**Statement by Brigid McManus to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection**

Thank you for inviting me to meet with you today. I will outline my own background and then say something about the work the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has underway and will be undertaking over the next few years.

I worked as a civil servant for over 34 years and served as Secretary-General of the Department of Education and Skills from 2005 to 2012. During my civil service career I also worked in the Department of Finance and the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht in a variety of public policy areas including public expenditure management, EU Structural and Cohesion Funds and the preparation of the 1994 National Development Plan, the governance and funding of national cultural institutions and national and EU tax policy. As Secretary-General of the Department of Education and Skills my responsibilities covered oversight of the full range of issues in the education sector including curriculum and assessment policy. I have strong experience of corporate governance issues in the public sector. I was appointed Chairperson of the NCCA in 2012 and I have served for three years in that role. The appointment being discussed today is for a second term.

The NCCA plays a key role in sustaining and enhancing education quality. Its remit to advise on curriculum and assessment covers early childhood settings, primary schools and second –level schools. While it has no specific remit in relation to higher education it is working closely with the higher education sector and others on transition issues particularly in trying to address the interaction of the Leaving Certificate and university entrance requirements and the impact on the senior cycle school experience. The Council itself is a largely representative structure with most members appointed by stakeholder organisations. In developing its proposals it places a strong emphasis on research and evidence, on deliberation through specific representative subject specialist groups, on widespread consultation and on trialling aspects of new curricula with network schools. While it is not responsible for implementing curricular change it supports such change through developing support materials and working with those responsible.

To give you a flavour of NCCA activities, work underway or planned in NCCA includes:

-a practice guide for early childhood settings on implementing Aistear and Siolta, the quality and curricular frameworks that apply to such settings;

-a new primary language curriculum (English and Gaeilge) for junior primary classes just finalised and for older classes by 2018;

-a new primary maths curriculum;

-a curriculum for primary schools in education about religious beliefs (ERB) and Ethics;

-developing a new overall primary curriculum framework;

-the new Junior Cycle *,* which isa major programme of workincluding revised curricula for all individual subjects, new short courses, advice on addressing student well-being, new school assessment tasks across all subject areas and new reporting arrangements including the introduction of the new Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement;

-new senior cycle curricula in Economics, Agricultural Science, Applied Maths and Physical Education ;

-introducing a new senior cycle Politics and Society subject in a number of schools;

-supporting the trialling of new practical assessment arrangements for Leaving Certificate science subjects;

-reviewing the impact of Project Maths and the new oral arrangements for Leaving Certificate Gaeilge; and

-work in relation to the transition to higher education in particular the development and introduction of new grading arrangements for Leaving Certificate subjects.

In addressing this work NCCA is very conscious of the importance of developing coherence across the education continuum and of addressing transition points which can cause difficulty – from early childhood to primary, from primary to second-level and from second-level to higher education. Fundamental to NCCA work is that it builds upon and recognises the importance of the classroom and the school as the site of change, of teachers and school management as the principal agents in that change, and the need for the drive for change to be focused on improving the quality of the educational experience for all children and young people.

Work must address the needs of students of all abilities and backgrounds: it must sufficiently challenge students with high ability in particular subjects and it must address the needs of students who are currently disengaging from education and students with special needs. In this context, one example is the work as part of the junior cycle reforms in developing new curriculum programmes for students with moderate to mild general learning disabilities and special needs that will allow their learning to be recognized and awarded for the first time at junior cycle. Increasingly NCCA tries to capture the student view in its work and engages with parents in supporting their child’s education. For example, the NCCA website includes video clips giving parents suggestions for activities they can do with young children to help support literacy and numeracy skills.

Curriculum policy and advice cannot be addressed on a standalone basis. To deliver effectively on its mandate NCCA needs to work collaboratively across the sector. It works closely with the Department of Education and Skills, the State Examinations Commission, the Teaching Council and the teacher professional development support services across the range of its work, and with the Higher Education Authority, the National Council for Special Education and Quality and Qualifications Ireland on other specific areas of work. It engages with all of the education partners in both its own work and other fora. Participating in international networks and research activity ensures NCCA is up-to-date with best practice elsewhere.

NCCA’s work is supported by the huge commitment and input of a large number of people involved on a voluntary basis in the NCCA Council and its different subject development groups and working groups and the work of its talented and enthusiastic fulltime staff. It has been a great privilege to have chaired the Council and overseen this important work for the last three years and I, and all the members of the new NCCA Council, are very committed to the NCCA’s important work in the coming years in improving the education experience of all students.