, Northern Ireland

¹² ECNI (2017) Statement of Key Inequalities in Education

¹³ Taskforce on Traveller Education (2011) [Report of the Taskforce to the Department of Education](#)

¹⁴ The DE defines a Newcomer as ‘a pupil who does not have satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum and does not have a language common with the teacher.’

¹⁵ UKBA Research Development and Statistics Directorate (2010) Helping new refugees integrate into the UK: baseline data analysis from the Survey of New Refugees UKBA Research Report 36

Children with Disabilities and/or Special Educational Needs

- 1.17 We highlighted the problems faced by children with disabilities, who did not necessarily have special educational needs, in accessing auxiliary aids and services in our 2013 case studies¹⁶. These included a disabled child who needed a communication system which would allow her to communicate beyond yes and no answers; another who required a Dictaphone, large print notes and extra time in exams; and a third who required a classroom assistant. None were entitled to the auxiliary aids and services sought because they were not, and could not be, stipulated in a Statement of special educational needs because the children concerned, while disabled, did not have SEN.
- 1.18 As a result of inadequate numbers of educational psychologists and lack of timeline for the assessment process, across Northern Ireland children with SEN are subject to unacceptable¹⁷ waiting times for assessment.
- 1.19 We note the Northern Ireland Audit Office's (NIAO) statement in its September 2020 impact review of special educational needs¹⁸ that: 'In our view there is a need for a systemic review of the SEN policies, processes, services and funding model to ensure the provision is sufficient to meet the needs of all children with SEN.'
- 1.20 While recognising that a greater proportion of children with SEN were leaving school with GCSEs or A levels and fewer were leaving school with no qualifications, the NIAO's 2017 review¹⁹ set out 10 recommendations for change. These included: ensuring consistency of approach to the identification and provision of support; teachers having appropriate training; recording and monitoring the reasons for delays in Statements being issued; and better monitoring of expenditure on SEN. It also called for continued effort to reduce delays in the issuing of Statements.

Young carers

- 1.21 For young carers, the requirement to provide care can result in low educational attainment and make the transition into adulthood more difficult, with regard to going into further education or securing employment.
- 1.22 Research undertaken in England²⁰ also showed that young carers obtained lower levels of educational attainment at GCSE level, equivalent to nine grades²¹ lower than their peers. This disadvantage has been found to continue with 75% of 16-18 year old carers spending time not in education, employment or training (NEET), compared to 25% of their non-

¹⁶ ECNI (2013) Strengthening Protection for Disabled People: Case Studies

¹⁷ Noted among the concerns regarding the statementing process in NI Assembly Research Paper (2015) [SEN legislation and policy in Northern Ireland](#), Caroline Perry

¹⁸ NIAO (2020) [Impact Review of SEN](#)

¹⁹ NIAO (2017) [Special Educational Needs](#)

²⁰ Children's Society (2013) ['Hidden from View : the experience of young carers in England'](#)

²¹ 'the difference between 9 Bs and 9 Cs'

carer peers²². There is no reason to suggest that Northern Ireland is different from the rest of the United Kingdom.

Children and young people subjected to bullying

- 1.23 Prejudice-based bullying at school can blight the lives of young people, negatively affecting their attendance and attainment as well as having a long-term impact upon their life chances. The Commission's *Statement on Key Inequalities in Education*²³ highlighted prejudice-based bullying as a persistent problem²⁴ for certain equality groups, including: trans pupils; minority ethnic students including Irish Travellers; students with SEN or a disability; and students with same sex attraction.
- 1.24 Missing school time is negatively correlated with educational attainment *and 'many young trans people in Northern Ireland are dropping out of education permanently because of the negative impact transphobic bullying has on their lives and the inability of schools to adequately support them'*²⁵.
- 1.25 Despite the existence of limited data on the presence of gay young people in the education system, various surveys and reports state that young people who report same sex attraction are more likely to be bullied in school than their peers and often self-exclude from school. Barriers for LGB students who are being bullied include lack of support from staff and unwillingness by schools to recognise and address homophobic bullying.

²² Audit Commission (2010) [Against the odds: Targeted briefing – Young carers](#). London: Audit

²³ ECNI (2017) [Statement on Key Inequalities in Education in Northern Ireland](#)

²⁴ This finding is also reflected in the 2017 Young Life and Times Survey. Ark (2018) [Young Life and Times Survey Summary of Results](#)

²⁵ McBride, RS (2013) *Grasping the Nettle: The Experiences of Gender Variant Children and Transgender Youth Living in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: Institute for Conflict Research

7. In your view, what is the main impact of educational underachievement?

- 1.26 The value of education includes, but goes much further than giving an individual the skills to perform a particular job or follow a profession. Education has a role in shaping an individual's views, their conduct, their relationships with others, and it has the potential to counter negative images and views that they can be exposed to outside of a school. When an individual fails to reach their full potential through education they miss out on a range of opportunities.
- 1.27 We recognise that the effects of education should not be seen as a panacea for all our social problems and divisions. Factors outside the school have a huge impact on the child's educational development. These include economic deprivation, family support, and housing.
- 1.28 People with fewer qualifications and skills are often disadvantaged in civic / community life and are at a much higher risk of unemployment and low pay. Whilst socio-economic status is not a specified ground under the equality legislation, the barriers and inequalities experienced by equality groups can be exacerbated by poverty and social exclusion.
- 1.29 Our education system rightly celebrates its successes in that 70.8% of our children achieve five or more GCSEs at grades A* - C, including English and Maths²⁶. It is at Grades A*-C at which an average pupil can be described as having the expected levels of functional skills in these subjects. It is therefore a matter of some concern that 29% fail to achieve an A*-C in English and Maths.
- 1.30 There is clear evidence, as set out in our Statement on Key Inequalities in Education, that children and young people from a range of equality categories, who are already at risk of being marginalised in society, often have lower levels of educational attainment. The practical consequences of poor educational attainment are to reinforce the cycle of deprivation that many poor, disabled, Traveller or other marginalised groups experience throughout their lives.

²⁶ DENI / NISRA (2020) Qualifications and destinations of Northern Ireland school leavers 2018/19

9. In your experience what has worked to address educational underachievement?

Any links to supporting evidence will not work through Citizen Space so links/ copies of external documents should be emailed to expertpanel@education-ni.gov.uk

- 1.31 The Commission both recognises and welcomes the progress made in advancing educational outcomes. We are also aware of the proactive steps taken by a range of bodies, including government departments and the education sector more broadly, to promote equality in education across the equality categories.
- 1.32 With regard to recent legislative and policy developments, the Commission has welcomed legislation on sharing in education; special educational needs; and addressing bullying in schools and have made clear how proposals could be enhanced or improved.
- 1.33 Whilst we both recognise and support this work, it is clear that challenges remain. We set out below a number of areas of education which have been shown to address educational underachievement, within Northern Ireland and more widely.

Family and community engagement

- 1.34 A number of Extended Schools programmes exist across Northern Ireland. The 2017 Investigation Links and Achieving Deprivation (ILiAD) report cited Extended Schools provision among the most important school level drivers of attainment²⁷.
- 1.35 The Full Service Extended Schools programme (FSES) and the Full Service Community Network (FSCN) are located in predominately Protestant and Catholic areas in Belfast including some of the most deprived electoral wards in Northern Ireland. These programmes are designed to address the barriers to learning that children and young people from these disadvantaged areas experience by providing additional support. In the FSCN programme the focus is on early intervention with the parents of children of pre-school and primary school age whereas the focus of the FSES is on supporting learners and their families as they transfer from primary to post primary.
- 1.36 Feedback²⁸ on the progress of these local partnership programmes involving children, parents, teachers and the wider community has been very positive with successful outcomes such as improved attendance and attainment recorded. The programmes highlighted appear to be effective

²⁷ TEO (2017) [Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation \(ILiAD\)](#)

²⁸ McMahon (2015) Full Service Extended Schools (FSES) and; Full Service Community Network (FSCN) Tackling barriers to Learning: the Policy Forum for Northern Ireland conference on Education in Northern Ireland: raising standards, school accountability and leadership

in addressing attainment and broader educational issues by involving those outside the immediate school²⁹. We have recommended that consideration of how those, such as BME groups and children with disabilities who may not live within socially deprived areas, could access such schemes, should they become more widespread.

Early years provision

- 1.37 European Commission research found that children who attended high quality provision had better performance in school, and better economic and social outcomes in later life. Research in Northern Ireland has found that children who did not attend pre-school showed poorer cognitive and behaviour outcomes than their peers who attended pre-school^{30,31}
- 1.38 Echoing the 2011 'Call to Action' report³², the 2015 PUP 'Firm Foundations' report³³ highlighted that early interventions are more effective and less complex than later remedial action. It also argued that while Sure Start has done excellent work there are many more children who would benefit but are not referred, are ineligible or are referred late. It also cited the impact of a lack of attention to early development from antenatal care through to early language therapy interventions on those entitled to free school meals, particularly Protestant working class boys.
- 1.39 We continue to call for appropriate, accessible and affordable childcare provision to meet the diverse needs of all children, including children with disabilities, those from BME communities and new residents³⁴. We have renewed these calls³⁵ in the context of the commitment to bring forward a Childcare Strategy within New Decade, New Approach.

Sharing successful interventions

- 1.40 In England, the Education Endowment Foundation and Sutton Trust are jointly designated by government as the 'What Works Centre for Education'³⁶. A 2018 review³⁷ found that: 'they have helped transform our understanding of the effectiveness of widely used but until now poorly evidenced practices'.
- 1.41 JRF³⁸ recommends developing a 'what works' centre to compile and promote high-quality evidence of ways schools can improve attainment for

²⁹ Report by the five ELBs (2015) Extended Schools Annual Report 2013-14

³⁰ Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons et al (2010) Early Childhood Matters: evidence from the effective pre-school and primary education project, cited in Northern Ireland Assembly Research Paper (2013) Early Years Provision, NIAR 68-13

³¹ EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (2012) Final Report

³² Purvis, D., (2011) Educational disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class, A Call to Action, p 7

³³ PUP (2015) Firm Foundations, Educational Underachievement and the Protestant Working Class Education: Getting it right for every child

³⁴ ECNI (2013) Childcare: Maximising the Economic participation of women

³⁵

³⁶ Others were established for policing, local economic growth and health and social care

³⁷ What Works Network (2018) [What Works Network, Five Years On](#)

³⁸ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2016) A prosperous, poverty free Northern Ireland

low income pupils and evaluate how successful these are. This type of approach could be extended to include pupils from the different equality groups with organisations such as the IES feeding in.

Sharing in education

- 1.42 Sharing can allow pupils to access the full range of the curriculum and may be encouraged to study those wider subjects at a further or higher education college. Such access is seen as ‘vital in areas where deprivation is more prevalent and is an important driver in breaking the cycle’³⁹. Pairing more effective schools with less effective schools may also offer the potential to close achievement gaps by improving standards and outcomes for all learners⁴⁰.
- 1.43 Such actions have the potential to also tackle low educational aspiration and achievement ingrained in disadvantaged communities, affecting those entitled to free school meals, particularly boys, including Protestant working class boys⁴¹ and contribute to addressing a legacy of working class sons having followed their fathers into jobs leading to a perception that qualifications are not needed⁴².

Targeted interventions and adoption / extension of best practice

- 1.44 We have recommended that consideration be given to the provision of dedicated programmes of formally taught education to provide ‘catch up’ learning for those most adversely affected by the loss of learning due to school closures during the pandemic. Such programmes should take account of lessons learnt from relevant programmes in Northern Ireland – for example, the Delivering Social Change ‘Literacy and Numeracy Programme’ which used newly qualified teachers to deliver tuition to children and young people who were ‘struggling to achieve even the basic educational standards’⁴³.
- 1.45 The Delivering Social Change Literacy and Numeracy Programme (2013-15) employed 310 recently graduated teachers to deliver tuition to children and young people in primary and post primary schools who were ‘struggling to achieve even the basic educational standards’⁴⁴. The Programme’s final report⁴⁵, prepared by the Education Authority, noted positive feedback with improvements in literacy and numeracy of targeted pupils, and reported more effective use of a broad range of data to identify

³⁹ Oxford Economic (2010) Developing the case for shared education, page 12

⁴⁰ Borooh and Knox (2012) Delivering Shared Education: Knowledge Exchange seminar

⁴¹ Barnardos (2010) Response to Purvis consultation on educational disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class

⁴² Purvis, D (2011) Educational disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class, A Call to Action, page 3

⁴³ OFMDFM (10.10.12) [Ministerial Statement](#)

⁴⁴ OFMDFM (10.10.12) [Ministerial Statement](#)

⁴⁵ DE (2015) [Delivery Social Change Literacy and Numeracy Signature Programme Final Report](#)

more accurately the pupils at risk of underachieving meaningful involvement of pupils and parents / carers.

- 1.46 By way of a further example, Barnardo's 2015 research *Feels Like Home*⁴⁶ explored the experiences of Newcomer pupils and school staff in primary schools across Northern Ireland. The research pointed to a number of areas of good practice including after school clubs, translated newsletters and a growing use of technology to communicate with parents. We have recommended that such good practice should be disseminated.

⁴⁶ Kernaghan D, Webb MA and Cariddi C, (2015) *Feels Like Home: Exploring the experiences of Newcomer pupils in primary schools in Northern Ireland*

10. How has the Covid-19 lockdown impacted on educational underachievement?

- 1.47 Our COVID-19 and Education – Equality Considerations paper notes a number of areas where there is a risk of the exacerbation of existing, or creation of new, inequalities leading to educational underachievement.
- 1.48 The equality impacts of the outbreak have the potential to be both severe and long-lasting. The context of the COVID-19 virus itself, of lockdown, of emergency measures, and of subsequent gradual and partial re-emergence from them – has the potential to compound existing inequalities and lead to the emergence of new ones. There may be persistent long-term impacts on equality groups, particularly on those equality groups more likely to experience poverty. There is also a need to avoid and challenge negative stereotypes related to equality grounds, and to challenge and avoid any rise in prejudicial attitudes.
- 1.49 The absence of formally taught education provision for a period of four months, will likely result in educational and social impacts across a diverse range of children. The full impacts are unknown currently, and we have made recommendations which we believe would limit the detrimental impacts of the pandemic.

Early years

- 1.50 The loss of over one term of pre-school education will have had a detrimental impact on children’s development. We therefore called for steps to be taken to identify and mitigate any equality impacts so that COVID-19 does not unfairly impact upon the educational progression and trajectory of children from specific equality groups. It has been noted⁴⁷ that ‘the negative impact from a lack of face to face school provision is likely to be particularly large for younger children.’

School closures and home-based learning

- 1.51 We have highlighted the potential negative issues associated with school closures from March to June 2020 and the need for actions to address them. Issues included around:
- A lack of access to appropriate space to learn and study, and educational or curriculum support materials;
 - The accessibility of digital materials – either due to access to IT equipment or broadband, or the accessibility standards of the materials themselves;
 - The circumstances and abilities of parents, carers or siblings to support learning – including in the context of wider family, caring and/or work commitments;

⁴⁷ Campaign for Social Justice (2020) The COVID-19 Crisis and Educational Inequality

- The loss or reduction of access to full-time formally taught provision with trained teaching and/or support professionals;
- The extent to which supports including specialist equipment, personal care or assistants for children with SEN and disabilities were in place outside of formally taught environments (schools, including special schools or further or higher education settings);
- The impact of reduced social interaction with peers and teaching professionals, including for those requiring specialist, language or wider support.

1.52 In this context, we have called for action to be taken to identify and address key inequality issues, including any associated with:

- How children and young people with particular disabilities, such as autism, or special educational needs are supported to adapt to a changed or changing learning environment;
- The risk that children and young people with traditionally lower attendance and transitioning rates such as Traveller and Roma children will not return to school or have lower attendance rates than previously;
- That children and young people who have, or perceive themselves to have, fallen behind their peers due to an inability to engage in home-based learning may disengage from formal education.

Family and community engagement

1.53 It is already known that lack of family engagement is linked to poorer educational outcomes⁴⁸ and the importance of education providers, families and communities collaborating to improve educational outcomes is well understood. We note above a range of impacts linked to home-based learning during school closures.

Post primary transfer

1.54 Post-primary transfer has been an issue of long-standing concern to the Commission. These concerns are heightened for the current cohort of Primary 7 pupils due to the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak. Data demonstrates that a number of Section 75 groups are over-represented within free school meal entitlement (low incomes) and research⁴⁹ has found that *'selective systems of education, using examination methods such as the Transfer Test, have a negative impact upon the attainment of children from low-income backgrounds'*. Language and awareness

⁴⁸ TEO (2017) [Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation](#)

⁴⁹ JRF (2016) A Prosperous, poverty-free Northern Ireland, p. 9

barriers have also been identified for Newcomer children⁵⁰. The impact of these barriers may have increased due to the period of school closures.

Pupils / students subjected to bullying

- 1.55 Evidence is currently limited as regards the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon the attitudes and potential behaviours of children and young people in Northern Ireland towards certain minority ethnic groups, but there is the potential that negative attitudes could be exacerbated.
- 1.56 We know that prejudice-based bullying at school can blight the lives of young people, negatively affecting their attendance and attainment as well as having a long-term impact on their life chances. We have therefore called for action to address this.

⁵⁰ Kernaghan, D. (2015) Feels Like Home: Exploring the experiences of newcomer pupils in primary schools in Northern Ireland p. 22 & 23

11. Please add any other comments that you would like the panel to consider.

The need to address data gaps and limitations

- 1.57 There remain^{51 52} significant and specific equality data gaps across a number of themes in education in relation to gender identity, religious belief, political opinion, minority ethnic group and sexual orientation. Where data exists, there is also a lack of disaggregation in relation to: ethnicity, disability status, dependency status and marital status.
- 1.58 Data gaps and lack of disaggregation in relation to Section 75 groups present a barrier to the assessment of the extent of particular groups within the school population. They limit the accurate and robust measurement of educational attainment, experiences and progression for those with particular equality characteristics. This in turn limits the scope for more effectively meeting the needs which specific groups may have, and prevents a detailed assessment of the effectiveness of measures aimed at benefitting such pupils / students across Section 75 groups.
- 1.59 We recognise that there are some limitations to data disaggregation. However, where robust to do so, disaggregation would provide greater information to inform the better targeting of policy interventions – for example on how young carers, or children and young people with particular disabilities progress through school.

The obligation to comply with Section 75 duties

- 1.60 In Northern Ireland public authorities are required⁵³ to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations generally and including when developing COVID-19 related policies.
- 1.61 These are continuing duties and are important duties to observe, even in the context of COVID-19⁵⁴ when policies may need to be developed at pace. The Commission issued an advice note for public authorities⁵⁵ on implementing the Section 75 duties and continues to provide advice to public authorities.
- 1.62 Decisions, particularly where they need to be made urgently, may have different impacts on different groups of people. In making decisions, Ministers and officials will need to weigh carefully potential impacts that such decisions have on those who are already disadvantaged, ensuring that any inequalities are not exacerbated, and that individuals are not exposed unnecessarily to direct or indirect risks or further disadvantaged.

⁵¹ ECNI (2017) Statement of Key Inequalities in Education

⁵² Burns, S., Leitch, R., Hughes, J., (2015) [Education Inequalities in Northern Ireland](#)

⁵³ ECNI website, [Section 75 duties](#)

⁵⁴ ECNI (2020), [The Section 75 duties when developing COVID-19 related policies](#)

⁵⁵ ECNI (21 April 2020) [Section 75 duties when developing COVID-19 related policies](#)

The need for effective, sustained and resourced action – linked to the delivery of an agreed PfG OBA population measure (tracked in aggregate and by Section 75 ground)

- 1.63 It is essential that action is taken to effectively address educational underachievement. A strategy should provide transparent and accountable frameworks through which clearly assessed and tangible outcomes can be delivered. It must be supplemented with a fully resourced action plan, and include effective monitoring and review mechanisms.
- 1.64 We note that a range of studies have considered educational underachievement in Northern Ireland in the last decade. These include the Peace Monitoring Report (2019); No Child Left Behind (2016); Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation (2015); Education Inequalities in Northern Ireland (2015); Firm Foundations (2014); Peace Monitoring Report (2014); and A Call To Action (2011). Action now is essential. Furthermore, if disadvantage is to be tackled, all measures must by design not only be tracked in aggregate, but also for the impact on individuals from each of the Section 75 grounds.