

**ORAL STATEMENT ON EAST BELFAST DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS AND
AREA BASED PLANNING**

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JOHN O'DOWD MLA
MINISTER FOR EDUCATION

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With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on my decisions on the six Development Proposals for non-selective post-primary provision which are aimed largely at serving East Belfast.

There has been a significant level of interest in these proposals. The proposed changes are of such significance for the East Belfast area that I felt it was important that I formally report my decisions to the Assembly.

The purpose of the statement is therefore:

- to inform you of my decisions and the reasoning behind those decisions; and
- to outline the next phase of area planning for this area.

As members may be aware, the Belfast Education and Library Board and the South Eastern Education and Library Board published six Development Proposals affecting seven post-primary schools in the east of the city and Holywood.

The purpose of the proposals is to re-shape controlled secondary and controlled integrated provision, largely for the East Belfast area, to meet changing demographics and the future needs of the area. The area covered by the proposals includes inner city and suburban Belfast east of the Lagan from Newtownbreda to Holywood, and also covers Dundonald.

This area straddles the boundary of two separate administrative bodies, namely the Belfast and South Eastern Boards. But it forms a distinct planning area for the provision of post-primary non-selective education.

There are 12,700 post-primary pupils currently attending school in the greater East Belfast area. These proposals will directly impact on around 3,500 pupils attending the seven schools affected.

Challenges

The significant issues raised in these proposals have clearly highlighted the need for area planning. In particular, it has become evident that managing authorities need to co-ordinate their activities and ensure related and interdependent Development Proposals are brought forward at the same time. This will provide clarity for everyone on the proposals and their impacts, and enable a holistic consideration of the area solution and proposed changes.

In bringing forward these Development Proposals, the Boards have rightly highlighted their responsibility to deal with immediate issues such as underachievement, raising standards and closing the gap, budgetary constraints, surplus places and poor accommodation.

However, it is important that administrative boundaries do not impede co-ordinated planning for a distinctive geographical area such as East Belfast.

At the centre of this process must be decision-making in the best educational interest of children, and solutions which can be implemented in a manageable manner.

As Minister, I have the responsibility of scrutinising proposals presented to me from the perspective of the pupils and the communities they are designed to serve.

The proposals put to me for consideration in this case are:

- to amalgamate Newtownbreda and Knockbreda High Schools,
- to close Orangefield and Dundonald High Schools; and
- to increase the size of Ashfield Girls' and Boys' High Schools, and Priory Integrated College in Holywood.

As I have already stated, the scale and impact of the proposed changes are significant. They reflect the need to restructure provision in the area to best meet the future educational needs of the population.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend the Belfast and South Eastern Boards for the work they have undertaken to identify the issues and develop proposals for change.

Both have recognised that change was necessary. Necessary because the young people of this area deserve to have high quality education that will improve and enhance their life opportunities.

As I have said, East Belfast straddles the boundary between the Belfast and South Eastern Board areas and there is significant movement of pupils between the two planning authorities. This in itself presents a set of unique challenges for the two Boards. Challenges that would be easier to manage if there was a single planning authority as envisaged through the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority.

In advance of ESA, it is my view that the only way forward is for the two Boards to engage in high levels of collaboration and constructive co-ordination to ensure proposals take account of the needs of all the young people in that area.

When all is said and done these proposals will set a pattern of education provision to serve this community for the foreseeable future and most certainly for at least the next 20 years.

In assessing the proposals, I must have confidence that the changes represent the best solution for the pupils in the area and are co-ordinated, robust and 'future-proofed' as far as possible.

In relation to a number of the proposals presented the evidence for my decision was unequivocal.

However, in relation to others, I believe further work is required, and as such I am not in a position to approve them at this time. I will be asking the two planning authorities to jointly reconsider a number of issues and come back to me with more compelling evidence and I will look at the new proposals with an open mind.

Turning to my decisions.

Firstly, the amalgamation of Newtownbreda and Knockbreda High Schools.

Enrolments at Knockbreda have steadily declined from 574 in 2007/08 to 395 in 2012/13. This is significantly below the minimum enrolment threshold of 500 set out in the Sustainable Schools Policy.

The performance of both schools at GCSE level has been significantly below the average. However, there have been some signs of improvement in recent years.

The amalgamation proposed will result in a school of 1,000 pupils.

I have decided to approve this proposal. I believe it will provide the opportunity for the development of a viable and sustainable school. This is to be a new school focused on improvement and addressing the issues faced by both schools in the past.

Initially this school will operate on a split site. When the time comes to consider a new build, I will require the South Eastern and Belfast Boards to work together to determine the most appropriate location for the new school which best serves the local population.

Schools should be in the heart of the communities they are serving and easily accessible for all pupils.

This amalgamation will take effect from September 2014 or as soon as possible thereafter, depending on the arrangements needed to give effect to this amalgamation. I want planning to start now to ensure a smooth transition to the new

arrangements. My officials will work closely with the South Eastern Board to ensure a managed transition.

My next decision relates to Orangefield High School.

The Sustainable Schools Policy is clear - the core issue for a school's sustainability must be the continuing provision of a high quality education for the pupils. As enrolments in a school fall, the number of challenges it must overcome in order to provide a high quality education rise.

With only 92 pupils remaining in Orangefield High School, it has declined to such an extent that it is no longer feasible to delay its closure. Regrettably this is an example where it has been left too late to turn the situation around.

Again regrettably, the only reasonable option available to me regarding the future of Orangefield High School is to approve its closure from 31 August 2014.

In making this decision I have advised the Belfast Board of the need for it to work closely with any schools which will receive Orangefield High School pupils to produce an action plan for improvement in outcomes in public examinations.

I want to turn now to the future of Dundonald High School.

I have considered very carefully the proposal that the school should close and can see many reasons why this would, as is the case in Orangefield, be an appropriate course of action.

However, I believe the case exists to explore a very different solution for Dundonald and its young people.

Dundonald is a large urban area with a significant population of school aged children. There is no other inclusive post-primary school close by. From engagement with local representatives, it is clear to me that this is a community

whose young people need, and should rightly expect, to be able to access good quality secondary education.

It is equally clear that this has not been happening. The provision in Dundonald High School has, quite simply, not been good enough. The last follow up inspection, just a couple of months ago, while highlighting some modest improvement, painted a graphic picture of low attendance, low attainment and low aspirations.

But the school is in the right geographical location; the young people are there; and the community- like all communities - needs and deserves a good school. So I have decided on this occasion not to accept the proposal for closure.

Dundonald High School will remain open.

However, for the school to flourish and its young people to achieve to their full potential, it is clear that attitudes, expectation for pupils' attainment and provision will need to change.

My Department and the South Eastern Board will play their part in delivering the change that is necessary. This will not be easy – and we will not be able to do it without the help of the community – but we are prepared to do our utmost.

The South Eastern Board will use the opportunity presented by the current reconstitution exercise to reinvigorate the school's Board of Governors in the coming months, ensuring the appointment of people with the skills necessary to deliver progress on an extremely challenging agenda.

A recruitment process will commence shortly to appoint a permanent Principal, a visionary leader capable of providing clear strategic direction, who is accomplished at raising and sustaining achievement, who can demonstrate a proven track record of supporting teaching and learning and who sets high standards and expectations for the good of young people.

An intensive support programme will be put in place by the South Eastern Board, supported by my Department, designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom, the quality of leadership and management at all levels and the educational experience for pupils.

But this will not be enough: for Dundonald High School and its young people to flourish, the support of the community and its elected representatives will also be necessary.

I have met many from the community who made the case for the school to remain, and I have been impressed by their passion, their enthusiasm and their determination.

I have listened – but my decision does not mean that they have achieved their goal. That goal cannot have been merely to sustain a school; it has to have been to sustain a good school – a school that is characterised by excellent leadership; by high quality teaching and learning; by high expectations for the attainment of pupils; but also by the support it receives from its community.

So to the people who called on me to keep Dundonald open, my message is simple. Your campaign is not over: it has only just begun.

Show me – and, more importantly, show the young people in your area – that you are serious about demanding a high quality education; that you are determined to stamp out inadequacy; raise achievement and expectations for your young people and show that you value and believe in what the young people of Dundonald can achieve.

My Department and the South Eastern Board will play their part – but so too must you play yours.

This is the beginning of a journey and I do not expect that it will be an easy road to travel.

I move now to Ashfield Boys' and Girls' High Schools.

The proposals for the expansion of Ashfield Boys' and Girls' High Schools and Priory Integrated College are aimed at covering the northern end of East Belfast.

However, I am not convinced that the proposal for Priory College actually provides part of the solution for the greater East Belfast Area as it serves largely the North Down area. So I will deal with it separately.

The proposed additional 490 pupils at the Ashfield Schools represent a large increase, and would have a significant impact on other schools in the area.

Neither Ashfield School has spare places, but both were undersubscribed in relation to Year 8 first preferences in the current year (2013/14) and in some previous years. There is also a significant level of unfilled places in other controlled schools in both in Belfast and South Eastern Board areas.

The proposed sixth form increases at both schools amount to 255 places resulting in a combined sixth form capacity of 400 places. Such large increases in sixth form provision would also impact on other schools in the area.

I have carefully considered the Ashfield proposals in the wider context of the whole East Belfast area. The area plans from both the Belfast and the South Eastern Boards indicate that expansion in several post-primary schools in the areas is anticipated. However, there is insufficient evidence that a proper co-ordinated strategic examination of Sixth Form provision, that includes both the grammar and integrated sectors, has been undertaken.

Taking this into account I have concluded that I am not in a position to approve these proposals at present.

I want to see a coherent set of proposals from the Boards that reflect the longer term needs in the area, particularly Sixth Form provision. I believe the proposals, as currently structured, are premature and further work is required to ascertain exactly

what provision is needed to meet the needs of pupils in this area, both at Years 8 to 12 and also sixth form. I need to have an understanding of the total area solution proposed before making decisions on individual proposals.

I believe the Ashfield Schools have the confidence of the community they serve and I want to get it right so that that confidence remains. There will be change, but just not at this time.

Finally, I have considered the case for Priory College.

As I have previously stated, based on the demographic information presented this school is not a natural provider for pupils from the East Belfast Area. The school has a catchment area which largely covers North Down.

But its close proximity to East Belfast means that decisions taken for either area will have ramifications for the other. So it cannot be totally divorced from the overall pattern in that area.

The school contends that it is currently capped below the level set out in my Departments' Sustainable Schools Policy, and that it should be afforded the opportunity to grow to this level.

The proposal is to increase the enrolment at Priory College to 600, which would allow the school to grow to the Sustainable Schools Policy's minimum enrolment for an 11-18 school.

The actual enrolment figures point up that the school is currently undersubscribed at first preferences. There has been no substantive growth in overall enrolment between Years 8 to 12. There were 425 pupils enrolled in 2008/09 as compared to 430 in 2012/13. But there has, however, been growth at sixth form.

As with my decision in respect of the Ashfield proposals, the issue of the level of sixth form places in East Belfast and neighbouring areas need to be considered

strategically by the South Eastern and the Belfast Boards. Provision at Priory may form part of this consideration.

I have looked closely at the issues raised in this proposal and taken account of my duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education. I want to give the school the opportunity to demonstrate that there is a need to provide for unmet demand for integrated education in this area.

I have therefore decided to approve the proposal, but with a modification. I am approving a modified enrolment number of 500 with a Year 8 admissions number of 100. This will enable the school to grow over time to a sustainable level, if the demand materialises.

Some will say that the school is still capped below the Sustainable Schools level for an 11-18 school.

To that I would say - I want to see a managed increase from Year 8, which is why I am setting an admission number of 100. This is necessary in order to preserve the balance between the lower school and the Sixth Form.

If I see a marked increase in the lower school within 3 years, and should the demand for places require any further increase, I will happily consider a further Development proposal from the Board at that stage. It will be for the South Eastern Board to keep the situation under review to ensure the enrolment number is fit for purpose. I will watch, with keen interest, how this school develops

I have outlined for you my response to the proposals that have been presented to me. I know you will want to consider this in more detail. So I will place a copy of the full submission on which my decisions were based, on my Department's website.

The Next Phase of Planning for East Belfast

I have made it clear that Area Planning applies to all publicly funded schools. No sector can be planned for in isolation, and no publicly funded school can remain outside the process.

In the case of East Belfast, I believe an opportunity was missed when all publicly funded post-primary schools were not brought into the equation and subsequent planning process. In such a radical overhaul of school provision, I expect the planning authority to ensure that all school types have been factored into the considerations.

For that reason I wish to emphasise that I see these decisions as very much the first phase of the re-shaping of provision in this area.

The next stage of planning for East Belfast will be led by the Belfast and South Eastern Boards, working closely with all the other sectors and my Department to ensure adequate places for the area at years 8-12 and at post-16.

My officials will be meeting with both Boards to discuss the detail of how they will progress my priorities for the next phase of development of post-primary provision to serve the area.

I want this done as a matter of some urgency to ensure that there are adequate places, in the right location, to meet future demand.

On foot of this work, further development proposals will be published. So while some schools may be disappointed by these decisions at this time, my decisions do not rule out further changes following additional analysis and consideration of all the options by the two Boards.

Although East Belfast is a unique area, I expect that the lessons learned from this area specific work will inform the future area planning work of all the boards.

It is clear that area planning is complex and multi-faceted, and requires co-ordination, discussion and pragmatism. The planning authorities need to bring forward inter-related and linked development proposals that clearly set out for all concerned the overall proposals for any given area. All publicly funded schools must be accounted for in area planning. Only by doing that can we properly assess the impact on the lives of our young people.

I have given a clear indication through this set of proposals that I expect area solutions. Where I am not satisfied that the proposals are in the best interest of the pupils concerned, I will require more work.

These decisions are too important to do otherwise. Our young people are our future. They deserve the best possible education, and I want to make it absolutely clear in finishing that pupils must come first, not institutions.