

Additional Support for Learning

30 September 2025

NASUWT evidence to the Public Audit Committee

The NASUWT's submission to the Scottish Parliament Public Audit Committee sets out the Union's views on the key issues which should be explored by the Committee in its inquiry into Additional Support for Learning. The NASUWT's evidence is informed directly by serving teacher and headteacher members and also by the work of its representative committees and consultative structures, made up of practising teachers and school leaders working in the education system.

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OVERVIEW

When the Audit Scotland briefing into additional support for learning was published, NASUWT was clear that this report echoed what we have been saying for years – that the presumption of mainstream policy was introduced without sufficient planning, resourcing or funding.

The result has been that too many children are not receiving the level of support they require to learn and achieve and that schools have been left struggling to do their best for pupils with a huge impact on the workload and welfare of staff. Many teachers are increasingly expected to teach children with such high and complex needs that they require almost one-on-one support, at the same time as teaching the rest of their class. Such a situation undermines the right of all pupils to a high-quality education and those pupils who deserve to have their additional learning needs met with specialist support. Current policies completely fail to adequately protect teachers' safety and wellbeing as they strive to do their best for pupils.

It is clear that the current system is failing pupils with additional support needs (ASN), their classmates and the teachers working to support them. The Union maintains it is high time the Scottish Government revisited its system of support for pupils with ASN as it is plainly not fit for purpose. This report should be the catalyst for change in schools.

The number of pupils with ASN is continuing to increase rapidly and without the fundamental rethink recommended by this report of how education for pupils with ASN is provided the current challenges will only deepen.

The Union believes Ministers should work with the teaching profession and workforce unions on how the current system can be reformed to address the existing problems and build a more effective system of education for pupils with additional needs which will better serve pupils, families and schools.

NASUWT EVIDENCE

The following are key findings across Scotland from NASUWT's ASN in Schools research.

Just 2% of teachers in Scotland say that the pupils they teach who have additional support needs (ASN) always receive the support they are entitled to, with over a third (35%) saying these pupils rarely or never receive the support they need.

While the number of pupils with ASN in Scottish schools is rising and their needs are becoming more complex, funding, support and the number of places in specialist provision are all dwindling.

While 92% of respondents said the number of pupils they teach with ASN has increased in the last five years and 93% said the needs of the pupils with ASN that they teach have become more complex during this time, 69% said that the level of support received by pupils they teach with ASN has decreased over the last five years.

Funding and resource pressures are evident with nearly half (47%) saying that there are pupils in their school who have been identified as needing specialist provision, but remain in their mainstream school because specialist settings are full. 43% said their local authority has reduced the number of places in specialist settings in order to manage budgets.

Over half (53%) said the number of specialist teachers employed to support pupils with ASN in their school has declined in the last five years. 62% said the number of specialist support staff has decreased during this period.

Unsurprisingly therefore, 94% said that the workload of teachers and school leaders in their school has increased as a result of underfunding for specialist services for ASN.

Only 2% of respondents say they always receive the support they need to teach pupils with ASN effectively. 46% say they rarely or never receive the support they need.

Voice of Teachers

Members were asked about their experiences of ASN provision and told us:

“There is nowhere near enough time, resources, staff to ensure that ALL ASN children receive the support they are entitled to. Pupils with behaviour needs are too often supported before children with learning needs as staff look to settle the class. The presumption of mainstream is making the job impossible to manage and is failing children with ASN”

“It is a postcode lottery depending on if your local school has a good provision or not. Being able to meet all learners’ needs depends on significant goodwill on the part of the ASN teacher and PSA staff. We do it for the kids but sometimes the system works against us to be able to do it well. Staffing is a huge concern and the formula that the council works with is insufficient.”

“I am having to work 80 hour weeks just to ensure my children are able to access a curriculum as I need to prepare individualised communication resources just so they can access their personalised and individualised curriculums.”

“Presumption of mainstream has created a cost-saving disaster in schools where staff are being expected to deal with more and more ASN planning on the back of cuts to support staff and dwindling ASN provision elsewhere. Having worked in ASN schools, I know their value in preparing pupils for a positive destination, however the current model of "square peg/round hole" is leaving pupils behind.”

“Sometimes ASN needs are so complex, the other pupils in the class are excluded due to time spent dealing with ASN issues. Support staff are too thin

on the ground. I cannot remember the last time I had any support in my classroom to assist - I am talking years ago, not just days/weeks.”

“Schools are having to deal with complex needs far beyond their capacity. This has a huge impact on the learning of all pupils as children show unease when there is violence or potential threats. The dysregulated pupils find the mainstream setting extremely challenging so it’s no surprise that incidents occur. Looks like we are teaching children to accept physical assaults as the norm and I wonder if domestic abuse incidents will increase in the next decade due to us having schools where nothing is done for the needs of the regulated pupils.”

“There is no in-class support whatsoever and we often have pupils with contradictory needs in the same room.”

“I feel so angry with my local authority for making my job impossible to do. There is no job satisfaction whatsoever in this current situation. It also feels that they don't care about our ASN children and that they think our pupils aren't worthy of having a chance at a successful future”

“As a PT of Guidance who has been in the role for 15 years, my job has changed beyond recognition. In the first 10 years I did not refer a single pupil on to the ASD or ADHD pathway. 2 years ago I was involved in the referral process for 25 pupils on my caseload in one year. A significant increase. The time taken now is a real drain and consumes my working week.”

“Every agency around us has had cutbacks and everywhere I turn can say no role for us but I need to keep supporting the young person. Caseload size has increased with more children with complex ASN. We are expected to write Health Care plans for children with medical needs with no medical training. We have to safety plan with children who have suicidal thoughts or plans. The levels of anxiety and poor mental health has caused an increase in daily workload compared to a few years ago. Children wanting one to one support while the increasing demand from SLT grows to breaking point. I get no

supervision for the horrific situations that I have to deal with. Guidance teachers in my school can't sleep with worry about all the demands on us. The job of a Guidance Teacher has changed so much over the years and it has become unmanageable"

"Pupils in mainstream settings are traumatised by the consistent and unpredictable outbursts and lack of control by some ASN pupils which leads to further gaps in peer relationships and causes anxiety and increased risk of school refusal among some children. While often not their fault and due to their needs, some children are unable to safely be fully involved and integrated into the mainstream classrooms but the local authority, especially in more rural or island communities, lack the alternative provision which could better meet the needs of those pupils."

"The building is not fit for purpose and prevents the needs of the children being met: too noisy; rooms too small and shaped so irregularly that no zones can be created. Some rooms are like greenhouses, either freezing or roasting. With no blinds to block the sun, it also becomes too bright to work in. Lights are too bright and too many cannot be dimmed, some classes don't even control their own lights."

"I have been bitten, hit, had my clothes and jewellery damaged by children who are not intending to cause harm but who have no sense of safety. I have not had adequate training in how to deal with this and the environment of our school is not safe for these children. I constantly worry that something bad will happen to a child in my care because our building has not been adapted in any way to take account of the needs of these children."

"In the last term I have submitted at least 30 violent incident forms. I have never had any follow up or been spoken to by a member of management or been offered support after being attacked and left with black eyes and bruises, scratches, bite marks or my hair ripped out. Not once have strategies been put in to place to support the pupil or member of staff. I have been told that I work in ASN so I should expect to be abused and attacked."

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“I think we are facing an ASN crisis - taught for 32 years and the sheer numbers of pupils presenting with ASN is unmanageable compared to 10-15 years ago”

“ASN funding and staffing must be commensurate with numbers of ASN pupils, staff are at breaking point and unable to meet 'girfec' standards - pupils are being failed every minute of every day”

“The presumption of mainstream only works if there is sufficient staffing to support the learners and deliver interventions which make the mainstream environment more accessible for learners with a range of ASN. No amount of training, knowledge and upskilling people can compensate for the fact that there is insufficient funding to staff inclusion in practice. I say this as both a parent and a teacher”

“I truly believe there needs to be an overhaul of the system. Children are being placed in the wrong provision, their needs are not being met and so there is an increase in violent behaviours. Staff are not being trained and supported correctly and management are too busy ticking boxes and filling in paper work instead of supporting staff and children on the floor. Resources are stretched due to lack of budgets and again not meeting the needs of children and also making day to day teaching such a struggle when we don't have appropriate resources.”

“I worry about who will stay in teaching in the future.”

CROSS BORDER COMPARISON

The NASUWT as a UK wide union collects data across nations and it is worth noting that there was a significant difference between the findings for Northern Ireland and those for England, Scotland and Wales. Respondents from Northern Ireland were much more likely to report that there had been increases in staffing over the last five years, and significantly less reported

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that staffing had decreased. This was particularly true for specialist support staff and other support staff (with 54% of respondents from Northern Ireland reporting an increase for each).

Specialist support staff	Increased?	Stayed the same?	Decreased?
All	27%	26%	46%
England	24%	27%	49%
Northern Ireland	54%	28%	18%
Scotland	20%	13%	67%
Wales	12%	26%	62%

Other support staff	Increased?	Stayed the same?	Decreased?
All	32%	22%	46%
England	32%	18%	50%
Northern Ireland	54%	34%	12%
Scotland	15%	23%	62%
Wales	14%	25%	60%

Specialist teachers	Increased?	Stayed the same?	Decreased?
All	19%	42%	39%
England	17%	42%	41%
Northern Ireland	31%	45%	23%
Scotland	25%	19%	56%
Wales	14%	43%	43%

We are aware that schools are adopting different strategies to manage the increasing complexity of learners' needs and behaviours. We asked respondents across the UK to indicate if their school was teaching learners who had been identified as needing Alternative Provision virtually and if this

was undertaken by school staff or by an external provider. Across the UK, 16% of respondents said that learners identified as needing AP remained on the school roll and were educated virtually by school staff. However, more than a third (35%) of respondents from Scotland reported this to be the case

NASUWT ASN Campaign

Delegates at NASUWT Scotland's Annual Conference 2025 called for the Scottish Government and local authorities to fundamentally rethink how they fund, plan and staff ASN provision in the following motion:

ASN Support in Schools

Conference notes that Audit Scotland, in a recent briefing paper, has called for a fundamental review of planning and resourcing of additional support for learning.

Conference agrees that Scottish Government and councils must fundamentally rethink how they plan, fund and staff additional support for learning as part of core school education in Scotland.

Conference is concerned that teachers are increasingly expected to teach children with such high and complex needs in mainstream classes that they require almost one-on-one support, at the same time as teaching the rest of their class.

Conference believes that all pupils deserve to have their additional support needs (ASN) met with specialist support, yet there are concerns that the current system is failing pupils with ASN, their classmates and the teachers working to support them.

Conference calls on the Scotland Executive Council to:

- (i) engage with Audit Scotland, and thereafter Scottish Government and councils, to improve current data collection practices;
- (ii) lobby Scottish Government to disaggregate data for support assistants, setting out those who are identified to support an individual child and those who are supporting the wider school setting;

- (iii) foster links with sister trade unions representing learning support assistants (LSAs) supporting all relevant campaigns to increase LSA numbers and improve their contractual rights, including time for professional learning;
- (iv) seek increases to national funding from Scottish Government to support the necessary systemic change and
- (v) bring a motion to SNCT supporting (a) lower ratios for specialist provision and (b) calling for staffing ratios (teacher, plus support staff) formulas to be agreed for mainstream classes, which would vary dependent upon the number of ASN pupils on the register.

SURVEY SUMMARY

The results of our survey underline the recent damning report by Audit Scotland which heavily criticised the Scottish Government's failure to adequately fund, plan or resource its presumption of mainstream policy.

A continued failure to get to grips with the crisis in ASN provision will have a far-reaching and long-lasting impact on young people's future life chances, the Scottish economy and on the recruitment and retention of teachers. The evidence for action and change has never been clearer.

Teachers are now routinely being placed in a situation where they are expected to teach children with such high level and complex needs that they require almost one-to-one support at the same time as teaching the rest of their class.

This is a betrayal of the duty of care which employers owe to both those pupils and to teachers. Pupils, teachers and families are being failed by the current system of ASN and the presumption of mainstream policy, under which children and school staff are being left to sink or swim.

Teachers desperately want to do their best for all the pupils they teach, but are being set up to fail by a system which is not fit for purpose.

ACTIONS

The Audit Scotland briefing makes two recommendations: the first is on improving the quality of data on ASL, and the second is that the national Government and local government should review how ASL provision is planned, funded and staffed. It is noted that both those recommendations have been accepted. While a welcome commitment, data can only ever be part of the solution. NASUWT would wish to highlight the following areas to the committee:

(1) Improved engagement

The Scottish Government and COSLA need to bring together the various agencies and groups who work with children and young people to develop a plan to rebuild and transform ASN provision so pupils and teachers receive the support they are entitled to expect. Any review must centre the voices of teachers. To date, NASUWT has been excluded from the national Additional Support for Learning Project Board, whose role is to support additional support for learning and inclusion policy, including through delivery of the Additional Support for Learning (ASL) Action Plan and associated workstreams. Equally, the data summit planned by the Scottish Government has been cancelled twice and we are currently without confirmation of a new date for this event to take place.

(2) External Support Partnerships

The availability of external support for schools greatly impacts on their ability to meet the needs of learners. The funding and role of health and social care must be built in to any review. There is a need to pick up issues locally and nationally about the lack of health service and social care engagement with and support around the ASN process. It is not acceptable, for example, for local authorities to pay for services and provision that should be provided from health and social care budgets.

(3) Agreed and consistent reporting

NASUWT agrees with the need for greater consistency in reporting. The current broad categories of ASN utilised are of limited use. As the NASUWT survey highlighted, provision of support for ASN pupils is dwindling and without detailed and consistent identification of need, in the context of huge pressures on budgets, it is easy for local authorities to overlook meeting support needs, meaning that teachers and schools are left to find 'solutions' as best they can.

There are also potential risks of increased use of categorisation data which could encourage a medical model approach and shift focus away from removing barriers to learning. The increased use of data needs to be carefully planned and tested alongside evaluating the effectiveness of supporting inclusion. It may be better to simply record the support required, rather than allocate a particular category, especially in the context of complex needs. Certainly, NASUWT would support a wholesale examination of the SEEMIS system and a determination of whether it remains fit for purpose in this sphere.

(4) Mediation

The committee's earlier engagements reference limited take up of mediation services, with parents often wanting to go to ASN tribunal, although resolutions are often achieved through dispute resolution services prior to a tribunal. This model reflects what happens in England and NASUWT would question whether making mediation a compulsory step will achieve the intended outcome. Recognising mediation as a pre-tribunal step is useful but the focus needs to be on transparency and ensuring that support is in place to meet needs.

(5) Time

Teachers need to be allocated sufficient time to fulfil their ASN responsibilities. Currently, there are competing demands on their time from other roles and responsibilities, workload pressures, including those arising from cuts to resources and staffing in schools and in external services and

agencies, a lack of support (including admin support), all contributing to teachers often feeling isolated and unsupported. The Scottish Government committed to reduce class contact time for teachers and this commitment must be expedited.

(6) Shared Understanding of Inclusion

‘Inclusion’ must not mean that schools and teachers are expected to do more without the necessary support or are left to fill a void because of pressures on other services. There is a need to clarify what is meant in reality by ‘inclusion’. Independent research¹ commissioned by NASUWT identifies a number of interpretations of inclusion:

as an ideology and/or aspiration linked to human rights;

as a place (usually mainstream versus special school);

as a policy;

as a professional practice (inclusive teaching);

and as a personal experience (how the individual experiences inclusion).

While governments may have policies for inclusion, there are questions about what those policies are seeking to achieve. For example, are they about:

- securing the right of learners to access education in their own communities?
- ensuring that every learner receives an education that meets their needs?
- learners being taught in classes alongside their peers, irrespective of the nature and complexity of their needs?
- ensuring that every learner is included in the life of a school?

NASUWT is concerned that policies are often driven by the need to make efficiency savings and that this takes precedence over other objectives.

NASUWT supports the social model of inclusion as a principle, meaning that the focus should be on removing barriers to inclusion. However, this must not mean that teachers, schools and other frontline staff are left to provide the ‘solutions’, or to address gaps in specialist support. We believe that there is a need for a spectrum of provision, including specialist provision. What provision is appropriate will depend on the needs of the learner but also on the resources and support available both within and to the school or setting.

¹ <https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/static/uploaded/ddacdcdb2-3cba-4791-850f32216246966e.pdf>

Governments must ensure that expectations for inclusion are matched by the resources needed to deliver those expectations. Indeed, in 2024, the following motion was passed at NASUWT Scotland Conference:

ASN – FAILURE OF CFE

Conference notes that resources and specialist provision for learners with additional support needs, such as neurodivergent conditions, learning disabilities, and physical disabilities that impact learning, are reducing, whereas, with better diagnostic tools, the number of learners being identified as requiring support in learning is increasing. Conference notes that in many schools, 48% or more learners now have an identified support need for learning. Conference takes into consideration these issues and believes that:

- 1. presumption of the mainstream and integration masquerading as inclusion is not working;*
- 2. children with severe and complex needs, including multiple neurodivergent conditions, should be recognised as having a disability within the definition of the Equalities Act 2010 and be able to access education as part of the wider Single Equality Duty;*
- 3. specialist provision is being eroded with the closure of special schools, while the use of school buildings for enhanced supervision which are not fit for this purpose is often seen as the cheaper option and not based on the needs of children;*
- 4. children are being prevented from accessing meaningful education as is their right;*
- 5. class sizes for learners with ASN/SfL were established in 1985 and do not reflect the situation in 21st-century schools.*

Conference calls for the Scotland Executive Council to campaign for:

- i. the end of the presumption of mainstream and integration masquerading as inclusion;*
- ii. the reopening of special centres for children with severe and complex needs, including multiple neurodivergent conditions;*
- iii. effective staffing and resources of the centres;*
- iv. Effective staffing and resources of ASN provision in mainstream establishments.*

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- v. *training at a postgraduate level for all teachers who wish to be registered with the GTCS as an ASN specialist;*
- vi. *the right of all of our school communities to feel safe.*

(7) System Coherence

Wider education policies must align with and support pupils with ASN. Significant changes are needed to policies such as those relating to the curriculum, assessment and accountability in order to support the inclusion of more learners with special and additional needs in mainstream schools. Other issues – such as class size, education phase, the nature and content of teachers' initial teacher education, and teachers' access to continuing professional learning and development – need to be considered and addressed. Some of these reforms would take significant time to implement and this must be factored into the timeframes for any reform.

(8) Funding

Class teachers have more learners who have an additional support need in their classes and the needs of learners in both mainstream and specialist school classes are more complex, but resources and support are being cut. NASUWT is committed to call out any plans or policies that do not provide the funding and wider resources needed.

(9) Shared Information

Supply teachers report that they are not given information about learners who may have an identified need. This has significant implications for their ability to meet the needs of learners in their classes. It also increases the risk of supply teachers experiencing poor learner behaviour in their classes and then being blamed for that poor behaviour. See our 2025 Scotland Conference motion:

'Teaching in a Vacuum': Supply Teacher Health, Safety & Wellbeing
Conference notes that supply teachers make a vital contribution to securing high educational standards for all children and young people.

Conference is deeply concerned with the results of the NASUWT Scotland Annual Supply Teacher Survey which showed that:

- (i) just over two-thirds (68%) stated they were not given the school's overall risk assessment;*
- (ii) in excess of a third (37%) stated that they were not provided with the details of any designated contact(s) for any questions, problems or emergencies;*
- (iii) well over half of supply teachers (55%) reported that they were not provided with the details of how to raise any concerns about health and safety;*
- (iv) just under two-fifths (39%) reported that they were not provided with the details of how to call for assistance, including first aid;*
- (v) well over a third of supply teachers (37%) stated that they were not provided with the details regarding access to computers, with log-in details;*
- (vi) over half of respondents (53%) stated that they were not provided with a list of the pupils in the class(es) they would be teaching, including details of any additional information, such as those with medical conditions or additional support needs (ASN);*
- (vii) over three-fifths of supply teachers (63%) stated that they had not been provided with the details of any pupils known to be potentially violent and how this should be managed;*
- (viii) over two-fifths of supply teachers (43%) reported that they had not been provided with the behaviour management policy when undertaking assignments in schools, including who to contact.*

Conference believes that local authorities are being negligent in their duty of care to many teachers generally, and to supply teachers specifically.

Conference therefore calls on the Scotland Executive Council to campaign for:

- (i) equal access to support systems for supply teachers, including PRD and Glow logins;*
- (ii) supply teachers to be provided with the appropriate information on site to ensure their safety at work;*
- (iii) sufficient paid time for supply teachers to be able to read and absorb relevant information;*

- (iv) a consistent and publicised national approach – a ‘Charter for Supply Teachers in Schools’ - to supporting supply teachers across local authorities;*
- (v) union health and safety checklists to be utilised by local association representatives to negotiate locally to support supply teachers;*
- (vi) seek feedback on existing local protocols for supply staff and any monitoring systems to assess implementation at local authority level utilising Freedom of Information requests*

(10) Workload

There is a need to challenge local authority and specialist service procedures and practices, including health and social care services, which create workload burdens for staff in schools. While we acknowledge that authorities and services are struggling to meet demands, it is not acceptable that they adopt procedures and practices that place workload burdens on staff in schools.

(11) School Buildings

Good quality ASN provision needs better school buildings to meet student needs. Schools need to be designed both with sufficient space for quiet rooms or nurture spaces but also to be inclusive and a research and evidenced approach to securing appropriate school buildings should be undertaken looking at the most up to date research.² Equally, closure of ASN and specialist schools, without the proper facility to cater to those ASN children in mainstream schools, causes problems.

(12) Staffing data

We cannot look at data relating to pupils with an additional support need without also understanding our staffing and workload issues. Work in this area is moving at a snail’s pace at the Strategic Board for Teacher Education (SBTE) and NASUWT has been calling for a shared definition as a crucial

²<https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/healthwellbeing/research/mentalhealth/projects/cedarteam/our-research/neurodiversityinscottishschoolsniiss/>

starting point, for example, assessing what is deemed to be a vacancy across different local authorities. Work in this area must move at pace.

(13) National Improvement Framework

Lessons need to be learned about the collation of data for the sake of data collection. Teachers have been scathing about the National Improvement Framework. In 2024 NASUWT wrote to confirm to government that:

“NIF is unpopular among teachers and has been described by some as ‘an absolute waste of teachers' time and energy’. Others in their feedback have described it as ‘the NIF rambles on, shambling its way through hours of meetings and meaning very little to classroom teachers - sooo many words - sooo little effect’.

This frustration no doubt stems from the fact that Education Scotland have never produced clear exemplars of achievement at different CfE Levels and SNSAs at Primary 1 remain unfit for purpose – in that context, there is very little data which can be trusted. Teachers feel like they are being asked to paint the roses red. A more welcome announcement would be a full review of the NIF.

“What teachers and schools need is time and resources and to be trusted to undertake their role, leading on teaching and learning. Feedback from members indicates that teachers are increasingly being asked to collate more and more data, fill our more and more bits of paper and yet they have no confidence that anyone actually needs the data, is looking at the data or that this constant bureaucratic churn is fuelling anything more than professional burnout.

“We need the NIF to be sufficiently reflective to realise that measuring a thing does not improve it – indeed, where resources are limited, it can in fact cause a detriment because the time and effort of teachers are being diverted from their core role of teaching and learning... An honest reflection is needed, as

we expect from our schools and teachers. If something is not working we should not continue to do it, hoping for a different result."

"In our response in August to Scottish Government around the Hayward recommendations the Union said:

Indeed, it may be time to strengthen that recommendation further and reimagining the NIF entirely, alongside national governance arrangements for policy creation. It is unclear whether existing stringent data collection systems would sit comfortably within a reinvigorated system which empowered and trusted teachers.

It remains an ongoing issue that the structures surrounding the NIF sit independently within the overarching governance arrangements for Scottish Education Policy. At the NIF Professional Associations meetings, the NASUWT and others have provided repeated challenge around whether continuing with the NIF was appropriate: this does remain the elephant in the room. Doesn't the NIF just add to confusion about the future direction of the Scottish education system? How does the NIF align with everything else that is going on, the constituent parts of 'everything else' not even cohering with each other very well? Doesn't the National Discussion call into question some of the principles and features on which the NIF is based?

This is not a new criticism of the NIF, in 2022 NASUWT stated:

The Union believes that a significant review of the place of the NIF within the Scottish context should be undertaken. It would be an appropriate time to stop and reflect on whether the NIF has set out what it intended to achieve and if not to review the current process.

There must be some acceptance that the views of the profession in relation to the NIF have been largely ignored: this is a poor platform upon which to build for improvement within education."

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“A key question which requires to be asked is whether the NIF, as an improvement activity, has had the desired impact and supported meaningful improvement at all levels. This is the starting question - the NIF should take time to evaluate its own impact before considering how to provide challenge outwards”