

Statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly

**Setting the Priorities for the Next Regional Area Plan for the
Education Sector in Northern Ireland**

9 August 2021

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Minister for Education**

I wish to make a statement regarding the next Area Plan for the Education sector in Northern Ireland. My colleague, fellow MLA and former Minister of Education, Peter Weir, last spoke about Area Planning back in October 2016 when the Education Authority published its first regional Strategic Area Plan 'Providing Pathways' for Education in Northern Ireland.

The education of our children and young people in educationally and financially viable and sustainable schools is a critical issue. In October 2016 the challenges included reducing the number of available places in schools, matching provision to population trends, addressing school provision which was not sustainable and improving the quality of provision.

The recent experience of the post-primary transfer has brought into sharp focus the role Area Planning has to play in resolving this issue in the medium to long-term. For a number of years we have had to put in around 1,000 additional places, at Year 8 alone, each year into schools to accommodate children transitioning from P7. My officials will be continuing to work with the Education Authority and others to ensure sufficient places are available in future years to minimise the additional stress and pressure caused to children and their families by the current distribution of places; which is often based on historic patterns of demand. While at the close of this year's procedure there were 2,700 available year 8 places, it is clear that these were not always in the right location. In order to alleviate this problem, it is vital that Area Planning ensures the right number of schools, of the right type, the right size and in the right location.

There has been some clear progress in Area Planning since 2011 and I am pleased to report that:-

- the number of small primary schools with composite classes of more than two year groups **has halved** from 88 primary schools (2010/11) to 43 schools (2020/21);

- the number of schools below the Sustainable Schools Policy minimum enrolment thresholds has fallen by 170 from 542 (2010/11) to 372 (2020/21) **a reduction of 31%**;
- the number of sixth forms with less than 100 pupils has fallen by 34 from 103 (2010/11) to 69 (2020/21) **a reduction of 33%**;
- the number of available places in primary and post-primary schools has fallen by 31,803 from 84,487 (2010/11) to 52,684 (2020/21) **representing a reduction of 38%**;
- but most importantly ,there has been a reduction in the number of children being educated in schools which fail to meet sustainable enrolment thresholds from 59,000 to 43,000, **a reduction of 27%**.

While there has been a gradual improvement in the number of schools that are sustainable, significant challenges remain and we need to improve further and at a greater pace. As a consequence of this the education of our children and young people is being adversely affected to a greater extent in some areas more than others. We need an accelerated and more dynamic approach to Area Planning.

I have considered the successes of the working partnerships between my Department, the Education Authority and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) under the Delivering Schools for the Future project and it is essential that they continue so that we can apply the lessons learned from this project to how we plan for our children and young people's futures, by bringing significant improvements as to where and how our children and young people are educated.

As we look forward to the next Area Plan, due to commence in September 2022, my principal aim continues to be to give our children and young people the best start in life and to offer every learner an opportunity to achieve their full potential at each stage of development.

The next Area Plan will help deliver my, and my Department's, commitment to the New Decade New Approach suite of actions that will contribute to addressing pressures in the Education system and deliver quick results in terms of improved efficiency and effectiveness of the system – Area Planning is key to addressing this.

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

My officials have produced a 'Sustainability Baseline Report' which looks at the impact that Area Planning activity has had since 2011. This report examines the quantifiable measures of the Sustainable Schools Policy by Local Government District, by phase and sector. It assesses the progress which has been made and it identifies where further work is required.

The key messages which the report highlights are:-

- overall, 372 schools are operating below minimum sustainable enrolment thresholds, what that means in practice is:
- just over 43,000 children and young people are being educated in schools with enrolments below minimum sustainability thresholds – while this has reduced significantly from almost 60,000 in 2010/11, it still represents 13% of our children and young people and needs to reduce to as close to zero as possible;
- approximately 3,000 of these young people are in sixth forms with enrolments below 100 and just under half of this total (1,405) are in sixth forms which are also not compliant with the Entitlement Framework;
- the number of primary schools operating composite classes of three or more year groups has halved since 2009/10, but 43 remain in this position; and
- the size of a school in terms of its enrolment has a direct bearing on spend per pupil, staffing costs and the pupil to teacher ratio.

As Minister it is clear to me that the Area Planning priorities which were set out in 2016 need restated for the next Area Plan – namely:-

- It is incumbent upon the managing authorities and sectoral body representatives to scope and bring forward proposals to address the issue of primary pupils being taught in composite classes of more than two year groups. Despite the best efforts of teachers, it becomes more difficult to deliver a high quality education if pupils are taught in composite classes of more than two year groups. I would like to see shared solutions coming forward which

maintain education provision in communities where unsustainable schools exist and this focus should be on creating a vibrant sustainable primary school where each pupil is in a class with a single year group;

- We need a renewed impetus to deal with post-primary schools that are failing to provide a broad and balanced curriculum for pupils in years 8-12. It is not acceptable that these pupils are denied opportunities because the schools are too small;
- Similarly, it is vitally important to see proposals to deal with the issue of small sixth forms. My predecessor stated that by 2020 no pupil should be in a sixth form with less than 100 pupils that cannot offer a full range of courses; I wholeheartedly agree and **this priority needs to be actioned in the first operational plan of the next Area Plan.**

I have asked the planning authorities and sectoral support bodies to take full cognisance of the Sustainability Baseline Report and to draw on this evidence as well as examining further robust evidence to plan provision for the next Area Plan. The report also needs to be read by all those involved in the management of schools, including those schools which are sustainable, as they too have a role to play in developing planning options and solutions in their communities.

There is, a current series of workstreams under the current Area Plan which need to be completed before September 2022. I acknowledge the work done by all involved to date and look forward to those actions being brought to a conclusion over the next 15 months, thus ensuring that even more of our children are educated in schools which are sustainable.

Recognising the scale of the challenges ahead, I have decided to make the next Area Plan cover a five-year period beginning September 2022 with three associated Operational Plans. My officials have revised Area Planning Guidance which takes account of lessons learned from the development and implementation of the first Strategic Area Plan and this guidance will assist in removing the barriers to Area Planning identified through the Delivering Schools for the Future Project.

Importantly it contains a timetable of key milestones which will keep the Education Authority, as chief planning authority, on course to commence the next Area Plan in September 2022. Building on the three priorities I have already referenced, I am further calling on the managing authorities and sectoral body representatives to:

- **Embrace a number of supplementary processes implemented by my officials and described in more detail in the updated Area Planning Guidance; these are aimed at making the Area Planning process more agile and responsive to the needs of children and young people and schools across Northern Ireland;**

and,

- **Work earnestly to deliver on the pre-planning timetable as set out in the Area Planning Guidance. This will ensure Area Planning activity is ready to commence at pace in September 2022.**

While the Covid-19 Pandemic impacted Area Planning activities for a period of time, there is one feature which emanated from how schools and sectors responded which we need to build into Area Planning that is - 'Collaboration and Partnership'. This approach recognised no sectoral boundaries and put children and young people at the heart of decisions and it is unacceptable that the interests of individual schools or sectors should prevail in planning considerations.

- **It is therefore incumbent upon all Area Planning stakeholders and schools to engage positively with the Education Authority and other sectors and collaborate and partner in the co-design of Development Proposals; to bring forward innovative, creative and shared solutions for sustainable provision and to continue to encourage and facilitate Integrated and Irish Medium education.**

I have witnessed great agility, creativity and collaboration by schools who opened their doors to vulnerable and keyworker children during the pandemic and how blended and remote learning was practically realised overnight. I want to see this ingenuity replicated into Area Planning and I commend the approach the Education Authority is taking in developing online and virtual consultations for Development Proposals - much more of this creative thinking is required across all aspects of Area Planning.

In terms of the strategic Area Planning for Integrated and Irish Medium schools, and our statutory duties, it has become apparent that schools that are newly formed in these sectors need to be supported and I have asked my officials to see a process developed to ensure this happens. It will be useful for schools, whether Integrated or Irish Medium, to know what is expected of them as they develop to become an established sustainable school. I am keen for the Department and managing authorities to work with the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta to develop interventions when things are not going to plan, to ensure schools are not left to struggle alone to try to achieve their full potential.

There are those who believe the application of the Department's Sustainable Schools Policy is the death knell to small unsustainable schools; and yes we continue to have too many small schools with too few pupils to generate sufficient funds to deliver the curriculum to an acceptable level. I want to correct that perception, however, and reaffirm that the Sustainable Schools Policy is first and foremost about ensuring the quality of the educational experience for all our children and young people.

I want to emphasise that the Sustainable Schools Policy describes various solutions available, to be explored with a view to ensuring there is a viable and sustainable level of quality educational provision and improved community relations in areas where

enrolments have been too small or in decline. I will task officials to develop a programme to support sustainable education provision in rural areas to see how it may work to keep education provision in a rural community.

We have an opportunity through the renewed application of the Sustainable Schools Policy and the development of the next regional Area Plan to continue reshaping our educational estate to increase the numbers of our children and young people attending schools which are strong, financially viable and are providing quality education with access to the full curriculum.

I have tasked the Education Authority with incorporating these priorities into the development and publication of the next Area Plan, together with the first of its two-year operational plans by June 2022 to take effect from September 2022.

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and all sectoral support bodies must work creatively to support the Education Authority in developing this plan, drawing on the evidence of the Sustainability Baseline Report to good effect and utilising the new Area Planning Guidance that has just been published to refocus our efforts.

I recognise the significant challenges that lie ahead and acknowledge the Education Authority and their partner, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, as planning authorities and to sectoral support bodies who, through implementing the first Strategic Area Plan, have increased the number of sustainable schools – but we are not finished and there is still much work to be done. I would encourage everyone to look beyond their particular sectoral interests and focus on how best we can increase the number of children attending sustainable schools in all areas of Northern Ireland.

I am confident we will 'Provide that Pathway' for their education that our children and young people so richly deserve.