

**Department of Finance
Memorandum on the Thirty Fifth
Report from the
Public Accounts Committee
Mandate 2011-2016**

Department of Education: Sustainability of Schools

**Presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly
by the Minister of Finance**

10 June 2016



© Crown copyright 2016

You may re-use this information (excluding logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence v.3. To view this licence visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/ or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

Where we have identified any third party copyright information, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

This publication is also available at <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/>

Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at afmd.returns@finance-ni.gov.uk

Contents

Pages 5-9

Department of Education:
Sustainability of Schools

Glossary of Abbreviations

| | |
|-------------|---|
| CCMS | Council for Catholic Maintained Schools |
| DE | Department of Education |
| EA | Education Authority |
| ETI | Education and Training Inspectorate |
| SSP | Sustainable Schools Policy |

Thirty Fifth Report

Department of Education

Department of Education: Sustainability of Schools

Introduction

Area Planning is the process by which the Sustainable Schools Policy (SSP) is being delivered through the strategic planning of primary and post-primary provision. The SSP aims to establish a network of sustainable schools - having schools of the right size and type in the right place. Special education provision is not covered by the SSP.

The Education Authority (EA) and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) are working closely with the sectoral support bodies (Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and the Controlled Schools Support Council) to develop Area Plans for primary and post-primary schools to cover the period from April 2017 to March 2020.

Revised Area Planning support structures have been in place from 2015 and include an Area Planning Steering Group which supports the Department of Education (DE) at a strategic level in embedding the process of Area Planning; an Area Planning Working Group which enables relevant bodies' to develop a consistent and common approach at an operational level; and Area Planning Local Groups which provide opportunity for local input to the development of the Area Plans.

These groups each have a role to play in the development of the strategic Area Plans and of the supporting Annual Action Plan which will set out actions to be taken to re-shape education provision to align with the objective of establishing a network of educationally and financially viable schools.

Annual Area Profiles are published by the EA and set out quantitative sustainability information for each individual school. They inform the assessment of existing provision against the SSP and offer members of the public an opportunity to compare information about their local schools. Should a significant change be required to a school, this would require the publication of a Development Proposal.

PAC Recommendation 1

Quantitative and qualitative factors are equally important in ensuring that schools are equipped to provide children with a quality education. The Committee recommends that, in future, the area planning process is based upon a robust review of all of the relevant criteria both quantitative and qualitative.

DE accepts this recommendation.

DE agrees all six SSP criteria (three quantitative and three qualitative) are important. The quality of educational experience is however of particular importance and DE currently has processes in place to ensure that schools are initially assessed against the three quantitative sustainability criteria on an annual basis, as set out in the Annual Area Profile. Should a school's Annual Area Profile demonstrate that the school is exhibiting stress in any of the three quantitative criteria DE expects the EA, working with the school managing authority, to take action to address these issues. This will be monitored by DE through the scrutiny of the Area Plans and their accompanying Annual Action Plans.

Should a significant change be required to any school to deliver the Area Plan, DE's existing statutory Development Proposal process includes an assessment against all six SSP criteria and this is included in the advice the DE Minister receives to inform decisions on Development Proposals. This advice is published on the DE website.

However, a project is underway to review the SSP criteria indicators to assess whether they remain fit for purpose and to identify if there are any other relevant indicators that should be included. DE will produce updated guidance on the Area Planning process by September 2016.

PAC Recommendation 2

The Development Proposal process can be lengthy, and leave pupils and their parents to suffer from poor educational provision until it is completed. Where a school is clearly no longer sustainable, the Department and the Education Authority must take action quickly to avoid a protracted period of decline.

DE has already implemented this recommendation.

Enhanced Area Planning support and governance structures are already in place to maintain momentum in bringing forward proposals to deal with sustainability issues, including under-performing schools. DE, working with the planning and managing authorities and the sectoral support bodies, has agreed a revised format and cycle for the Area Plans which includes an Annual Action Plan for each Area Plan. This approach will ensure that communities are informed of the current supply and demand for education provision and of the strategic sustainability issues facing schools in the local area on a timely basis. The Annual Action Plan will set out clearly the proposed actions to address these issues. DE will monitor progress in addressing sustainability through scrutiny and challenge of these plans to ensure pupils have access to high quality education.

In addition, DE has revised and re-issued comprehensive Development Proposal guidance to further improve the process. This guidance emphasises the need for school managing authorities to bring forward Development Proposals for changes in schools in a timely manner in order to protect the educational well-being of all pupils and avoid a protracted period of decline. DE has also provided enhanced guidance on developing the Case for Change for Development Proposals. In addition, DE has provided training and information sessions for DE staff involved in the processes for the consideration of Development Proposals. It should be noted however, that the Development Proposal process must continue to allow sufficient time to consider and consult on options for change where it has been identified that a school is not sustainable.

PAC Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the Education Authority supports schools identified for closure and underperforming schools to ensure that those schools are equipped to provide a high standard of education. This should involve assisting schools in developing a process of internal self-assessment and peer support.

DE accepts this recommendation.

The school managing authorities work closely with schools identified for closure to ensure that the closure process is managed to protect the educational interests of pupils and to minimise the impact of the closure on their educational experiences.

Current processes also ensure that underperforming schools, identified through inspection or by managing authorities, receive support from DE through the EA. The EA supports and challenges schools in formal intervention or schools identified as being at risk of underperformance. The nature and level of support required will differ from school to school and may include building the capacity of leadership throughout the school to undertake rigorous self-evaluation, including data analysis and building the capacity of school staff to develop robust action plans which address key priorities for improvement.

In addition, DE, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and managing authorities have all worked to promote and support effective self-evaluation across all schools. DE has produced and disseminated guidance on effective school development planning and provides schools with data to inform self-evaluation and help schools identify areas where improvement is required. Further, DE's SSP provides clear guidance on factors which make a school sustainable and is a framework for schools to use to self-assess. ETI also continues to promote a culture of self-evaluation within schools through inspection and *Together Towards Improvement*¹.

¹ Together Towards Improvement is a resource to support schools in the process of self-evaluation through examining "The Quality of Leadership and Management; The Quality of Provision: and The Quality of Achievements and Standards".

However, DE acknowledges that more work can always be done. How best to support underperforming schools, whatever their circumstances, will be a key feature of DE's ongoing discussions with the Director of Education in the EA.

PAC Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that, as a matter of urgency, the Department commissions a review of the approved enrolment figure recorded for every school to ensure that the figures are accurate and based on up-to-date design standards. It should provide a timescale for completing the review and should report back to this Committee on its findings.

DE partially accepts this recommendation.

DE is currently undertaking an exercise to assess the capacity of every school. This is a complex and resource intensive project which will be taken forward in phases and is currently being scoped to assess the current information held by the EA and DE. The initial focus of this review will be on the primary sector as this is the sector with the most schools showing variations between approved and actual enrolment figures. DE will produce an initial report on primary schools by 31 October 2016 following consultation with the schools. Lessons learned from the assessment of primary schools will inform the approach to reviewing the post-primary schools. However, the post-primary schools present an additional level of complexity due to the range of general classrooms and specialist accommodation provided.

While accommodation may limit a school's enrolment, it is not the only factor involved in setting approved enrolment figures. Existing schools have all been constructed at different points in time, and are therefore based on different design standards which would have been current at the time of construction. These schools nevertheless remain capable of effectively delivering the current curriculum and have an appropriate enrolment number directly linked to the available accommodation. DE does not therefore believe that the approved enrolment figures for every school need to be based on up-to-date design standards.

DE will report the findings of the review of approved enrolment figures for the primary and post-primary sector to the Committee once the reviews have been completed.

PAC Recommendation 5

Area planning decisions must be based on robust evidence and accurate data which takes account of all school enrolments. The Committee recommends that the Department reviews the rationale for excluding certain types of enrolment from the calculation.

DE accepts this recommendation.

DE's Area Planning guidance states that Area Planning must be based on robust and verifiable data. While certain types of enrolment were excluded from the calculation of surplus places, DE is able to identify the exact number of children in a school or in an area, including those admitted as supernumerary for open enrolment purposes. DE therefore considers Area Planning decisions are already made using robust evidence and a range of accurate data which takes account of all enrolments.

DE is however currently reviewing the way in which enrolments in schools are presented to provide greater clarity on the distribution of pupils across the system and the level of available/surplus places across the system.

PAC Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that, once the Department has undertaken a review of approved enrolments it gives consideration to quantifying how much surplus places cost. This would provide a constructive driver for change as it would identify how much resource could be invested more effectively in the education system.

DE accepts this recommendation.

DE will further consider this recommendation in light of the outcome of the review of approved enrolments.

However, in terms of calculating the cost of surplus places, under the extant Common Funding Scheme grant aided schools do not receive funding for ‘empty’ places or spare capacity. They are funded based on actual pupil numbers and the characteristics of those pupils. In addition, certain fixed costs will always be inescapable irrespective of school size and the number of surplus places a school may have and budgetary cover is required to reflect such costs. DE considers the most effective driver for change will be through effective Area Planning and that the issue of surplus places will be addressed through this process.

PAC Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the Department revisits an earlier recommendation to develop a more strategic approach to succession planning and the development of future leaders and leadership roles at all levels in schools.

DE accepts this recommendation.

The creation of the EA’s School Development Service provides an important opportunity to take a more strategic and regional approach to succession planning as part of its leadership support function and this will become an integral part of its role.

DE recognises that school leaders have a significant role to play in ensuring that our young people reach their full potential. Leadership at all levels is therefore a key theme of DE’s Teacher Professional Learning Strategy, ‘Learning Leaders’ (March 2016). DE currently provides development and support for existing, emergent and aspiring leaders through the EA. DE also provides induction and mentoring support for newly appointed Principals. Support and professional learning for school leaders will be further strengthened through the development of an agreed pathway to leadership.

PAC Recommendation 8

The success of area based planning is dependent upon stakeholders ‘buying in’ to the process. The Committee recommends that the Department develops an engagement strategy which reflects the importance of consulting widely and achieving the buy in of all key stakeholders.

DE accepts this recommendation.

DE has already commenced work on the development of a communications strategy which will be in place by September 2016. The strategy aims to enhance stakeholders’ understanding of SSP and raise awareness about the Area Planning process and the benefits that will be realised through effective Area Planning solutions.

In addition, DE Area Planning officials actively engage with the school planning and managing authorities and the sectoral support bodies through the Area Planning support structures to ensure consistent and common approaches are developed throughout the Area Planning process. This will further embed stakeholder engagement with various groups at a strategic, operational and local level.

DE has also issued enhanced Area Planning guidance which has a strong emphasis on a common and consistent approach to engagement with stakeholders and those affected by changes emerging from the Area Planning process.

PAC Recommendation 9

The current system for dealing with suspensions is fundamentally flawed. The Committee recommends that the Department provides clear strategic leadership on this issue to the Education Authority which must deal with suspensions expeditiously and cost effectively.

DE accepts this recommendation.

DE already provides clear strategic leadership to the employing authorities on the management of precautionary suspensions. This issue is a standing item on the Governance and Accountability Review meetings chaired by the DE Permanent Secretary, where the relevant Accounting Officer (eg Chief Executive of the EA or CCMS) provides assurance that each case has been subject to a monthly review to ensure the precautionary suspensions are managed as expeditiously and cost effectively as possible. In addition, DE has issued specific guidance to

Governors and Employing Authorities regarding dealing with precautionary suspensions in relation to allegations of abuse.

While DE does not consider that the current system for dealing with suspensions is fundamentally flawed, DE has established a project board to further enhance its oversight of precautionary suspensions, including work identified to support Boards of Governors and Employing Authorities, and to analyse the impact on school budgets.

PAC Recommendation 10

The Policy for Sustainable Schools is based on flawed and inaccurate data which undermines the policy. The Committee recommends that the Department undertakes a root and branch review of the policy to ensure that it is evidence based.

DE partially accepts this recommendation.

The SSP was developed in line with Northern Ireland Civil Service Policy Development guidance using the best available data at that time. It was widely consulted upon, rural proofed and welcomed by a diverse range of interested parties including the NI Assembly Education Committee. The implementation of SSP through the Area Planning process has also been tested in the courts and it was found to be a competent policy upon which to make decisions both about the future of individual schools and Area Planning more widely. DE therefore does not believe that the SSP is based on flawed and inaccurate data, nor that a root and branch review of the SSP is necessary.

However, as outlined in response to Recommendation 1, DE is currently reviewing both the qualitative and quantitative indicators attached to all six SSP criteria to ensure they remain relevant and are fit for purpose in the current context, and will be producing updated guidance on the Area Planning process.

Copies available from:

Department of Finance, Room S21,
Accountability and Financial Management Division,
Rathgael House, Balloo Road, Bangor BT19 7NA

Published and printed by DFP, Central Print Unit,
Craigantlet Buildings, Stoney Road, Belfast BT4 3SX
Tel: 028 9016 3397

978-1-908820-74-7



9 781908 820747 >