An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council
for Special Education

National Council for Special Education

Data Strategy 2025-2028

Contents

Foreword

It is a real pleasure to welcome the publication of the 2025-2027 Data Strategy of the NCSE. The NCSE is committed to building a world class inclusive education system for Ireland. To realise this vision, it is vitally important that the NCSE have timely access to quality data to improve decision making, deliver better services and fulfil our reporting requirements. Implementation of this strategy will mark an important step in achieving this objective.

Since the existing data systems were developed, NCSE has transformed as an organisation, through expanded remit, increased staffing and organisational restructuring. As a result, it is timely to take a critical look at both our systems and our approach to managing data.

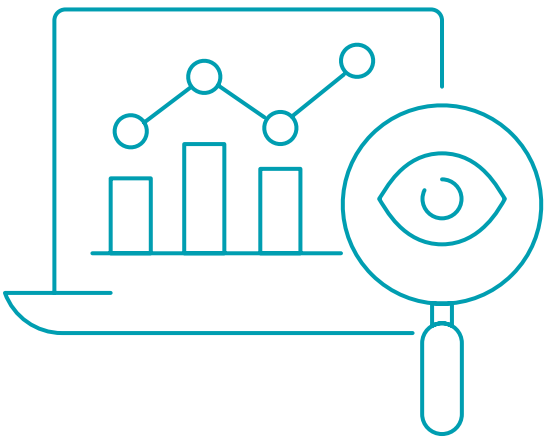
NCSE Senior Management Team are committed to the successful implementation of this data strategy and will provide the necessary leadership within their respective pillars to enable its success. In addition to recommending new systems, the strategy also calls out the cultural change required in the data environment by all within the NCSE.

The strategy identifies 26 key actions covering areas such as resourcing, reporting, business process mapping, data quality and governance. The anticipated benefits of a fully implemented strategy include improved information management, enhanced organisational capabilities, a strengthening of our data driven decision making, better stakeholder engagement and a more streamlined service delivery.

The move to both the development of modern systems and a refreshed approach to data management, will act as critical enablers to support NCSE in its operational activities and achieve its strategic goals.

John Kearney
Chief Executive Officer

11 September 2025



Executive Summary

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE)'s Data Strategy 2025-2028 sets out how we will transform our data capabilities to better support children with special educational needs. Building on extensive consultation and assessment, this strategy addresses current limitations while positioning the NCSE to meet growing service demands effectively.

Current Challenges

NCSE faces critical data challenges that impact service delivery. Information is fragmented across multiple systems and numerous spreadsheets, preventing staff from accessing complete information efficiently. A significant number of processes remain paper-based, creating administrative burden and preventing real-time access to critical information. Additionally, our systems lack the analytical capabilities needed for enhanced evidence-based decision-making and timely responses to stakeholder queries. In particular, fulfilling our reporting obligations to the Department of Education and Youth is a key deliverable.

Strategic Response

To address these challenges, we will implement the following key workstreams:

- **Establish a Data Unit**
  Create a dedicated team with expertise in data management, analytics and governance to drive improvements across the organisation

- **Data Management**
  Ensure data is usable, reliable and valuable for the needs of the NCSE. This will be achieved by developing and implementing data management policies that support best practice in collecting, organising, securing, storing and utilising data effectively throughout the data lifecycle

- **Consolidate Data Systems**
  Enhance data system capabilities

- **Business Intelligence**
  Deploy modern reporting tools providing real-time dashboards and self-service analytics

- **Digital by Default**
  Replace paper forms with digital data capture, improving data quality while reducing administrative workload

- **Data Governance**
  Establish clear data policies, assign data stewards, and implement quality frameworks

- **Data Sharing**
  Develop secure data sharing agreements/protocols with other public service stakeholders (Department Education and Youth *et al.*) while protecting NCSE data from unauthorised access, misuse or breaches

Implementation Priorities

This strategy directly supports the NCSE's Statement of Strategy 2023-2026 and aligns with broader public service data initiatives. With appropriate investment and leadership commitment, it will significantly enhance our capacity to support children with special educational needs through improved operations, decision-making, stakeholder services, organisational capabilities, and information management.

1 Background and Context

1.1 Organisational Context

In 2023, following an additional investment of €13 million in Budget 2023, the NCSE commenced its 'Vision 26' transformation programme which expanded the organisational structure from four to five pillars and with increased staffing.

The newly established Systems and Innovation pillar has responsibility for developing the organisation's data management capabilities, including data analytics, forecasting, records management and planning to meet future service demands. This data strategy represents a key deliverable of this pillar and directly supports the NCSE's Statement of Strategy 2023-2026 goals, particularly in providing coordinated services, evidence-informed policy advice, and operational excellence.

1.2 Data in the Public Service

The Irish public service manages data within an evolving policy landscape. The Public Service Data Strategy 2019-2023 identified that while individual public bodies have developed effective systems for their specific needs, opportunities exist to improve data sharing and reduce duplication across government. The forthcoming national data strategy from OGCIO, expected in 2025, will further shape how public bodies approach data management.

Recent government initiatives emphasise digital transformation and data-driven decision making. The Connecting Government 2030: A Digital and ICT Strategy for Ireland's Public Service specifically calls for public bodies to harness data effectively, improve data sharing and interoperability, and expand open data publication. For the NCSE, this means moving beyond traditional approaches to embrace modern data management practices while maintaining security and privacy standards.

1.3 NCSE Data Journey

Data in the NCSE plays an important role in the support and delivery of NCSE services. Historically, data management practices evolved through necessity driven by immediate business requirements. This resulted in sub-optimal organisational data silos emerging from disparate systems. This strategy aims to leverage NCSE data as a core asset; use data as an enabler to deliver joined-up systems; use authoritative data to enhance informed decision-making practices; leverage business intelligence applications for insight/reporting and become a data driven organisation for the benefit of our stakeholders.

1.4 Legislative and Regulatory Framework

Data management in the public sector operates within a legal framework that shapes how the NCSE must approach data collection, storage, sharing and protection. GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018 establish fundamental requirements for data protection and privacy – particularly significant given the highly sensitive nature of data relating to children with special educational needs.

The Data Sharing and Governance Act 2019 provides the legal basis for sharing data between public bodies and establishes governance structures including the Data Governance Board. This enables the NCSE to share data with the Department of Education, HSE and other bodies while maintaining appropriate safeguards. The Freedom of Information Act 2014 creates obligations regarding public access to information, requiring careful balance between transparency and privacy.

Education-specific legislation creates other obligations for the NCSE. The Disability Act 2005 impacts our data requirements through assessment of needs processes. Recent legislation including the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 and the Education (Provision in Respect of Children with Special Educational Needs) Act 2022 have created new data requirements for admissions and service provision. The Children First Act 2015 establishes requirements for child protection that influence how we manage and share sensitive information.

At European level, the Open Data Directive, implemented through SI 376/2021, requires certain datasets to be made available for reuse, supported by DPENDR's Open Data Strategy 2023-2027.

This legislative landscape requires sophisticated data governance to ensure compliance while enabling effective service delivery. The strategy addresses these requirements through clear governance frameworks, policies and technical controls.

1.5 Technological Evolution

The NCSE's technology landscape reflects two decades of incremental development. SEAS (Special Education Administration System), implemented in 2005, remains the core operational system managing student information and resource allocation. While SEAS has been adapted over time to include special class data and other functions, it was designed for a different era of technology and service delivery. The system currently holds critical state-wide data but lacks modern capabilities for workflow management and analytics.

Document management relies primarily on eDocs, an OGCIO Build-to-Share application that provides secure storage but limited collaboration features. Other systems including Customer Relationship Management (CRM) ticketing systems, ArcGIS for geographical analysis, and various spreadsheet-based solutions have been implemented to address specific needs.

Modern capabilities such as real-time analytics, automated workflows, and mobile access remain largely unavailable. Investment in contemporary technology infrastructure will be essential to achieving the organisation's service delivery ambitions.

1.6 Current Challenges

As part of developing this data strategy, the NCSE undertook a Data Maturity Assessment. This assessment, along with reviews of our data systems and inventory, identified several areas for improvement.

Current systems were implemented independently, and opportunities now exist to better integrate them. The Data Systems Review identified numerous separate systems currently in use, which presents challenges for staff needing to access information across different platforms.

Many established processes still rely on paper-based data collection, particularly for applications and field assessments. While these processes have served the organisation well there has been a notable expansion of function. Transitioning to digital alternatives would enable more timely access to information and reduce administrative workload.

The Data Inventory Assessment revealed that staff are eager for clearer guidance on data management practices. There is strong interest in training on data classification and better understanding of how datasets connect across the organisation. Within the NCSE there is a demonstrated commitment to data quality but there is a need for more standardised processes and clearer ownership structures.

These findings present opportunities to build on existing foundations while implementing modern data management practices that will better support service delivery and decision-making.

2 Scope

This Data Strategy applies to all, service delivery related data management activities across the NCSE for the period 2025-2028. Data collected, processed and stored by the NCSE includes:

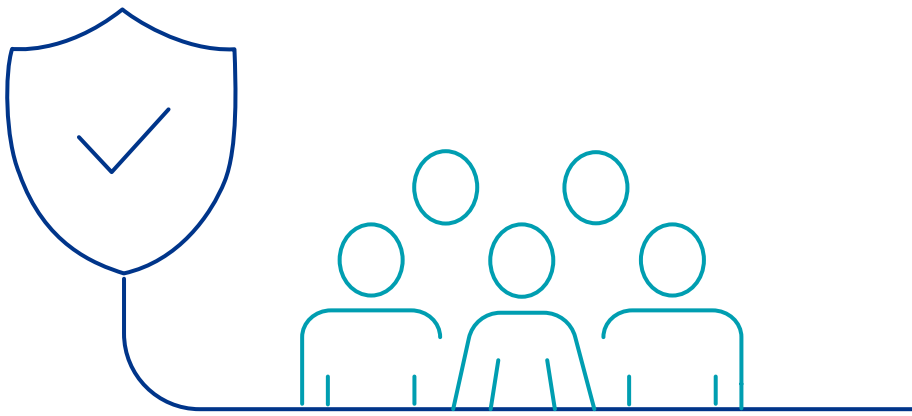
- Student records
- Resource allocation data
- Special class information
- Assessment data

Data in its broadest sense includes structured data fields (largely found in databases and systems) and also unstructured information such as documents, image or video files and social media posts. Different approaches are taken to manage each, and the scope of this strategy focuses mainly on structured data.

The strategy does not address ICT infrastructure including network architecture, hardware procurement, or device management.

Governance

The strategy will be led by Pillar 5 with periodic oversight by the Senior Management Team. All data initiatives during this period must align with this strategy to ensure coherent implementation.



3 Vision

The NCSE will deliver integrated, quality data services that enable, students and their parents, schools and staff, to access the information they need, when they need it, to support informed decisions about special education provision.

We will:

- Deliver information that provides a complete view of each student's journey through special education services
- Provide our staff with real-time access to reliable data and self-service analytics
- Enable schools and families to interact with our services digitally
- Create organisational intelligence through detailed data models and analytics
- Maintain trust through robust governance and quality frameworks
- Fulfil our reporting obligations to the Minister for the Department of Education and Youth

4 Anticipated Benefits

Implementation of the NCSE Data Strategy will deliver significant improvements across key areas:

Better Information Management

Data will be securely managed through governance policies and standardisation, providing a single source of truth. Data quality will improve through the implementation of the data quality framework and cleansing activities. The strategy will strengthen compliance with legal requirements through clear roles and responsibilities for data governance and the development of archival policies.

Enhanced Organisational Capabilities

The dedicated Data Unit will develop further expertise in data analytics and data management. Investment in new technology will deliver greater value and productivity gains through Cloud, ICT, Digital and AI based solutions to support core workstreams, business process mapping and data modelling activities. Through these enhanced organisational capabilities NCSE will be better positioned to adapt to changing service demands.

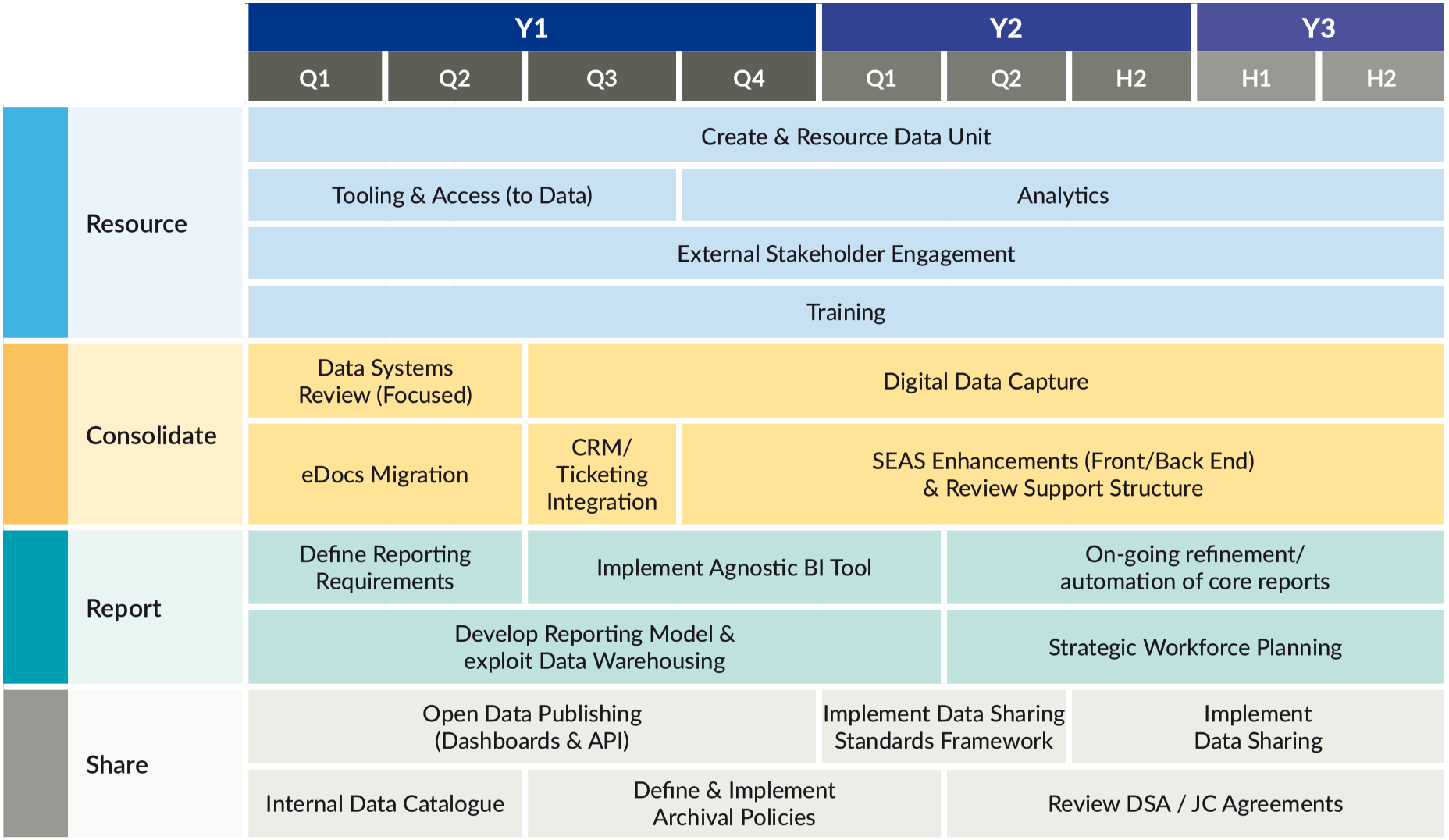
Data Driven Decision-Making

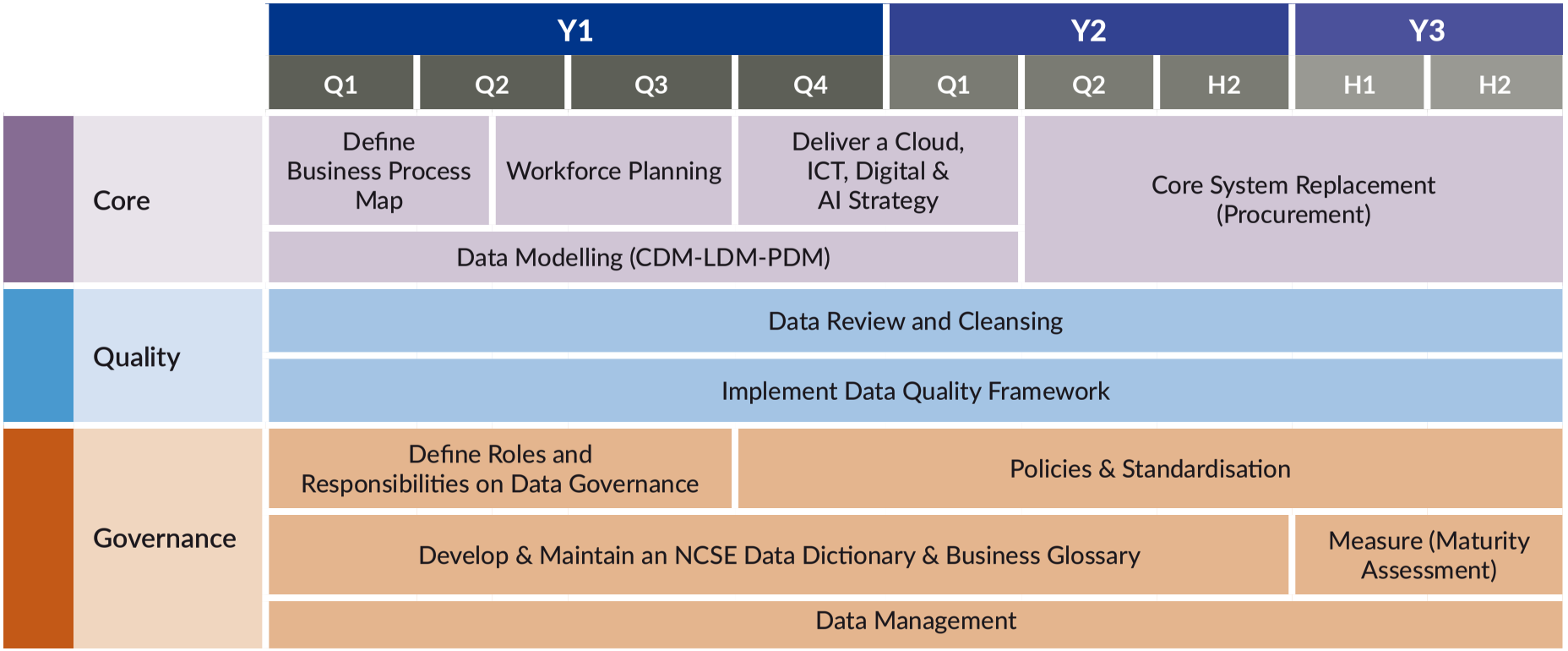
Leadership will gain access to integrated dashboards through the implementation of a BI tool. The strategic workforce planning and data warehousing initiatives will enhance evidence-based decision making through enhanced analytics that identify trends and emerging needs. This will strengthen policy development and enable more consistent responses to parliamentary questions and information requests.

Streamlined Stakeholder Engagement and Service Delivery

Schools will benefit from reduced paperwork through the digital-by-default approach. Children will receive more coordinated services across public service through the data sharing standards framework and agreements established in the shared workstream. Families will gain greater clarity about available supports through improved open data publishing and dashboards.

4.1 Workstreams Roadmap




Y1
Y2
Y3
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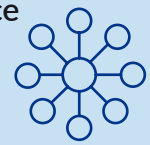
H2
Core
Define Business Process Map
Workforce Planning
Deliver a Cloud, ICT, Digital & AI Strategy
Core System Replacement (Procurement)
Data Modelling (CDM-LDM-PDM)
Quality
Data Review and Cleansing
Implement Data Quality Framework
Governance
Define Roles and Responsibilities on Data Governance
Policies & Standardisation
Develop & Maintain an NCSE Data Dictionary & Business Glossary
Measure (Maturity Assessment)
Data Management

4.2 Workstreams Overview:

Resource



Primarily focuses on the creation and development of a Data Unit, within the NCSE. The workstream also calls out a set of initiatives to support the immediate requirements of the proposed unit.

Consolidate

Sets out the initiatives which will enable the NCSE to begin to consolidate processes and systems back into their core system (SEAS). A key pre-requisite of this work stream is the completion of a series of data cleansing activities under the 'Quality' workstream and the capture of data (at source) digitally by default.

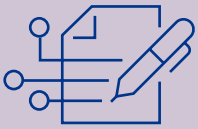
Report

Will define the: NCSE Data Reporting requirements. i.e. a Single Source of Truth for Data Reporting with real-time access to data through dashboards and customisable reports, ensuring timely insights and decision-making at all organisational levels.

Share

Will deliver on the EU Open Data directive, fully embrace Data Sharing, define a comprehensive records management policy and compile an internal data catalogue building on new/refined Data Sharing Agreements (DSA).

Core



Will define business process mapping and the underlying NCSE Data Model. It will inform the NCSE Cloud, AI, Digital and ICT strategy. It will deliver multidimensional models that build on core business systems to deliver effective strategic workforce planning.

Quality

Will action data cleansing activities and the implementation of a data quality framework. Activities will feed directly into the consolidation stream.

Governance

Will address Data Governance. i.e. Implement robust data governance and data management practices for secure and real-time access to educational and administrative data.

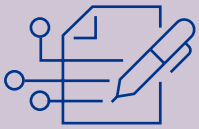
4.3 Information on Workstream Activities:

Workstream	Activity	Actions
1. Resource 	1.1 Create and Resource Data Unit	• Identify and appoint staff to oversee the various workstreams and activities • Recruit to fill any skills gaps that have been identified
	1.2 Tooling and Access to Data	• Ensure that the Data unit has access to the required tooling. • Remove obstacles to access backend data, e.g. SEAS
	1.3 Analytics	• Review current capabilities within the organisation and develop a reporting model • Enhance reporting model to move from general reporting to an analysis model
	1.4 Training	• Develop training resources on existing and new systems • Identify common use-cases to extract key performance metrics • Ensure regular communications on availability of training resources • Develop a training schedule to train all relevant staff

Workstream	Activity	Actions
2. Consolidate 	2.1 Data Systems Review (Focused)	• Identify all the systems currently used within the organisation. • Understand the type of information each system holds and its specific purpose • Create a map of who interacts with these systems as well has how these systems interact with each other
	2.2 Digital Data Capture	• Implement a method of data capture that is "Digital by default" to move away from paper-based records (where possible) • Implement 'Capture once, use many' principle
	2.3 eDocs (E-Pupil) Migration	• A project plan and activities to migrate eDocs to SEAS
	2.4 Customer Relationship Management (CRM)/ Ticketing Integration	• Create a single view to track the status of each individual (e.g. student, child) case, view their current progress, and see their full profile.
	2.5 SEAS Enhancements (Front/ Back End) and Review Support Structure	• Create new front end for data entry using web forms • Review back end of SEAS system to see how to leverage various analytics and visualisation tools • Develop a consistent approach for key use cases • Identify changes needed to improve information accessibility for system users.

Workstream	Activity	Actions
3. Report 	3.1 Define Reporting Requirements	• Define the key metrics and standard dashboards needed across the organisation • Determine which datasets are needed to build and support these dashboards • Engage with Stakeholders
	3.2 Implement an Agnostic Business Intelligence (BI) Tool	• Introduce a reporting tool that can connect to any system and any data sources • Provide support, training and maintenance for the tool to relevant staff
	3.3 Ongoing refinement/ automation of core reports	• Identify “core reports” requirements • Determine a timeframe for these reports to be run (e.g. daily, weekly, etc.) • Develop a feedback channel for the improvement of existing core reports • Develop a data reporting catalogue
	3.4 Develop Reporting Model and exploit Data Warehousing	• Review organisational data needs and align them with organisational data model • Futureproof utilising Total Quality Management (TQM) principles • Implement an ETL process to enable real-time refresh
	3.5 Strategic Workforce Planning	• Set up a workforce group to look at current and future reporting needs • Track report progress and make it accessible for all staff

Workstream	Activity	Actions
4. Share 	4.1 Open Data Publishing (Dashboards and API)	• Implement an open data portal to enable data reusability to other public service bodies and the public • Where possible make data available using APIs
	4.2 Implement Data Sharing Standards Framework	• Develop data sharing guidelines for shared data • Assign roles and responsibilities to roll out and monitor the adoption of the framework
	4.3 Implement Data Sharing	• Set up a clear data sharing process and agreement for both current and future data sharing activities for both internal and external stakeholders • Create a single, consolidated view of all data sharing agreements – including existing, in-progress, and new agreements
	4.4 Define and Implement Archival Policies	• Develop a clear archival and retention policy that applies to all systems and types of data • Automate the archival process wherever possible to improve efficiency • Engage with staff to identify and prioritise which data should be archived first • Ensure the archival and retention policy aligns with existing public sector directives and legal requirements
	4.5 Review DSA/ Joint Controller Agreements	• Review current data sharing agreements with external stakeholders • Identify new stakeholders to establish data sharing agreements

Workstream	Activity	Actions
5. Core 	5.1 Define Business Process Map	• Identify the main work processes and the key information needed to support them • Create a clear map showing how each core process connects to daily reporting and operational monitoring
	5.2 Workforce Planning	• Define the resources required (staff, time, budget) for the various workstream activities • Develop and/or recruit staff as necessary
	5.3 Deliver a Cloud, ICT, Digital and AI Strategy	• Set up a project team to develop the strategies • Create a plan to integrate cloud services, ICT, digital tools, and AI into the organisation's existing systems, databases, and work processes
	5.4 Data Modelling (CDM-LDM-PDM)	• Conceptual Data Model (CDM): Defines the high-level structure of data such as what data is important and how it relates to the business • Logical Data Model (LDM): Provides further details such as data types, relationships, and rules, without focusing on how it will be stored • Physical Data Model (PDM): Translates the logical model into a technical blueprint, showing exactly how data will be stored in databases or systems
	5.5 Core System Replacement (Procurement)	• Identify and define the requirements for replacing existing systems • Procure a suitable alternative system that meets these requirements • Bespoke or Customisable Off The Shelf Solution (COTS) – 'Make or Buy' • Internal stakeholder engagement (workshops)

Workstream	Activity	Actions
6. Quality 	6.1 Data Review and Cleansing	• Review data stored across different systems to understand how it's currently processed and what business rules are being used • Create a standard checklist and set of business rules to ensure data is processed consistently across all systems • Identify outdated information that can be removed, and highlight data that needs to go through ETL (Extract, Transform, Load) processing for better quality
	6.2 Implement Data Quality Framework	• Assign clear roles and responsibilities for monitoring and managing data quality • Define what "data quality" means for the organisation, including key metrics to measure it • Implement an automated data quality tool to monitor and improve data across core systems. • Communicate any changes or improvements made to enhance data quality across the organisation • Conduct an annual data quality review to monitor progress and identify improvements over time

Workstream	Activity	Actions
7. Governance 	7.1 Define Roles and Responsibilities on Data Governance	• Appoint staff, data owners to specific roles and clearly outline their responsibilities related to data governance activities • Re-establish data working group • Establish a web steering committee (data publishing protocols) • Improve data literacy across the organisation
	7.2 Policies and Standardisation	• Develop clear and practical governance policies that are easy to implement • Launch programs and initiatives to help staff understand the importance and value of these policies adhering to data standards • Designate a point of contact to assist departments in implementing the policies and gather feedback on their feasibility • Establish a data retention policy and legacy systems data archival policy
	7.3 Develop and Maintain an NCSE Data Dictionary and Business Glossary	• Create an internal data dictionary accessible to all staff • Create an external data dictionary and contribute to the Public Service Data Catalogue • Assign specific roles and responsibilities for maintaining and updating the dictionaries
	7.4 Measure (Maturity Assessment)	• Monitor the organisations data situation and track progress to measure the impact of changes over time
	7.5 Data Management	• Continuously monitor data-related activities to ensure quality and compliance • Assign responsibilities for the merging and purging of NCSE Enterprise data • Assign clear roles and responsibilities for data accountability across the organisation

5 Appendix

5.1 Glossary

API: An Application Programming Interface (API) is a software intermediary that allows two computers or applications to talk to each other.

Business Intelligence (BI): Technologies, applications, and practices for collecting, integrating, analysing, and presenting business information to support better decision-making.

Data catalogue: A data catalogue is a comprehensive inventory of an organisation's key data assets. It provides information (metadata) about data assets including business descriptions, data ownership, technical information and can also include usage or classification guidance to support data governance. Overall, when managed and maintained appropriately, it enhances and transforms data accessibility and usability within an organisation.

Data governance: Data governance refers to defining structures which have the appropriate standards and guidelines necessary to ensure accountability and proper management of data assets.

Data literacy: Data literacy is about people having the knowledge, skills and capability to explore, understand and use data relevant to their role in an organisation.

Data management: Data management refers to the process of handling and arranging an organisation's data effectively. It involves collecting, storing, securing, transforming and using data for decision-making.

Data maturity assessment: A method for organisations to assess their current data management capability by examining their data management processes and procedures in a range of different data areas and benchmarking these processes and procedures against predefined levels of maturity.

Data owner: Data owner is a specific data governance role which is assigned to a senior individual in an organisation with ultimate responsibility for a specific dataset. A data owner oversees the data governance of the assigned dataset which includes ensuring compliance with relevant internal policies and broader legislation including data protection. A data owner will rely on internal organisational supports such as a Data Protection Officer and can often assign key support roles such as Data Stewards to assist them in discharging the accountabilities of their role. A data owner is the approval authority for decisions about the sharing and release of the given data.

Data protection: Data protection refers to the processing of personal data, setting out obligations on data controllers and processors, and providing strengthened protections for data subjects under GDPR legislation.

Data quality: The state of completeness, validity, consistency, timeliness and accuracy that makes data appropriate for a specific use.

Data sharing agreement: A data sharing agreement sets out the framework for the sharing of personal data between parties and defines the principles and procedures that the parties shall adhere to and the responsibilities the parties owe to one another.

Data standards: Data standards are an agreed documented set of organisational guidelines which describe how data items should be defined and structured within an organisation. Data standards ensure consistency across items such as data formats, naming conventions, units of measurement, and other specific business themes which may be present across an individual organisation domain. By adhering to data standards, organisations can enhance interoperability between systems, increase data quality and enable easier data sharing with approved wider stakeholders.

ETL: Extract, Transform, Load – a process that extracts data from source systems, transforms it to fit operational needs, and loads it into a target database or data warehouse.

Metadata: Metadata is information about data. It does not contain the actual content of the data but merely describes it. Having reliable, clear and concise metadata for key organisational datasets makes it far easier to understand and work with individual datasets.

Open Data: The concept of Open Data is about making data held by public bodies available and easily accessible online for reuse and redistribution. Open Data gives everyone access to non-personal government data which can deliver enhanced economic, social, environmental and democratic benefits to all.

5.2 Strategy Development Process

The NCSE Data Strategy was developed through a structured set of assessments and workshops. The process included:

Data Inventory Assessment

A thorough review of the NCSE's data assets was conducted over a 10-week period, involving interviews with 14 stakeholders across all five organisational pillars. This assessment:

- Identified the types and storage of data held across the organisation
- Mapped current data storage locations and management practices
- Assessed compliance with data protection requirements
- Identified opportunities for improved data classification and management

Key findings highlighted the need for clearer guidelines on data classification (addressed in Governance workstream), improved documentation of work processes (Core workstream), and a more coordinated approach to data management across the organisation (role of the Data Unit).

Data Maturity Assessment

A structured evaluation of the NCSE's data management capabilities was conducted using a recognised maturity framework set by the OGCIO. This assessment:

- Measured current data management maturity levels across key knowledge areas
- Identified strengths and areas for improvement
- Provided a baseline for measuring future progress

The assessment revealed an overall average maturity level of 2.18 (on a scale of 1 to 5), with strengths in document and content management. Areas for development included data quality management (see Quality workstream), governance structures (Governance), and system integration (Consolidate workstream).

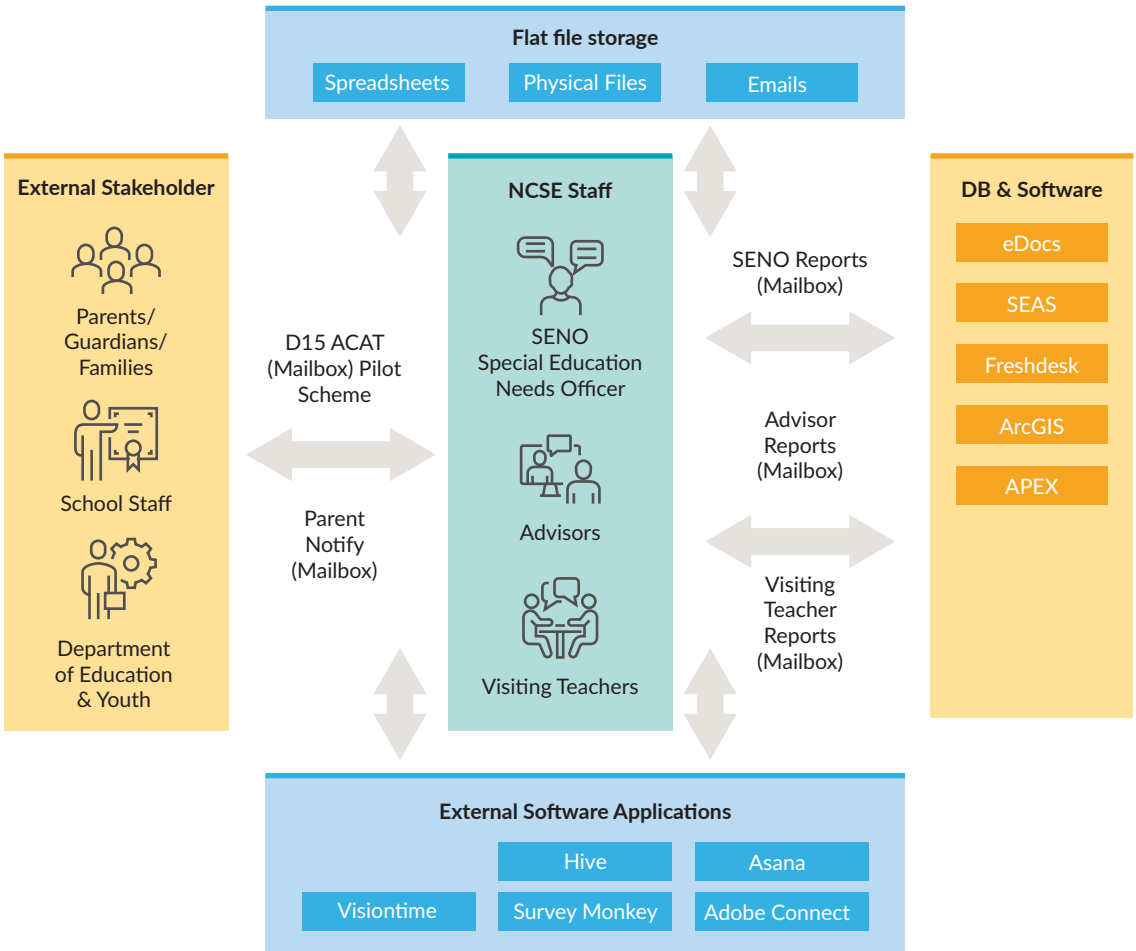
Data Systems Review

A technical review of the NCSE's information systems was conducted to understand data flows and system capabilities. This review:

- Mapped core systems and their interconnections
- Identified gaps in current functionality
- Assessed opportunities for system consolidation and enhancement

The review highlighted opportunities to improve interoperability between systems (Consolidate workstream), reduce data silos (see SEAS enhancements and eDocs migration), implement digital data capture, and develop more integrated approaches to case management (CRM/ticketing integration) and reporting (Report workstream).

Current System View



NCSE Systems Map