

17 October 2016

Ministerial Statement - Area Plan

Mr Speaker with your permission I wish to make a statement on the Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools, known as the Sustainable Schools Policy, and the Education Authority's draft Area Plan which is being launched later today.

My Department's Sustainable Schools Policy, which is implemented through the Area Planning process, focuses on providing children and young people with high quality education that meets their needs and enables them to achieve their full potential.

This is entirely in line with our draft Programme for Government and its identified outcome that:-

“We give our children and young people the best start in life”.

My Department is leading on four supporting indicators focused on improving child development, improving educational outcomes, reducing educational inequality and improving the quality of education.

It is my aim that every pupil will have a first class experience at school and fulfil their potential.

Regardless of which sector a pupil is enrolled in – all pupils deserve equality of access to high quality education.

The educational experience of our children and young people is greatly enhanced when they attend schools that are educationally and financially viable.

The Sustainable Schools Policy is a framework for assessment of the sustainability of primary and post-primary schools. The six criteria and supporting indicators clearly illustrate what a sustainable educational experience should look like.

Schools must deliver a broad and balanced curriculum, offer extensive extra-curricular activities, have high quality pastoral care systems and have the confidence of the communities they serve.

In primary schools pupils should be in a class with no more than two year groups but ideally they should be in single year group classes. They should be able to interact with peer groups and have the best chances to prepare for successful transition to post primary school.

In post-primary schools the curriculum should provide a wide range of pathways to meet the needs and interests of all pupils. Where there is a sixth form this too should be offering a broad and balanced curriculum and should be sufficient in size to be self funding. Pupils should have the best chance to succeed and attain to prepare themselves for life as an adult and contribute to our community.

Many of our schools demonstrate these characteristics and many of our children and young people thrive in them.

However there are still a significant number of schools that are struggling, for a wide range of reasons, to deliver the best for their pupils.

This is particularly evident in the primary sector and, despite the best effort of teachers, it becomes harder to deliver a high quality education if pupils are taught in composite classes.

We have too many small primary schools with more than two year groups in a single class.

Similarly, in small post primary schools there are challenges in providing the range of subjects needed to offer effective pathways to further education, training or employment for our young people.

There are too many schools with too few pupils to generate sufficient funds to deliver the curriculum to an acceptable level. It is a real issue particularly in schools with very small sixth forms.

As a result limited available resources are being spread too thinly in an attempt to ensure that in small schools every pupil has access to the curriculum. While this approach protects the educational well being of the pupils it has, in some cases without doubt, propped up schools that otherwise would have been unsustainable.

This is not a recent development. It is a legacy due to the lack of strategic planning to proactively address the growing problem of too many unsustainable schools.

This is something which is not sustainable for the future and cannot continue. I believe effective Area Planning is the solution and I am determined that there will be a renewed focus on strategic planning to ensure sustainable provision across Northern Ireland.

We need to see an accelerated and more dynamic approach to Area Planning in the best interest of our children and young people, to deliver Programme for Government outcomes and benefit our economy and society.

The Sustainable Schools Policy envisaged a network of schools delivering, where needed, creative and innovative models of provision through collaboration and federation however the appetite to demonstrate this have not been evident and there are opportunities which should not be missed.

My officials have been working with all those with a statutory or advisory role in Area Planning to develop and embed new Area Planning Governance arrangements.

I am content that it has addressed the concerns raised about the previous Area Planning process and the Area Plans published by the former Education and Library Boards. Issues such as silo planning, lack of engagement with all sectors and a failure to clearly communicate the key strategic issues facing our schools and

impacting on our children and young people's educational experience and opportunities. The guidance clearly sets out the roles and responsibilities of the statutory planning authorities and key contributors to the Area Planning process.

I welcome the work that has been undertaken by the Education Authority in its role as the overall statutory planner of education provision. The Authority has been leading the development of a draft strategic three year Area Plan for the primary, post- primary and special education sectors. It has been ably supported in this work by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and the sectoral support bodies – namely

- the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education,
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta(CnaG),
- The Controlled Schools Support Council;

and more recently, at my request

- the Governing Bodies Association, representing the Voluntary Grammar sector.

All sectors have engaged in this process to identify the strategic educational issues facing primary, post-primary and special education and not simply focussing on their own sector.

This draft Area Plan is different. It is the first regional Area Plan. It is a strategic plan which focuses on the persistent and thorny issues that need to be addressed now across Northern Ireland and in each Local Government District.

For the first time area planning will have full input from all educational sectors, at all levels, in effect discussing the future shape of provision around the same table collectively at the same time.

This will present a major challenge for all our education sectors and must be embraced equally by all sectors to find sustainable solutions, both within education sectors and between sectors.

It also takes account of the Programme for Government, Community Planning and in particular the constrained financial position that we are likely to be operating in. It sets out the high level actions needed in all sectors to address the issues over a period of three years from April 2017 to March 2020.

The Area Plan confirms that in some areas we have too many school places for the number of children and young people available to fill them. In other areas it highlights that there is a sufficient number of places but they are not in the right place. The challenge that faces almost all Local Government Districts is that we have schools that are too small to adequately provide for their pupils and ensure they have the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

I will say it again - this is something which cannot continue.

The current status quo is not an option.

While this draft Area Plan is a new start, I do not think that all issues can be addressed and actions implemented in three years given the scale of the challenge. But I do know we need to start.

We need to start with the issues that are impacting most on children and young people's educational experience and future prospects. We need to tackle unsustainable provision in all sectors.

Therefore by the end of the planning period I expect actions to address the issue of primary pupils being taught in composite classes of more than two year groups. Ideally I would like to see communities with a vibrant sustainable primary school where each pupil is in a class with a single year group.

I expect to see proposals to deal with Post-primary schools that are failing to provide a broad and balance curriculum for pupils in years 8-12. It is not acceptable that these pupils are denied opportunities because the schools are too small.

I would also expect to see proposals to deal with the issue of small sixth forms. By the 2020 no pupil should be in a sixth form with less than 100 pupils that cannot offer a full range of courses.

These are big challenges but they must be tackled and tackled now.

I know changes to schools are emotive and difficult for communities and can lead to lengthy and expensive litigation. This will sometimes require difficult decisions to be made and will require mature discussions and approaches from everyone involved in education. I also know that to do nothing or do little isn't an option. We must focus on how we provide children and young people with access to a quality education and the opportunity to be happy and successful citizens contributing to our economy and community.

I have said much of the challenges.

But I strongly believe that with challenge comes opportunity. And as a community we cannot afford to miss this opportunity.

The consultation on the draft Area Plan for 2017 to 2020 will run for 8 weeks from 5pm today and provides our community with the opportunity to look at education provision differently. Communities have a chance to shape education for current and future generations.

Communities will want the best for their children and young people.

Communities will have to ask –

Is the current provision strong and sustainable? Is what we have the best for our children and equips them for life in the 21st century?

If there is any doubt then - what can be done? Is there a better way?

Communities need to ask - Do we want a strong educational presence in our community? Do we want certainty for our children and their parents?

Is one larger secure sustainable school better than two or more schools that are constantly facing sustainability issues?

I want local communities and their elected representatives to consider the Education Authority's Area Plan and to make their views known. I hope that the draft Area Plan will be a catalyst for discussion about quality education provision in the 21st century.

I hope the focus is on the strategic issues and not on individual schools.

Once I am satisfied that the strategic issues are understood and agreed then the school managing and planning authorities will prepare a final Area Plan taking into account the views from the consultation. This will be supplemented by an Annual Action Plan each year for the life time of the three year Area Plan.

That action plan will provide details of the actions to be taken to address issues in local areas and at local schools.

Should there be a proposal for change in any school, local communities will be consulted and their views will be taken into account. I can assure you that the focus will be on providing quality education and providing pathways for all pupils.

Pupils' needs must come first. And if that means that some schools have to close then I am prepared to take those difficult decisions.

I cannot stress enough the importance of this consultation for the future of our children and young people. In these constrained financial times we have to act to maximise the impact of our available resources. We need to be realistic about the quality of the network of schools we need to provide and can afford.

Finally I urge you all to actively engage with your constituents on the matter of education provision and help them understand what is needed and why it is needed.