

Document Pack
Committee and Members' Services Section
3rd Floor, Adelaide Exchange
24-26 Adelaide Street
Belfast BT2 8GD



3rd February, 2009

MEETING OF STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Dear Councillor,

The above-named Committee will meet in the Council Chamber, 3rd Floor, Adelaide Exchange on Friday, 6th February, 2009 at 12.30 pm for the transaction of the business noted below.

You are requested to attend.

Yours faithfully,

PETER McNANEY

Chief Executive

AGENDA:

1. Routine Matters
 - (a) Apologies
 - (b) Minutes
2. Finance
 - (a) Revenue Estimates and District Rate 2009/10 (Pages 1 - 14)
 - (b) Economic Downturn (Pages 15 - 26)
3. Human Resources
 - (a) Standing Order 55 - Employment of Relatives (Pages 27 - 28)
4. Cross-Cutting Issues
 - (a) Consultation : Department for Social Development - Social Security Agency : Delivering a Better Service for Customers (Pages 29 - 38)
 - (b) Schools of the Future - A Policy for Sustainable Schools (Pages 39 - 94)



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy and Resources Committee
Subject:	Revenue Estimates and District Rate 2009/10
Date:	6 February 2009
Reporting Officer:	Director of Corporate Services, Trevor Salmon
Contact Officer:	Director of Corporate Services, Trevor Salmon

Relevant Background Information

At the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee 9 January 2009 the Director of Corporate Services presented the revenue estimates for 2009/10. The district rate increase to support the revenue estimates was reported as 8.59%.

At the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on 23 January 2009 reductions in departmental budgets totalling £1,042,560 were agreed by Members. Members were also notified of the rates package provided by the Minister of Finance and Personnel. The combined impact on the rates position of these measures is an increase in the district rate of 7.16% which is the equivalent of a 2.96% increase to the domestic ratepayer when the regional rate element is included.

At the meeting it was agreed that the Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Services should provide the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on 6 February 2009 with options for further reducing the required increase in the district rate.

The purpose of this report is to present to Members the options for further cost reductions and to make proposals in relation to advancing the Council's efficiency programme.

Key Issues

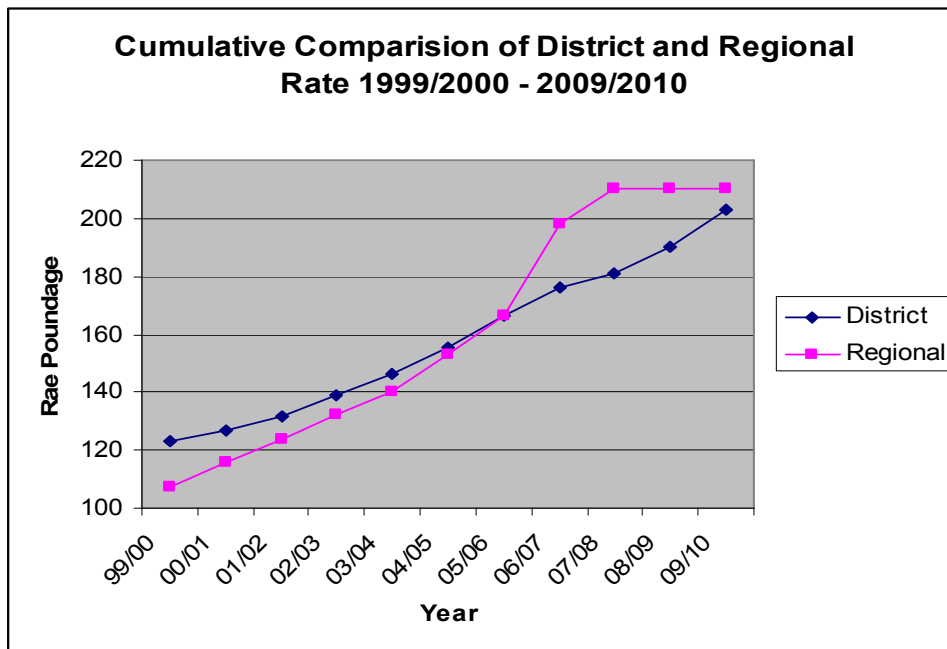
Operating Context

Before discussing specific cost reduction options it is firstly important to set them in the context of the overall financial position of the organisation and the economic environment.

For many years the council through strong financial management has been a cash rich organisation with strong reserves and little borrowing. Major schemes like the Waterfront Hall and the Gasworks were developed without additional burden to the ratepayer. Also the council has invested in top class facilities across the city such as the Grove Well-Being Centre and the Falls Swim Centre. At the same time the council has consistently set a rate below inflation, reduced its base budget by £6.7m and maintained high levels of citizen satisfaction.

Circumstances beyond the control of the council have served to create a new financial environment for the council. **The Minister of Finance and Personnel just recently stated in the Assembly that “we are in a position of extreme volatility” and he indicated that there would be tight budgetary constraints over the next 2 years.** The dramatic economic downturn has led to significant losses in income from rates and fees and charges. Indications are that income from rates will not increase over the next couple of years because of the rising number of vacant business properties. These losses have been exacerbated by claw backs from LPS and the decision last year not to partly fund the City Investment Strategy from the rate. This situation has had the following impacts: the council needs to bolster its reserves quickly; the Capital Programme requires significant loan funding which puts additional pressure on the rate; ways must be found to compensate for the loss of income and at the same time minimise the burden on the ratepayer.

The combined rate for 2009/10 currently stands at an increase of 2.96% to the domestic ratepayer which is below the current rate of inflation of 3.1%. If this rate is agreed it will mean that the rate set by the council is again lower than the regional rate charge as the graph below demonstrates. Members are asked to note that any further reductions in the rate increase which, while negligible to the ratepayer in terms of reduced weekly payments¹, may seriously limit the council’s ability to respond to further losses of income and build a reasonable level of reserves. They will also severely limit the council’s response next year to any unforeseen events. For example, flexibility in the budget allowed the council to deliver an immediate response to flooding in the past two years. For these reasons Members are asked to give consideration to accepting the rate increase as was reported to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on 23 January.



¹ £250,000 reduction in expenditure will result in a weekly saving to the average ratepayer of 2p.

Options for Further Cost Reductions 2009/10

If Members decide that notwithstanding the issues faced by the council, the imperative remains a further reduction in the rate, options for further cost reductions are outlined below. These options are the easier to realise as they do not impact directly on front line service provision and do not involve reductions in staff numbers.

- **Civic Hospitality** –reduce the Civic Hospitality budget by **£20,000**, however, this may limit the council’s ability to respond to new requests.
- **Proms in the Park** – Included within the estimate of expenditure for Major Events 2009/10 is £80,000 for the annual “Proms in the Park” event. To date the BBC has not committed this year’s event to Belfast and it appears that they are keen to share the event in different locations outside Belfast. Members could decide to remove the budget from the Major Events programme, saving **£80,000**, and advise the BBC that we are unable to hold the event in 2009 due to current financial pressure.
- **Hire of External Rooms** – reduce this budget by **£30,000** by prioritising use of council facilities for internal meetings. This reduction would still facilitate use of external venues for appropriate local public meetings, for example, DPP meetings.
- **Members Training** – a review of the Members training budget for 2008/09 has shown a significant under spend. It is recommended that the budget is reduced by **£20,000**. Members should note that the officer training budget has already been reduced by 8.5%.
- **New Initiatives** - the Corporate Plan contains a new budget heading for corporate thematic working totalling £500,000. This covers cross cutting priorities on areas like safety, older and younger people. Members could consider reducing this budget by **£75,000**. A reduction in the budget would not mean that the initiatives would stop but rather the pace and / or scale of implementation would have to be reconsidered and processes examined to ensure maximum efficiency.
- **Hospitality** - the estimated cost of providing the trolleys / functions catering service in terms of consumables is £87,073. It is recommended that Members cap the level spent on catering consumables to £62,000 in 2009/10. **This will produce savings of £25,000**. It is not viable to reduce spending any more in this area unless Members are willing to consider reducing staffing levels.

If Members agree to accept these reductions in expenditure totalling £250,000 then the revised rates position for 2009/10 is an increase in the district rate of **6.93% which is the equivalent of a 2.86% increase to the domestic ratepayer when the regional rate element is included. For the average household in Belfast this will result in an annual rates rise of £23.26– 45p a week**. Appendix One provides details of the impact of the rates increase on the main household types. This increase is just below the current rate of inflation and compares favourably to the average council tax bill increase in England of 3.5%.

The following is a list of options which would yield further savings but will have an impact on front line service delivery and staff numbers / pay levels.

- **Summer Fun Days** - last year 15 fun days were staged in 15 different venues across the city. A total of 2600 children attended. No commitment has been made towards these as yet i.e. no advertisement of dates/venues. These would normally be advertised in the What’s On booklet over the next couple of months. Members could decide to cancel the Fun Days which would save £30,000.

- **Refurbishment of Playgrounds** – a rolling programme of refurbishment of has been planned for 28 playgrounds across the city throughout 2009/10. £75,000 would be saved if Members agreed to two playgrounds being excluded from the 2009/10 programme.
- **Local Area Working** – the council is committed to integrating its services at a local level. Consultation with areas will start this year on a 21 area basis. Members could consider redefining this initiative in the context of the economic climate and reduce the budget by £75,000.
- **Cleansing Services - reduction in overtime** - Overtime budgets in Cleansing Services have already been reduced by £34,000. A further reduction of £37,000 (approximately 2,450 hours) could be achieved by reducing operative hours on the street across the Waste Collection, Priority Waste and Street Cleansing services. This will almost certainly lead to employee relations problems for the Service and the Council.
- **Cleansing Services – equipment and operational supplies** – a reduction in the available operational equipment and supplies across to support the cleansing service delivery could yield £7,000 of savings. This option may impact on the consistency of service delivery across the city.
- **Building Control - reduction in overtime** – a reduction of £10,000 in overtime costs could be achieved if Members decided to remove the building regulation inspection service currently available on Saturday mornings and the summer service on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings. This will mean that the current facility to book a same day inspection up until 5.00pm will be no longer available.
- **Environmental Health - reduction in overtime** - overtime budgets in Environmental Health have already been reduced by £12,100. A further reduction in overtime of £2,500 could be achieved by limiting the out of hours services in areas such as safety and night time noise cover.

Strategic Approach to Efficiency

Over the past four years the base budget of the council has been reduced by £6.7m. The council has achieved this through savings in areas such as advertising costs, training, procurement and better use of ICT. The savings have been delivered without Members having to make difficult decisions about changing the organisation and front line services have not been affected. The next few years are going to be tough for the council at a time when we have reached the point where the potential return from quick wins and short term gains is diminishing.

This means that the council can no longer plan its efficiency programme on the basis of purely transactional type savings. A new more strategic approach to efficiency is required. This means that the efficiency programme needs not just to be couched in terms of targets but also in the context of how efficiency gains will be used to support the priorities of the council. In basic terms the council needs to move its efficiency programme from a transactional nature to transformation.

There are three broad methods for creating transformational efficiency savings. These are:

- **Internal methods** which involve reviews of and challenges to existing structures, processes, practices and finances.

- **Mutual methods** which would require the council to work with other councils in areas like procurement and shared services.
- **External methods** involve outsourcing and joint ventures.

The council will need to decide which methods or combination of methods it wishes to pursue. Irregardless of method Members and officers will be required to make some tough decisions over the next few years. Councils in England have developed a mechanism to support Members fulfil this difficult role. The mechanism is known as a Budget and Transformation Panel. Its role is to provide scrutiny and oversee the identification and implementation of transformation projects. Members are reminded that it has already been acknowledged that this role should be undertaken within a three year planning context. This Panel is usually supported by some form of independent external assistance. An example of a transformation project is the “review of the centre” which the organisation is currently undertaking. This will challenge existing structures and staffing levels but will potentially deliver savings over a number of years. The working of the Panel should be reviewed in March 2010. The Panel would consist of ten Members and be representative of the current political make-up of the council. The Panel would report to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on an advisory basis.

Key Messages

The Head of Corporate Communications has drafted a set of key messages to accompany the rates announcement. He recommends that it is vital that there are no more than four overall key messages that Members should focus on in the announcement of next year’s rates.

It is recommended that these should be:

1. **We have worked extremely hard to achieve an overall effect on the citizens of Belfast of a rates increase of 2.??per cent. The figure will result in an average increase across households in Belfast of less than 50p per week or £25 per year.**
2. **This has been achieved against a backdrop of the toughest post – war economic climate and a significant fall in rate and revenue income.**
3. **Without our commitment to efficiencies which has realised saving of around £6.7m over the past three years we would have been looking at doubling the rates burden.**
4. **The council must show responsible leadership by achieving the balance between investing in the city and providing efficient value for money services.**

Further details of the key messages are provided at Appendix Two.

Recommendations

Members are requested to:

1. To consider the options for setting the rate 2009/10 outlined in this report.
2. To recommend a domestic and non-domestic district rate for the special council meeting being held on 12 February 2009.
3. To agree to the establishment of a Budget and Transformation Panel to oversee and scrutinise a base review of the budgets and the identification and implementation of transformation projects.
4. Agree the key messages for the announcement of the rate.

BELFAST CITY COUNCIL

Average Rates Bill based on

a

6.93% will mean:

PROPERTY	Rates Bill 2008/09	Rates Bill 2009/10	Annual increase in Rate Bill	Weekly increase in Rate Bill
Domestic Properties	£	£	£	£
Terrace House	531.34	546.55	15.21	0.29
3-Bed Semi-Detached House	812.60	835.86	23.26	0.45
4-Bed Detached House	1,806.55	1,858.26	51.71	0.99
Apartment	512.61	527.29	14.68	0.28
Average Capital Value	707.02	727.26	20.24	0.39

* Regional Rate frozen for Domestic Properties in 2009/10

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**Belfast City Council**

Report to:	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
Subject:	BCC Proposed Response to Economic Downturn
Date:	06 February 2009
Reporting Officer:	Peter McNaney, Chief Executive
Contact Officer:	Shirley McCay, Head of Economic Initiatives, Ext 3463 Sharon McNicholl, Strategic Policy and Planning Manager, Ext 6207

Introduction

The proposed response to the current Economic Downturn from BCC is presented below. Members were provided with a summary of areas where support could be provided at the Strategic Policy & Resources Committee of 23 January 2009. A more detailed response has now been prepared for Members' consideration.

Relevant Background Information

Members are aware that the world's economy has entered a period of sharp decline and recession and, despite numerous efforts by governments and central banks across the world, the outlook continues to appear gloomy. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) recently stated that world economic growth would fall to 0.5%, the lowest level since World War II. Official Government figures also confirmed last week that the UK's economy is now officially in recession for the first time in nearly two decades. Business and consumer confidence levels have fallen sharply and unemployment levels are rising with businesses struggling to cope with the tough economic climate and reduced levels of consumer spending.

Commentators differ over whether NI will suffer more or less from other UK regions as a result of the economic crisis. Views vary from NI being one of the least

vulnerable regions in the UK because of its public sector strength to NI being affected more so as a result of steeper house price declines and the end to the rapid expansion of the retail sector and large-scale property development which NI has been witness to since the mid 1990s. However people across Northern Ireland are already feeling the effects of the 'credit crunch' and it is likely that this will continue for the foreseeable future.

The UK's Local Government Minister has stated that "*the new frontline is local with councils leading the response*" and that the recession is a "*big opportunity for local government to show local leadership*". Councils in the rest of the UK are being urged to use their well-being powers to tackle the recession. Whilst these powers are not legally in place as yet in NI, the principles behind it can be effected in working with others to find local remedial actions to benefit the locality and to support those most in need.

Belfast City Council is committed to responsible leadership during these difficult times. However, it should also be acknowledged that local government has limitations and whilst the downturn creates the opportunity for the Council to demonstrate its relevance, leadership and responsiveness it can only do this within its legal powers framework. A major contribution which Council can make is in working with central government which is where the main counter-cyclical effort lies in a recession.

Notwithstanding these limitations the Council has already agreed that it must continue to invest in our city to help provide jobs and support the economy and maintain the services that are even more important in times of need. We recognise the difficulties faced by people and businesses in the city in the current climate and will ensure we provide services and operate in a value for money way. This report contains more detailed on these proposed areas. Members will be aware that the Northern Ireland Executive has already put in place a series of measures in response to the economic downturn (see Appendix 1). The measures put forward by the Council are concentrated at a Belfast level and should be seen as additional to these measures.

Key Issues

Any work that the Council is doing within this area should also be seen within the context of the key messages that Members have already agreed on the rates. One of the key things that the Council has been able to do to help people through this time of economic uncertainty has been to minimise the rates increase through the Council committed approach to delivering efficiencies. The key messages are set out below -

1. We have worked extremely hard to minimise the rates effect on the citizens of Belfast.
2. This has been achieved against a backdrop of the toughest post –war economic climate and a significant fall in rate and revenue income.
3. Without Council’s commitment to efficiencies which has realised saving of around £4million over the past three years and a further £2.7m in 2009/10 we would have been looking at doubling the rates burden.
4. The council must show responsible leadership by achieving the balance between investing in the city and providing efficient value for money services

Suggested Actions

- The impact of the economic downturn must be considered at two levels in the context of local government i.e. internally (for the Council as an entity in itself and as a service provider) and externally (on the role which Council can play in alleviating the effects on taking remedial action to support survival, recovery or growth within the local economy).
- In both these areas Belfast City Council has both the capacity and the opportunity to exercise civic leadership and to use its convening authority to coordinate activity and resources for the betterment of the locality. Facing up to the challenges of an economic downturn also firmly underpins the Council’s place-shaping role.
- There are four main areas where the Council can focus effort in order to help support ratepayers through this tough time -
 1. What we can do to support local citizens/community
 2. What we can do to support local businesses
 3. What we can do to support the wider economy
 4. What we can do internally as a Council

WHAT WE CAN DO TO SUPPORT LOCAL CITIZENS/COMMUNITY

Keeping Costs Down

- The Council will continue to provide financial assistance to advice services across the city and we will work to ensure that as many people have access to these services as possible.
- The Council is pursuing DSD for increased grant aid to support the additional demands for debt advice and assistance.
- The Council will continue to represent our citizens with other key agencies such as the Land & Property Service in relation to rates bills.
- The Council will continue to provide advice on energy efficiency and how to save money on the home to reduce household costs
- The Council recently introduced a pilot fuel stamps scheme to assist households, especially the elderly, in budgeting for home heating oil. If successful, this pilot will be rolled out across the city.
- The Council will continue to work to make our services as accessible as possible to people in need – for example, means-tested “Boost”, in Leisure Centre.

Information and sign-posting of help

- Recent episodes, such as the floods, have shown that Belfast City Council will do everything in its power to help the city through a crisis. The Council is committed to doing the same with this crisis by using our facilities to sign-post where people can get advice, support and help in this time of uncertainty.
- The Council has a strong record in terms of inter-agency action and it is the intention to work with other delivery agencies in the city to ensure that the information and messages that they need to get to the public in terms of alleviating hardship are available in council-owned locations
- The Council will explore the use of the Council’s web-site to sign-post people to the help they need though the provision of links to allow them to access as much information as possible on-line. City Matters will also be utilised to sign-post where people can get help.

Supporting Employment

- BCC has facilitated some short term work experience placements for the long-term unemployed through its current community outreach programme and has recently agreed to further Council engagement in providing pre-employment training programmes that are specifically designed to link the unemployed and economically inactive to specific job vacancies within the Council and wider

public sector.

- The Council will engage in the Workforce Buddies Project to support the retention of a former long-term unemployed appointees and to help them settle effectively into their new role.
- The Council will organise employability/redundancy road shows and clinics under the title of 'Belfast is Working' Programme of events and activities for those at risk of being made redundant or already unemployed in liaison with DEL and DSD to be held in Council buildings or in workplaces – consider flexible timings eg weekends/nights.

Timescale: February – September 2009

- The Council will continue to deliver its HARTE programme - Hospitality and Retail Training for Employment (HARTE).

Maximise publicity opportunities from HARTE programme. First wave of participants to start on 15 February.

Timescale: Recruitment underway – programme runs until 2011. First opportunities for publicity in early March – recruitment for first cohort of participants

- The Council will instigate employability work at Titanic Quarter connecting local citizens to job opportunities.

Targeted employability work at TQ, linked to Memorandum of Understanding

Timescale: February – March 2010

WHAT WE CAN DO TO SUPPORT LOCAL BUSINESSES

General

- Through the corporate plan, Members have placed the economic health of the city at the centre of its strategy for the future. The Council will continue to pursue the strategies that it has in place to strengthen the local economy, through its economic development and tourism development work and is already re-focusing this work to address the new challenges being faced by the city
- Ensuring early payment of accounts to creditors. The legal limit is currently 30 days but we will do everything in our power to ensure that payments are made much earlier than this in the vast majority of cases
- Proposals will be brought back to Members on how we will manage the difficulties faced by tenants of our industrial estates; we need to balance the

need for income with supporting those experiencing hard-ship. Possible options are to consider permitting tenants to pay monthly rather than quarterly, agree short term lettings and to review service charges with a view to reducing level.

- The Council will review procurement methodology to assist smaller companies to secure work and to speed up awards of contracts

- **Market Intelligence**

The Council will undertake the survey of 500 businesses in Belfast to be undertaken. To be completed mid-February.

- Follow-up events with the business community to be hosted by Lord Mayor to report back on actions and outputs from previous events.

Timescale: up to two additional events: suggested dates late April and September

- Editorial content/commentary

The Council will explore a series of editorials in business magazines over a period of months. This will offer the opportunities to profile 'good news' stories on business successes and allow Council to publicise its support mechanisms for the business community in the current economic downturn.

Timescale: First edition in March 2009

Business Growth Initiatives

- The Council will provide additional mentor activity on business support programmes.

Offer additional, targeted support to companies participating on business development programmes to help them with particular growth challenges. This will provide a 'rapid response' service to companies experiencing specific difficulties that can be worked through with an experienced mentor.

Timescale: February – December 2009

- The Council will undertake additional outreach work to promote public procurement opportunities.

Four workshops across the city (in conjunction with CPD or other procurement agents). This will also consider whether any revisions to application process for BCC procurement opportunities can be considered – eg reduction in paperwork to encourage additional companies to consider tendering. The Council will also host a procurement event in WFH – May/June time – in conjunction with Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce.

Timescale: Feb – March 2010

- The Council will undertake independent retail masterclasses

Six retail masterclasses on topics of concern for local traders including how to survive in an economic downturn

Timescale: Feb – March 2008

- The Council will continue to deliver 'Prepare to Export' programme.

Helping business to consider exporting for the first time, taking advantage of currency fluctuations.

Timescale: Programme to start May 2009

- The Council will continue to enhance the promotion of global gateway

Proactive encouragement of exporting opportunities and potential – helping companies make contact with international counterparts through WTC network

Timescale: Ongoing

- The Council will support INI in a collaborative event.

Breakfast event with INI to draw companies' attention to range of services available for services available for businesses in the current climate

Timescale: Planned date – 4 March

- The Council will expand its programme of Belfast Entrepreneurs' Network Events.

One workshop and one networking event on topics of interest already taking place each month. Three additional workshops proposed: potential topics include cash-flow management etc. (issues identified by businesses as a result of economic downturn).

Timescale: February – September

WHAT WE CAN DO TO SUPPORT THE WIDER ECONOMY

Ensuring the attraction of new monies into the local area and its circulation is wholly necessary to stabilise and keep the wider economy functioning.

Continuing to support developmental work in tourism and culture increases the economic attractiveness of the locality and sustains local jobs and businesses.

The tourism sector presently supports 17,000 jobs and attracts 6.9m visitors and injects £313m into the economy.

The arts organisations supported by BCC contribute to 450 jobs directly and Council's funding levers in an additional £22.00 for every £1 of Council investment.

Tourism

- Refocus BVCB marketing campaigns on ROI/Eurozone to highlight value for money
- BVCB will consider the development of special discount travel offers between Dublin/Belfast
- The Council will focus on “Belfast for Free” promotions.

Culture & Arts

- The Council will implement ‘Test Drive the Arts Initiative’
- The Council will tailor training to arts organisations’ current challenges
- The Council will promote skills development for sustainability
- The Council will explore new partnerships with NICVA, Vol Arts Ireland & Visual Arts Ireland for joint commissioning
- The Council will promote shared services within arts organisations
- The Council will host symposium to consider effect on key organisations

Events

- The Council will continue provision of free public events
- The Council will analyse current events surveys to identify more customer focused delivery mechanisms
- The Council will seek to identify new sources of funding
- The Council will seek to identify new partners to assist in delivering events

WHAT WE CAN DO INTERNALLY

- Members will be aware of the proposed establishment of a Budget and Transformation Board. It is proposed that this Board also acts as the Council’s task force in monitoring the economic situation and managing the Council’s response and proposing any adjustments to Policy & Resources Committee
- The Council will monitor and analyse local economic trends and implications
- The Council will meet local business traders to consider their challenges and to develop support measures
- The Council will convene a community planning symposium with other partner organisations to consider Belfast based response beyond Council
- The Council will continue to work with the Government’s Land & Property Service to help maintain an accurate and up-to-date property rating list to ensure that ratepayers do not have to bear any additional costs for property inaccurately recorded as vacant
- The Council’s review of its Capital Programme should also take account of the effect of ‘not’ progressing capital schemes on the construction and land/property services. Across the board, the public sector is being

encouraged to, wherever possible, maintain its investment programme.

- The construction industry has been hit particularly badly by the economic down-turn and Council's capital. The Council will actively work with the construction sector to help keep building costs down
- The Council will review fees and charges (for example Council venue hire, market stallage rates, cemetery and crematorium charges) to consider how to ease the burden on local people
- The Council will continue to develop and improve recycling facilities to help reduce landfill disposal and future heavy financial penalties

Recommendations

To approve the content of this report as Council's response to the economic downturn.

Documents Attached

Response in Northern Ireland

Abbreviations

DEL – Department of Employment and Learning DSD – Department of Social Development INI – Investment Northern Ireland
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RESPONSE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Several sectors, businesses and institutions have called on Central Government via the NI Executive to offer aid and support to N Ireland businesses, entrepreneurs, communities and individuals. Whilst the NI Executive does provide the potential for local resources to be directed to specific issues, its powers are limited as much of the problem is at the macro-economic level.

- The NI Executive has been endeavouring to enlist the support of the banking sector to develop initiatives to support local industry business and customers. One of the issues is the extent to which interest rate cuts are passed onto the customers.

- The Executive announced a £70m economic aid package in mid December which included

- 100,000 households will get £150 cut in electricity bills benefiting those receiving income support and pension credit
- A one year freeze of a planned rates increase for businesses will be followed by a rates relief scheme for small businesses
- Building projects worth £115m, including schools will be advanced to boost the construction sector and should go to tender by March
- £30m investment in farms, school maintenance and roads
- £5m investment to boost DSD Housing programme
- 10 day target for public sector bodies to pay small businesses

CBI, FSB, NI Independent Retail Association and NI Manufacturing all welcomed the package to a greater or lesser extent.

The CBI state that the freezing of non-domestic rates for 09/10 will lead to savings of £8m for the business sector.

The mid December announcement of 10.8% reduction in electricity tariffs and a 22.1% fall in Phoenix Gas rates. However consumers will still be faced with 35.5% increase in electricity over the last year and with 8% increase on gas.

- Invest NI have produced their response to the economic crises which comprises some new initiatives, new product offerings, tailoring existing support mechanisms and enhanced monitoring awareness and advice. Examples of support include a series of focused practical seminars in key areas of financial and cash management, improving internal efficiencies, supply chain management and securing extra sales outside NI, free diagnostic support for 3 to 5 days and a £5m accelerated support fund.

- A new website has been set up by the IOD – www.nicrunchtalk.com to encourage companies to seek advice and share practice on how to face the economic difficulties.

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Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy and Resources Committee
Subject:	Standing Order 55 – Employment of Relatives
Date:	6 February 2009
Reporting Officer:	Trevor Salmon, Director of Corporate Services, ext 6083
Contact Officer:	Jill Minne, Acting Head of Human Resources, ext 3220

Relevant Background Information

To inform the Committee of delegated authority exercised by the Director of Corporate Services to the employment of individuals who are related to existing officers of the Council.

The Director of Corporate Services has authorised the appointment of the following individual who is related to an existing officer of the Council in accordance with the authority delegated to him by the Policy and Resources (Personnel) Sub-Committee on 27 June, 2005. The Committee is asked to note the appointment authorised by the Director under Standing Order 55.

NAME OF NEW EMPLOYEE	POST APPOINTED TO	RELATIONSHIP TO EXISTING OFFICER	NAME OF EXISTING OFFICER	DEPARTMENT
Brian Coll	Recycling Operative (Scale 3)	Father	Newell Coll	Health & Environmental Services

Resource Implications

Financial

Provision for this post exists within the revenue budgets of the relevant departments.

Human Resources

There are no Human Resource considerations. All appointments have been made on the basis of merit in accordance with the Council's Recruitment Policies.

Asset and Other Implications

There are no other implications.

Recommendations

Committee is asked to note the appointment authorised by the Director of Corporate Services in accordance with Standing Order 55.

Key to Abbreviations

None.

Documents Attached

None.



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
Subject:	Department for Social Development – Social Security Agency – Delivering a Better Service for Customers
Date:	Friday 6 th February 2009
Reporting Officer:	Gerry Millar, Director of Improvement, ext 6217
Contact Officer:	Sharon McNicholl, , ext 6204

Relevant Background Information

Purpose

To bring to the attention of Members, a consultation by the by the Department for Social Development, Social Security Agency on Delivering a Better Service for Customers and to present for approval a draft response to this consultation.

Background

Over the past two years, the Social Security Agency has been conducting a Strategic Business Review into how services are provided within their local office network of Jobs & Benefits/Social Security Offices. As a result, they have developed proposals to restructure their local operations function to ensure the future delivery of high quality services for customers. This public consultation document "Delivering a Better Service for Customers" explains the proposed changes.

Recent correspondence received from the Social Security Agency on 27th January 2009 addressing some of the issues of this consultation document is attached at Appendix one for Members attention.

Summary of the Consultation Document

Proposal

In order to provide a better service to customers, the Social Security Agency (SSA) is proposing to make changes to the way services are delivered through its local office network of Jobs & Benefits and Social Security Offices. It is envisaged that the changes will be introduced on a phased basis over 3 years, starting in October 2009.

Background

The Agency currently delivers its services to around 550,000 customers through a network of 35 Jobs & Benefits/Social Security Offices dispersed throughout the main cities and towns in Northern Ireland and through a number of centralised benefit branches. The local office network is mainly responsible for the administration of Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance, Social Fund, National Insurance Number applications/allocations and the provision of information and advice on the broad spectrum of social security benefits. The current front office services provided by Social Security Agency staff in local offices, including new claims, national insurance number applications, information and advice and over the counter payments are not affected by the proposed changes. The proposed changes relate to **how** these services will be delivered in the future.

Drivers for Change

The proposed changes are driven by two main factors:

- A) The Need to Improve, Modernise and Make Services more Accessible for Customers –**
 The Agency recognises that a more modern and effective telephony system could provide a major opportunity for increasing customer accessibility to its services. Independent customer research recently undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers, on behalf of the Agency, indicates

that there is scope for improvement in the telephony service provided to local office customers. Feedback from Social Security Agency frontline staff would also suggest that many of the enquiries raised by callers to offices could be dealt with by telephone.

B) Viable Business Model Going Forward – Following an in-depth assessment, the Agency concluded that its staff are spread too thinly across the network and, consequently, its ability to deal with future major changes and continue to provide a high standard of customer service into the future is severely constrained. Consolidation of the current 74 back-office Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance and Social Fund processing teams, which are spread across 35 sites, into Benefit Processing Centres is, therefore, unavoidable.

Proposed Changes

The Agency recognised the importance of local access to its services and therefore the consultation document states that proposed changes to the current local service delivery model, summarised below, are premised on the basis that a strong network of public offices delivering frontline services will continue to exist:

- Back office processing for Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance and Social Fund will be centralised in 18 Benefit Processing Centres located on 16 sites;
- National Insurance Number processing will remain centralised in 3 locations;
- The introduction of an **enhanced** telephony service including low/fixed rate calls;
- The creation of dedicated Telephone Support Units for each Benefit Processing Centre;
- Extension of existing appointment system to include the majority of current caller traffic;
- The introduction of Customer Access Phones in front offices which will connect the customer to the ESA Centre, Social Fund Crisis Loans Tele-Claims Unit or an expert benefit adviser in the District Telephone Support Units; and
- Access to the Agency’s website

The consultation document makes the following key points with respect to the proposed changes:

Centralisation of Back Office Processing – at present most customer contact with back office staff is conducted via the telephone or by post and this is expected to continue. It is not anticipated, therefore, that centralisation of back office processing will have a major impact on customers. However, it will have a significant impact for staff as it is anticipated that, over the 3 year implementation period, around 1050 staff will have to be relocated. Approximately 850 of these staff will have to move from their current offices to Benefit Processing Centre locations and a further 200 staff will be redeployed to vacancies elsewhere in the SSA/wider Northern Ireland Civil Service. There will be no redundancies as a result of the proposed changes. In order to help reduce costs and minimise staff travel distances it is proposed to make best use of the Agency’s local office estate by locating the Benefit Processing Centres in the back office of 16 of the Agency’s current local offices.

Introduction of an Enhanced Telephony Service – introducing a single telephone number for Income Support/Jobseekers Allowance (there are currently 38 telephone numbers, excluding fax numbers, in the SSA section of the BT telephone directory). The Agency is exploring the feasibility of implementing a short dial “101” contact number with the NI Direct Programme. It is expected that calls to “101” will be charged at a fixed rate of ten pence per call, irrespective of the duration, location or whether from landlines or mobiles.

The full consultation document can be accessed at <http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/consultations.htm>. The deadline for responses is **Thursday 29th January 2009**. However, the Council has gained agreement from the Social Security Agency to submit a response after the deadline. It has been agreed that the Council response is submitted on the 6th February 2009 after committee approval, subject to Council ratification. A draft response to the consultation is attached at Appendix 2.

Resource Implications

N/a

Recommendations

The Strategic Policy & Resources Committee is asked to note the content of the report and to approve the response attached at Appendix 2 to the consultation document and its submission to the Social Security

Agency. Members are asked to outline any additional comments that they would wish to make in the response.

Key to Abbreviations

N/a

Documents Attached

APPENDIX 1: Correspondence received from the Social Security Agency

APPENDIX 2: Draft Belfast City Council Response to the Social Security Agency Consultation on Delivering a Better Service for Customers

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CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S OFFICE			
CX	IMPR	ISM	CMS
RMU	C COMM	COI	P&L
28 JAN 2009			
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OTHER	DEVEL.	LEGAL	H&ES
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From Bryan Davis, Chief Executive

27 January 2009

STRATEGIC BUSINESS REVIEW (SBR)

When I last wrote to you in November 2008, I set out the proposed organisational changes arising from the SBR, and advised you of the commencement of the public consultation. To date the proposals have generated a very high level of interest which is very welcome, with responses being received from a wide spectrum of individuals and organisations. This has been reflected in the recent local media coverage.

However, it is clear that a number of the perspectives on SBR appearing in the media bear little resemblance to the facts which are set out in the Agency's consultation document. Indeed, many of the comments made range from being highly speculative to factually incorrect. It is vitally important that the SBR proposals are clearly communicated to and understood by everyone. So, for purposes of clarity, I wish to counter some of the mis-information which is being circulated and to allay some of the concerns which you may have regarding the SBR proposals.

The facts are set out as follows.

Under the Budget Settlement, as approved by the Assembly and the Executive, the **Agency like the rest of the NICS is faced with the dual challenge of making significant efficiency savings (5% per annum) while continuing to improve service delivery.** Calls for the proposals to be shelved ignore the fundamental obligations which the Agency faces, which are required by DFP. The Agency **must** deliver on its Efficiency Targets. The SBR proposals represent a modest restructuring which will be well managed to ensure the safeguarding of existing frontline services. The SBR blueprint is the option which provides the best overall outcome for customers, staff and the taxpayer. The Agency has no choice but to live within its means, and even with the efficiencies generated by SBR, we still have to seek more through other approaches. If SBR did not go ahead the Agency would have to find the projected savings generated by it by

other means. Despite the clear efficiency requirement, the prime driver for the SBR is to provide a viable and sustainable Agency which will provide a sound basis for improved service delivery into the future.

Local offices will not be closing. Despite our Minister's commitment to the retention of the network, it has been said that half of our local offices will be closing. This claim is totally untrue.

Contrary to recent comments, **staff will not be expected to travel hundreds of additional miles under these proposals.** In line with NICS provisions, any staff moves will be within reasonable daily travel. Where this is not possible, other measures will be considered.

There will be **no staff redundancies as a consequence of SBR.** Various claims to the contrary in the media are totally untrue. It is expected that there will be efficiency savings equating to 200 posts, over a period of time, but these will be delivered primarily through a combination of re-organisation and redeployment. Under these proposals no-one will lose their employment.

The Agency's front line will be strengthened by the SBR proposals. Figures have been circulated externally by NIPSA expressing the view that there may be an overall reduction under SBR proposals of almost 500 staff delivering benefits such as Jobseekers Allowance, Income Support and Social Fund. This does not make sense. Staff relocated from JBO/SSO offices to BPCs will continue to be directly involved in delivering benefits.

Comments have also been made that separation of the back offices from the front offices can only mean a dilution of service to the customer and what works in England (within DWP) will not necessarily work here. There is no evidence to support this statement. The Agency delivers the same social security benefits as Great Britain and customer needs are highly comparable. Indeed our Belfast Benefits Delivery Centre already has some 800 staff successfully providing centralised benefit processing (on behalf of DWP) for approximately 177,000 customers in a number of London Districts. In addition, if we were to follow the GB model, a region the size of Northern Ireland would require only 1 or 2 processing centres rather than the 18 decentralised across NI which are proposed.

All frontline offices will continue to be fully staffed to meet demand in order to provide customers with a full service. Speculation relating to 'skeleton staff' being unable to cope, or the introduction of a 2 tier service is entirely untrue.

Together with our colleagues from the Department for Employment and Learning we will ensure that customers will continue to receive a very good service.

Appointments will be adequately resourced and arranged on a timely basis. Arrangements will be put in place to ensure that the needs of vulnerable customers are met. The SBR proposals will offer greater customer choice and accessibility. A 'walk-in' service will continue to be available for those who need it; for example, in situations of urgent financial need such as Crisis Loans. The concern that customers may be required to travel to a neighbouring office to have their needs met has no basis and will not happen.

Under SBR proposals **telephony arrangements to meet customer needs will be enhanced and modernised** to the latest industry standards. Speculation that telephony support units would be distant, impersonal call centres is incorrect. They would be staffed by experienced Agency personnel who will be trained to ensure that each customer's needs are met in a timely and effective manner. This would see a step-change in service delivery, offering better privacy and accessibility for customers.

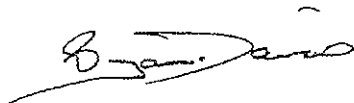
With regard to the economic downturn, implementation of the SBR proposals would provide us with the **necessary strength in depth to cope with the impact of increasing job registers over the longer term**. We are witnessing very significant increases in job registers. Because of this some have commented that we should stop the SBR consultation now. This is unrealistic. Minister has already given her assurance that all consultation responses will be fully considered. **No final decisions will be made until the consultation process has been concluded.**

The proposals would be gradually phased in to ensure that service delivery is protected. Separate to this, we will ensure that the necessary additional resources to cope with this increased demand will be found either through re-prioritisation or additional bids for funding. This approach has already been agreed with DFP and reflects exactly the same provision which DWP are making. However, any additional resources secured to deal with the downturn **do not remove the obligation for the Agency** to still deliver its Efficiency Savings.

The SBR proposals are fully supportive of the BAIN Review on the location of public sector jobs. Despite comments that the SBR proposals run contrary to the Bain Review, the Agency is proposing to centralise back office benefit processing on 6 out of 9 of the locations recommended by BAIN, and is considering options for work to be located in two others.

In conclusion, the SBR proposals present us with the opportunity to replace out-dated and fragmented service delivery arrangements with a new approach which can service our customers well into the future.

I hope you find this clarification helpful.



BRYAN DAVIS

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APPENDIX 2 - PROPOSED COUNCIL RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION

SOCIAL SECURITY AGENCY: “DELIVERING A BETTER SERVICE FOR CUSTOMERS - CHANGES TO HOW SERVICES ARE DELIVERED THROUGH THE JOBS & BENEFITS AND SOCIAL SECURITY OFFICE NETWORK”

BELFAST CITY COUNCIL RESPONSE

Belfast City Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on “*Delivering a Better Service*”. The Social Security Agency’s package of proposals aimed at improving services for customers of its local office network.

Belfast City Council is committed to working in partnership to improve the quality of life and well-being of all people living in Belfast. As a city with high levels of deprivation the Council would emphasise the importance of ensuring, as the consultation suggests, that no front office sites will be closed in Belfast.

Figures published by the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment in January 2009 indicate that the annual percentage rise in unemployment benefit claimants in Northern Ireland was the highest in nearly 33 years. In light of this the Council would stress the need for Social Security Offices to remain open with adequate staff provision. The rising unemployment figures, particularly newly unemployed would indicate that more people will be making use of the benefits system than ever.

Given the complexities of the benefits system, in terms of completing forms, a move away from face-to-face contact in the current economic climate may have a detrimental effect on claimants. It is important that claimants receive the best service possible and a fully accessible service.

In terms of the agencies approach to supporting “vulnerable customers”, the Council would also be concerned about the implications of the proposed changes for those with difficulties in communicating their needs effectively, whether this is because of poor literacy or other issues. The Council would seek reassurance that the needs of those for whom English is not their first language would be adequately addressed under the proposals.

The Council would like to see a more overt reference to the improvement in performance standards that will result from the changes proposed. For example, what will be the impact on waiting times for customers? What quality standards are being used to gauge the effectiveness of the experience that customers will have in using the system? The Council would welcome assurance that the changes are being driven by a robust assessment of the needs of customers in an increasingly difficult environment.

The Council emphasises the importance of ensuring, as set out in the consultation document, that any staff employed in sites in Belfast would be redeployed within Belfast. The Council would draw attention to the fact that the Spatial Development Strategy identifies Belfast as the dynamic, metropolitan core, regional gateway and focal point of the regional strategic transport network. It refers also to the regional advantages gained from the role of Belfast as the strong heart of the region and serving as an economic powerhouse and centre of administration. It further acknowledges that securing a strong and vibrant Capital City and Metropolitan Area is vital to the economic and social well being of Northern Ireland.

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Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
Subject:	SCHOOLS OF THE FUTURE – A POLICY FOR SUSTAINABLE SCHOOLS
Date:	Friday 6 th February 2009
Reporting Officer:	Gerry Millar, Director of Improvement, ext. 6217
Contact Officer:	Kevin Heaney, Strategic Planning and Policy Officer, ext. 6202

1.0	<u>Relevant Background Information</u>
1.1	On the 12 th January 2009, the Education Minister Caitriona Ruane announced the publication of "Schools of the Future – A Policy for Sustainable Schools" (copy attached at Appendix 1) which seeks to ensure that there exists an estate of educationally sustainable schools, planned on an area basis which meets the needs of local communities. In announcing the new Policy the Minister stated <i>"This policy is about ensuring our schools estate is robust and capable of delivering educational excellence to meet the needs and aspirations of all pupils"</i> .
1.2	The origination of this Policy emerged in December 2006 with the release of the Independent Strategic Review of Education undertaken by Sir George Bain which put forward a series of recommendations which sought to address issues such as the use of resources in education, the need for better strategic area planning of the schools' estate, and the need for improved sharing and collaboration among service providers. The Bain Report set out to secure the longer-term viability of schools within Northern Ireland.
1.3	In response to the Bain Report, in January 2007 the Department of Education issued a consultation document on "Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools" which examined in detail the issue of sustainable schools and set out a series of recommendations including a proposed assessment criteria which it was suggested should be applied to assess whether a school may be considered fit-for-purpose or whether action is required to address emerging problems of viability.
1.4	At that stage, the consultation document and recommendations contained therein was brought to the attention of the Committee for consideration and a decision had been taken that it would be referred to Party Groupings within the Council for individual consideration and submission of responses as deemed appropriate.
1.5	The Policy on Sustainable Schools attached at Appendix 1 is the culmination of the aforementioned consultation process. The Policy document sets out: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vision for Education (<i>refer to pages 4 – 5</i>) • Baseline profile of the current position in regards to school enrolments within Northern Ireland (<i>refer to page 7</i>) • The relevant policy context for sustainable schools including 'A Shared Future', post-primary reforms, the entitlement framework and the revised curriculum. It also considers the implications of specialist, extended, integrated and Irish-medium schools (<i>refer to pages 11-17</i>) • The educational, financial and other factors affecting sustainability including, for example, enrolment trends and costs per pupil (<i>refer to pages 22-27</i>) • Sustainability criteria and indicators (<i>refer to pages 34-37</i>) • Approaches to address sustainability issues including, for example, amalgamation; confederation, federation, co-location and shared campus (<i>refer to pages 38-40</i>)
2.0	<u>Key Issues</u>
2.1	<u>Members will note that the Policy document does not make any recommendations or proposals as to the future rationalisation of the school estate including the potential closure or amalgamation of schools.</u> Instead, it sets out a policy framework which, it is intended, would underpin and inform any future consideration around the sustainability of the school estate.

2.2	The Policy document states that too often concerns about a school's viability are addressed only when enrolments have already declined over a period of years to an untenable position and rationalisation is the only option remaining. It is intended that the Policy will provide a framework to enable earlier consideration of sustainability issues and support intervention activity, as necessary, so as to ensure that the educational needs of the local community is met. The Policy should also have a role in helping a school to monitor and self review its current position and to consider how it might be strengthened and improved.
2.3	The Policy sets out six criteria for helping to assess the viability of schools (<i>please refer to pages 34-35 of Appendix 1 attached</i>). Each of the undernoted criteria are further augmented with a range of quantitative and qualitative indicators identified (<i>refer to Annex 1 of Appendix 1</i>) to support the assessment process. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) the educational experience of children 2) enrolment trends 3) financial position 4) school leadership and management 5) accessibility 6) strength of links with the community.
2.4	The Policy document states that the consideration of the sustainability criteria and indicators <u>does not mean</u> that where problems are identified, closure or amalgamation needs to be pursued. However, if difficulties arise on one or more of the criteria there may be a need for some form of intervention or a more detailed review and evaluation to be undertaken.
2.5	Members will note that the Policy states that "the intention is not to have a mehanistic application of the criteria and indicators, but to provide a view of how effectively a school is performing and of the range of factors affecting its performance".
2.6	The Policy framework emphasises the importance of planning at a local level, taking into account local circumstances, when considering the future sustainability of schools. It is intended that the Policy will form an important aspect of the area-based planning approach being developed for the new Education and Skills Authority (ESA) as advocated by the Bain Report. Schools will be reviewed against the Policy Framework on a case-by-case basis to ensure that all relevant factors including educational, economic and community/local related issues, are taken into consideration.
2.7	Accordingly, due consideration will need to be given to the interdependencies between education and other agendas such as, for example, health improvement, social and community development, community safety, good relations etc. Moreover, any future planning in regards to education provision will need to take account of community planning in the new local government system.
2.8	Safe secure neighbourhoods, quality housing, addressing health inequalitities, maximising educational and employment opportunities as well as supporting children and young people, are just a few ways in which partnerships between sectors can really improve fundemendally the quality of life of citizens and address the deep-rooted issues facing communities. Accordingly, inter-sectoral working/ partnership will be critical if the Council is to truly embrace its leadership and advocacy role within the city and effectively take forward its proposed community planning role.

3.0 Resource Implications

There are no Human Resource or financial implications attached to this report

4.0 Recommendations

Members are asked to note the contents of this report.

Documents Attached

Appendix 1	Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools
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**Schools for the Future:
A Policy for Sustainable Schools**

**Scoileanna don Am atá le Teacht:
Polasaí do Scoileanna Inmharthana**

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MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

My aim is to have strong viable schools which provide our children with a high quality education for their benefit, and for the benefit of society as a whole. School sustainability should first and foremost be about the quality of the educational experience of our children. The Policy for Sustainable Schools will form an important aspect of the area-based planning approach being developed for the new Education and Skills Authority (ESA). The Policy is helping to inform the work of the post primary groups I set up earlier this year to develop local plans in advance of the establishment of the ESA.

The policy sets out six criteria and associated indicators that should provide a framework for helping to consider issues of school sustainability. The criteria cover the strength of links to the local community, educational experience, enrolments, financial position, school leadership and management, and accessibility. The development of the policy has benefited from comments from a wide variety of organisations and individuals involved in education.

The policy will be of assistance to all those involved with schools, including Boards of Governors, teachers and the local community in helping to assess the position at the school and whether early intervention is required. The policy is not intended to trigger particular solutions automatically. It is recognised that local circumstances need to be considered in determining appropriate action, and the position needs to be assessed on a case by case basis. The main consideration must be the quality of education we provide for children and young people.

I believe this policy forms an important part of the overall approach I am taking forward, including Every School a Good School and the post primary transfer reforms, to raise standards, address educational underachievement and help achieve our goal of providing an excellent education system that our children deserve, based on equality of access for all.

Caitríona Ruane MLA
Minister for Education

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education (the Bain Report) was published on 4 December 2006 following consultation with the education sector and other interests. The report addresses the use of resources in education, the need for better strategic planning of the schools' estate, and the need for improved sharing and collaboration. It includes 61 recommendations to address the challenges facing education and sets out the educational, social and economic arguments for change. Its central focus is the quality of children's education.

1.2 The report examines carefully the issue of the viability of schools as a central consideration for area planning. It raises the importance of having schools that are viable in both educational and financial terms. It makes two specific recommendations on these aspects, as follows:-

The policy for sustainable schools should ensure that all schools are sustainable in terms of the quality of the educational experience of children, enrolment trends, financial position, school leadership and management, accessibility, and the strength of their links to the community.

The sustainable schools policy should ensure that regardless of the financial position of a school or the services it provides, it is not considered viable if the quality and breadth of the education it provides is less than satisfactory.

1.3 The report also recommends minimum (not optimal) enrolment thresholds for primary schools, post-primary schools and sixth forms, as a basis for ensuring that all children have access to an educational experience that is at least satisfactory.

1.4 The term "sustainable schools" is also used elsewhere to refer to the need for sustainable development to be an important part of the education system through the facilities provided and the teaching and learning followed in the

classroom. In the context of sustainable development, the Department for Children, Families and Schools in England explains that sustainable schools aim to prepare young people for a lifetime of sustainable living through their teaching, their fabric and through the example of their day-to-day practices. A sustainable school puts a high value on the well-being of its pupils and the school environment.

- 1.5 *A Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland*, published by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in May 2006, recognises the need for changes in behaviours and practices across society to protect the environment. An implementation plan for sustainable development was published in November 2006. This strategy commits the Department of Education to a wide-ranging set of actions to embed sustainable development in all aspects of education. The key target to introduce formal education on sustainable development to the curriculum at Key Stages from 2007 has been achieved.
- 1.6 The focus of this document is on the longer-term viability of schools provision as set out in the Bain Report. In addressing the viability of schools, ensuring that each school is strong and vibrant, it will be important to ensure that the principles of sustainable development are also taken into account.

Vision for Education

- 1.7 Education is central to our future. In the education and development of young people, and in the continuing learning of the adult population, it represents one of the most significant investments in developing the individual, society and the economy. There is a broad and challenging vision for everyone involved in the delivery of education:

To ensure that every learner achieves his or her full potential at each stage of development.

- 1.8 In advancing towards this vision the education sector will want to: -
- ensure that the excellent quality of education available to some young people is made available to all, in both urban and rural settings, in accessible, modern, fit-for-purpose accommodation;
 - improve outcomes for all but, in particular, to provide additional support to those who require it, including those children with Special Educational Needs, to realise their full potential;
 - encourage schools to co-operate in sharing best practice to support children with Special Educational Needs and those with other barriers to learning;
 - sustain strong, successful and viable schools, well led by their Governors representing local stakeholders, principals and their staff, to be the centre of the education system, supported by effective administrative and strategic direction;
 - encourage schools to become closely integrated with their wider community, with much better links to early years' provision and to informal educational opportunities beyond the school;
 - implement a revised curriculum offering fresh opportunities, particularly to those for whom education is currently not working well enough;
 - move away from the division of academic and vocational education to ensuring access to a broader educational experience for all young people,

supported by better quality careers advice, signposting the appropriate pathways to the future;

- ensure that each school or set of schools can sustain the ethos which it values and has upheld for many years;
- create a new set of relationships amongst schools and colleges, based on strong, successful and sustainable institutions, well funded and equipped but building on the expertise of the different sectors;
- sustain the quality, morale, health and well-being of the teaching workforce, youth workers and other educational professionals and support staff, helping them to prepare and implement the major education reforms and deal with the range of social challenges affecting young people, particularly in an increasingly diverse population; and
- uphold an education system that plays a powerful and positive role in the normalising of society, helping to make it sustainable and vibrant, with greater sharing amongst communities.

1.9 Strong, sustainable schools providing quality education and access to the full curriculum are central to the achievement of the educational vision.

Purpose

- 1.10 This document examines the issues relevant to achieving sustainability of schools which should be central to the planning of future school provision. It considers the issue of sustainable schools in the Bain Report context and sets out criteria and indicators for use by the Department, the education authorities, school Boards of Governors and the wider community, to help assess whether a school may be considered fit for purpose, or whether action is required to address emerging problems of viability. The objective is to improve the quality of education offered to pupils of all ages and backgrounds. The criteria should also have a role in helping a school to monitor and self review its current position and to consider how it might be strengthened and improved.
- 1.11 Too often, concerns about a school's viability are addressed only when enrolments have already declined over a period of years to an untenable position and rationalisation is the only option remaining. The set of criteria set out in this document is much broader than enrolment thresholds and are intended to provide a framework for earlier consideration and action as necessary so that options can be considered which best meet the educational needs of the local community. The criteria will also ensure transparency, consistency and equity in decision-making on sustainability across schools and sectors.
- 1.12 In examining these issues, this document also considers the importance of sharing and collaboration and how the education sector can contribute to that by meeting the need for sustainable schools. The policy is relevant to all of our grant-aided schools.

The Current Position

- 1.13 The Bain Report contains a detailed analysis of our diverse schools system with controlled and maintained schools, voluntary grammar schools, integrated schools and Irish-medium schools. (There is also a small independent sector which does not receive government funding.) The Bain Report commented that the multi-sector school system, combined with the rural nature of much of the North, single-sex schools and a selective system of education, means that we have a higher proportion of small schools than England, Scotland or Wales. The vast majority of the very smallest primary schools are located in rural areas. Effective delivery of the curriculum in the smaller schools often presents particular challenges and difficulties. These schools are also generally more expensive to run but it must also be noted that such schools are often at the heart of rural communities, helping to ensure their sustainability whilst providing valuable and often scarce facilities.
- 1.14 In the primary school sector, the percentage of schools here with fewer than 100 pupils is, at 37%, significantly higher than in England (14%) and only slightly higher than the percentages for Scotland (35%) and Wales (31%). The average size of our primary schools is greater than in Scotland, Wales and demographically similar areas of England. In the post-primary sector, we have a significantly greater percentage of schools (15%) with fewer than 300 pupils than England (2%), Scotland (10%) and Wales (1%). Also, our post-primary schools have smaller average enrolments than elsewhere. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 below show the percentage distribution of schools across Britain by enrolment band in the primary and post-primary sectors respectively.

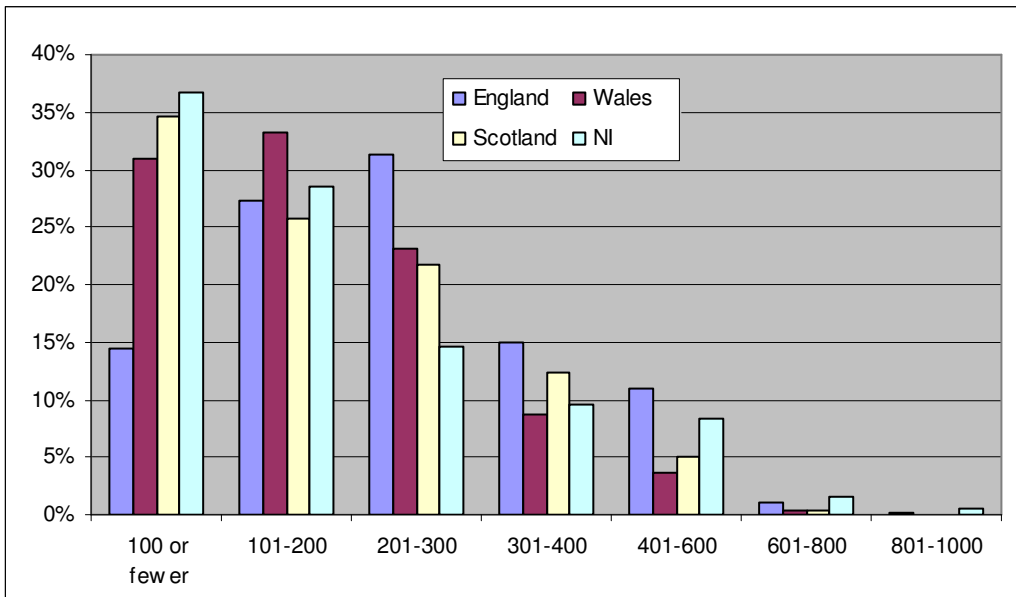


Figure 1.1: Percentage of Primary Schools by Enrolment Band, 2006/07¹

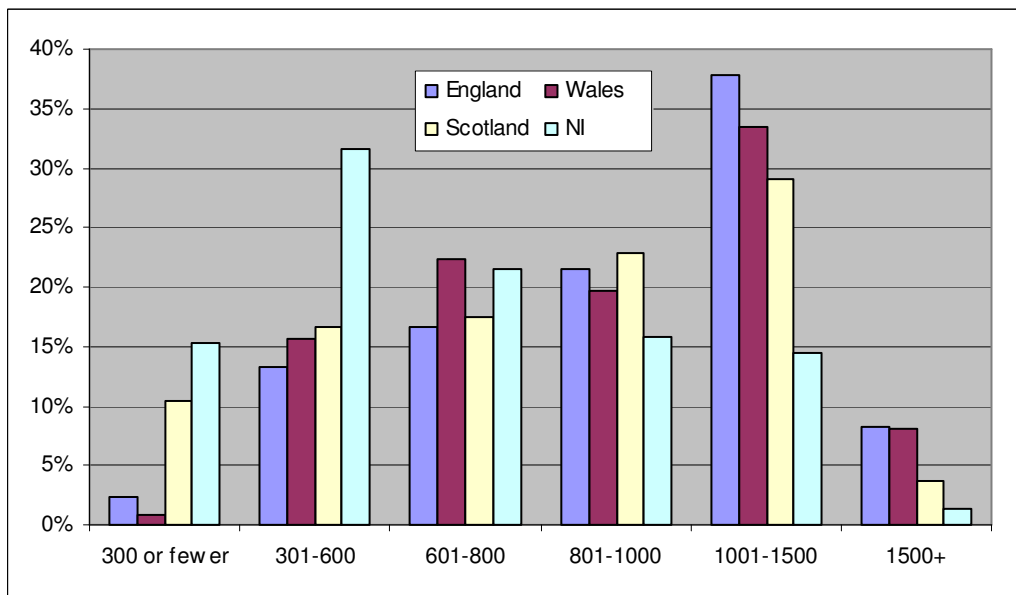


Figure 1.2: Percentage of Post-primary Schools by Enrolment Band, 2006/07²

1.15 The demographic trends being experienced present our education system with a major challenge of ensuring that schools remain educationally viable and avoid the inefficiencies arising from excess surplus capacity. The Bain Report recommends that surplus capacity in the schools' estate should be no

¹ England, Scotland and Wales figures relate to 2005/06

² England, Scotland and Wales figures relate to 2005/06

more than 10 per cent of the total capacity distributed across the system. The numbers of children of school age are projected to fall by some 12,000 over the next ten years – a fall of around 4%. The primary age population is projected to rise by 4%, while the post-primary school age population is projected to decline by 11% between 2006 and 2016³. The overall school population peaked in 1996/97 and has been declining since then. Although there was a recent small increase in the birth rate, and there is net inward migration, the projected school age population remains downwards.

- 1.16 At the sub-regional level, however, the pattern can vary quite significantly - from Castlereagh which is projected to see a 27% fall in pupil numbers, to Dungannon where an increase of 14% is projected⁴. Whilst projections by school sector are not available, a downward trend has been evident in both controlled and maintained schools, pupil populations in both have fallen by 13% over the period 1997/98 to 2007/08.
- 1.17 Whilst small schools often face particular challenges in providing the full curriculum and an educational environment which maximises the opportunities which they can offer their pupils, the pressures become even more evident at a time of falling rolls. The pressures are faced, not just by the smallest schools, but also in much larger schools.
- 1.18 A “fit for purpose” school should provide a high quality educational experience to children in as cost effective a manner as possible. The focus should be on providing a high quality schools’ estate, based on local area plans which reflect current and projected pupil numbers, and take account of the quality of existing school buildings.
- 1.19 It is important to examine the range of factors which are relevant to a school’s longer term viability. Inevitably, sustainability is dependent on enrolment levels, in particular with regard to educational experience and the capacity of

³ Figures based on 2006 NI Statistics & Research Agency population projections.

⁴ Figures based on children aged 4-17 for the period 2006 to 2016 based on 2006 NI Statistics & Research Agency population projections.

schools to provide a rich learning environment. Enrolment is only one aspect of the sustainability considerations and schools which fall under the proposed enrolment thresholds will not automatically be considered for rationalisation but will be subject to review against all the sustainability criteria and indicators detailed in Annex A. Budgetary issues are closely related to enrolments, since the majority of funding being provided to schools is through the Local Management of Schools delegated formula allocations, almost all of which is on the basis of pupils enrolled at a school. However, sustainability is wider than issues of enrolments and budgets, since a school's longer-term viability may also be significantly affected by other factors such as educational performance, quality of leadership and management, community support and the overall provision within the immediate area e.g. parish or village, which have been identified by the Bain Report as relevant factors to sustainability.

1.20 The following sections of the document:

- outline the relevant policy context for sustainable schools;
- identify the educational, financial and other factors affecting sustainability;
and
- identify approaches to address sustainability.

2 THE POLICY CONTEXT

- 2.1 A general principle of the education system is that, so far as it is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training, and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure, pupils shall be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents. This principle is reflected in the Department's open enrolment policy. This section highlights the range of specific policies relevant to considerations of longer-term viability and the future planning of the schools' estate.
- 2.2 The Department is committed to a vision that ensures that every learner fulfils his or her full potential at each stage of development. This means that new opportunities for collaboration and sharing in education should be pursued.
- 2.3 Education must establish and address the real needs of young people to ensure that they are given every opportunity to prepare for a life in a diverse society. Our aim is to support effective and meaningful collaboration across the education system and enable children and young people to build their understanding of what they have in common as well as what defines them as being different. This should equip them to explore issues around diversity and how people of differing political, religious, ethnic and cultural traditions can live together in mutual respect and with a common understanding of our interdependence as equal members of society.
- 2.4 The Bain Report recommended that in the planning of the schools' estate the new Education and Skills Authority should be required to maximise opportunities for integrating education within a system of sustainable schools. The Department will therefore examine school proposals in future for opportunities for delivering a more inclusive approach. Indeed, the Bain Report commented that the manifestations and outcomes of the distinctive character of schools, and the contribution of schools to the spirit of peace and reconciliation, should be included in schools' annual reports, and in inspection reports, taking account of the community environment of the school.

2.5 Collaboration, by its nature, will be most successful when entered into voluntarily and with a commitment to genuine and meaningful sharing on the part of the schools concerned. The converse is that, without such commitment, schools will not benefit fully from collaboration. Given the difficulty in assessing genuine commitment to collaboration and sharing, the criteria set out at section 6 and Annex A below do not include an explicit indicator. Nevertheless, schools are expected to collaborate and, for schools under review, the opportunities offered though sharing may enable them to provide the quality of education to which children are entitled and without which viability may be jeopardised.

The Post-primary Reforms

2.6 The Entitlement Framework will guarantee for all pupils access to a minimum number and range of course choices (eventually 24 courses at Key Stage 4 and 27 courses at post-16), one third of which should be of a professional or technical nature. Most of the courses will be available in their own school but some pupils will also access courses in neighbouring schools, further education colleges or approved training organisations. The expectation is that the entitlement framework, whether in the school or through collaborative arrangements, will be delivered by subject specialists, particularly at Key Stage 4, with access to the full range of subject choices. Pupils will be able to study courses in line with their needs and in line with their career aspirations and interests. Schools can choose to give their pupils access to the 24 and 27 courses which they feel are most appropriate for their pupils from the extensive range of accredited courses available. There may be particular challenges for smaller schools, or those in rural areas, and Governors and School Managing Authorities will need to consider how they are to be addressed to ensure that all pupils have access to the Entitlement Framework. The need to provide access to courses raises questions over the sizes of schools and the local collaboration arrangements which might most effectively deliver it. The viability of sixth form provision is also a key consideration. The curriculum offered in the sixth form should be broad,

balanced and coherent. The Education and Training Inspectorate has advised that sixth forms should be self-financing and should not draw resources away from pupils in lower age groups. The Bain Report has recommended a minimum sixth form of 100 pupils.

2.7 In her statement of December 4, 2007, the principles of which were later reflected in proposals for post-primary transfer brought before the Executive on 15 May 2008, the Minister for Education stated that all pupils' access to the Entitlement Framework from Key Stage 4 (i.e. from 14) should be according to a formal and structured process of informed election. This statement was part of a wider consideration of the post-primary system predicated on the benefits of electively matching pupils to the educational provision suited to their needs at the age of 14, rather than selectively matching pupils to provision at 11 (through the admissions criteria of individual institutions). This consideration retained a transfer from primary to post-primary school at 11, but argued that access to post-14 provision (determined by informed election) could be facilitated by a number of means, including:-

- access within an 11-19 institution;
- transfer to an alternative 11-19 institution;
- access through an 11-19 institution or post-14 institution which offers the Entitlement Framework in collaboration with other schools in a Learning Community; and
- a local area may offer general provision in 11-14 schools followed by specialism and diversity in post-14 provision.

All of these develop further the centrality of school (and FE College) collaboration and the development of Learning Communities in the future of post-primary education. The Minister linked her consideration of all of these issues to the need for a policy on sustainability by considering the impact of demographic decline which, in strict numbers terms, is largely impacting on the non-grammar schools to the extent that, on average, one in five places were empty in the 122 secondary schools⁵.

⁵ For 2006/07, 122 secondary schools had an estimated 80,200 places available and 17,400 surplus places.

- 2.8 Whilst collaboration will be a key aspect of the new arrangements it is very much focused on offering the best possible education and opportunities for the pupil and should not be a means for school authorities to avoid difficult decisions on the need for rationalisation.

The Revised Curriculum

- 2.9 A revised curriculum for all schools is being introduced on a phased basis from 2007/08 to 2009/10. One of its key strengths is that it is less prescriptive than the previous curriculum. The content of the curriculum will allow scope for schools to teach beyond the statutory minimum, in line with the ability and interests of their pupils. This differs from the previous curriculum, which prescribed in much more detail exactly what must be taught, regardless of the ability of the pupils in the class. While the statutory areas of learning are broadly comparable with the previous subject areas, there will also be a new area of learning, known as Learning for Life and Work, which includes Employability, Citizenship and Personal Development. There will also be a focus across all Key Stages on the cross-curricular skills of communication, using Mathematics and ICT. With the introduction of the revised curriculum, the assessment arrangements need to be capable of reflecting a pupil's achievements and attainments in all areas of learning rather than the narrower focus of the previous arrangements. The new arrangements will emphasise ongoing assessment based on feedback on what has been achieved and the setting of realistic targets for future learning. Schools will need to have the appropriate leadership and management structures, teaching capacity, accommodation and resources to provide the revised curriculum.

School Improvement Policy

2.10 The Department's policy for school improvement, "Every School a Good School" (ESaGS), "Gach Scoil ina Scoil Mhaith: Polasaí le haghaidh Feabhsú Scoile", sets out policies and processes applicable to all schools and a different set of arrangements for schools which are particularly weak. In the latter case it specifies an escalating course of support and interventions in failing schools. If efforts to improve the quality of education sufficiently are unsuccessful the policy provides a number of options which include:

- Restructuring of the governance, leadership and management within the school;
- Merging the school with a neighbouring school;
- Closing the school and re-opening after a period with a new management team; and
- Closure of the school, with pupils transferring to other nearby suitable schools.

Such actions, taken on the basis of a school's failure, after significant intervention, to address weaknesses identified and achieve the desired level of improvement, are consistent with the Sustainable Schools policy which identifies the provision of quality education as the overriding consideration.

Specialist Schools

2.11 There are currently 34 Specialist Schools, 12 designated in 2006, 13 designated in 2007 and a further 9 announced for designation from September 2008. The schools aim to raise standards, not just in their specialist area but across the whole curriculum. They work with other schools, community groups and business and through collaboration and sharing of best practice, benefit partner schools and pupils in the local area. Specialist schools are created by the designation of existing schools, following a rigorous application process and do not add to the overall number of schools.

Extended Schools

- 2.12 The focus of Extended Schools is on supporting learning, healthy lifestyles and creativity. It provides activities based on schools' particular circumstances and needs, but will include breakfast clubs, after-school study support and after-school youth, sport and leisure activities, programmes for parents and community use of schools. The Department provides funding to the Education & Library Boards who release funding to schools on the completion and approval of an Action Plan. Priority for Extended Schools funding is given to those schools serving areas of greatest social disadvantage.
- 2.13 Extended services can make a significant contribution to reducing differentials and improving the quality of life for children and young people, particularly from disadvantaged areas. Positive engagement with families, sharing facilities with local community groups, and establishing close links with statutory and voluntary agencies working in the area helps reinforce the position of the school and highlights its pivotal role in terms of its contribution to personal, health and community development.

Integrated and Irish-medium schools

- 2.14 The Department of Education has statutory duties to encourage and facilitate integrated and Irish-medium education. DE also takes account of the fact that we are a signatory to the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages: Part III gives rise to certain obligations in respect of the teaching of, or through, Irish where there is sufficient demand. DE has a clear duty therefore to respond positively to parental demand for integrated and Irish-medium education. The Department considers individual proposals for funding of a new school against a number of factors, including educational standards, premises, intakes and enrolment viability, suitable alternative provision, religious balance for integrated schools, objections to the proposal, public expenditure implications and impact on other schools, and decides on the merits of each case.

- 2.15 The statutory duties in regard to integrated and Irish-medium education were examined in the Independent Strategic Review of Education. The Bain Report has recommended that in discharging its legislative duty in respect of integrated education the Department should explain that it is committed to facilitating and encouraging a variety of approaches to integrating education within a framework of sustainable schools. The Report also recommended that the Department should develop a comprehensive and coherent policy for Irish-medium education. The Review of Irish-medium education, launched by the Department in December 2006, is identifying how best to encourage and facilitate continued and sustainable growth of the sector, ensuring the highest quality educational outcomes for pupils.

Area-Based Planning

- 2.16 Developments at one school may have significant impacts on other schools in its area, including their sustainability. This underlines the importance of examining provision on an area basis as recommended by the Bain Report, taking account of the overall projected need for provision in the area.
- 2.17 This will be addressed through the roll-out of area-based planning in 2008. Area-based planning is about anticipating the educational needs in an area and planning to meet those needs in an effective and efficient way through an estate of sustainable facilities. This will ensure that planning is on a whole system basis, taking account of impacts within and across areas and across sectors to develop plans that meet the need for provision in that area. Whilst the ESA will have operational responsibility for area-based planning, school sectoral interests will have a major role to play in the development of the Area Plans.
- 2.18 In developing area-based plans, a central consideration must be the need for schools which will be viable. The sustainable schools policy is therefore to help provide a framework to inform the preparation of area plans. On 4 March

2008 the Education Minister announced initial work on area-based planning focusing on post-primary provision to be completed by January 2009.

3 THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE FOR CHILDREN

3.1 The core issue for sustainability must be the continuing provision of a high quality education for the children. This section examines the educational issues arising particularly from schools with small or declining enrolments. There is not a simple correlation between school enrolment and educational attainment. There are many instances where there is a high quality of teaching and learning in both large and small schools which is reflected in favourable Education and Training Inspectorate reports. Where the quality of teaching and learning is very good in a small school, it is not surprising that parents and the wider community are content with the status quo. The costs in human and financial terms, however, can often be considerable. In some schools there may be undue and substantial pressures on staff, for example in planning to address the wide range of needs, year groups and abilities, in evaluating the curriculum and in managing educational change. The following paragraphs summarise the key educational issues for small primary and post-primary schools.

Primary Schools

- 3.2 Small primary schools face a particular difficulty in delivering a high quality of education where staff members have to contend with unduly demanding workloads and small (and perhaps diminishing) enrolments. Small primary schools can face challenges in meeting the educational requirements of the children. The challenges can become increasingly greater when:
- i. there are composite classes with more than two age-groups within most classes. This is likely to occur when there are fewer than four teachers, one of whom will be a teaching principal; and
 - ii. There are only two teachers, one of whom will have responsibility for four different age groups, and the other three different age groups. In

addition, one of the two teachers will also have a responsibility as a teaching principal.

- 3.3 Teachers in small schools also face problems of having less scope for professional interaction and mutual support. The school is unlikely to provide a wide programme of extra-curricular activities and will have a smaller range of teacher specialisms e.g. music. The smaller numbers of children in each year group limit the opportunities for working alongside peers, social interaction and challenge, and participation in extra-curricular activities including team-based experiences.

Post-Primary Schools

- 3.4 Small post-primary schools can face a number of challenges:
- i. the school has difficulty in ensuring the continuing availability of teachers who have sufficient specialist experience and qualifications to allow the school to provide effective teaching and assessment in all areas of the curriculum. There is also greater difficulty in covering absences as teachers engaged to do so should also be subject specialists;
 - ii. access to professional exchange and peer support related to specialisms can be more restricted and often insufficient;
 - iii. there may be increased staffing problems, in terms of recruiting and retaining good staff and fewer opportunities for school-based staff development;
 - iv. there is less scope for pupils to benefit from liaison with a broad peer group; and fewer opportunities for provision of a full programme of extra-curricular activities;

- v. the curriculum choices and specialist teaching open to learners may be diminished and this becomes even more acute at 6th form level; and
- vi. teachers are likely to be required to teach well beyond their specialist subject area.

4 ENROLMENT TRENDS

- 4.1 Chapter 3 identified the challenges that small schools at primary and post-primary levels may face in providing a broad and balanced educational experience. This chapter describes the intake and enrolment considerations for new and existing schools and thresholds for recurrent and capital funding for new schools.
- 4.2 Whilst recognising the wishes of parents for the education of their children, the Department of Education must also ensure that the viability criteria which new schools must satisfy in order to receive funding are compatible with the provision of quality educational experiences and outcomes for learners, and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure. There are a number of criteria and factors, set out at paragraph 2.14 above, which are examined in reaching a decision on whether to approve a proposal to create a new school and these will continue to apply.

Primary Schools

- 4.3 In regard to primary schools the Department of Education has previously advised that the relevant school authority should review the position of a primary school when the enrolment falls below 60. In terms of investment in the replacement of school buildings, the Department has not normally provided investment where there are fewer than four classrooms required. The cut-off point for replacement has been when there are 85 or fewer pupils which means that four teaching spaces are not justified.
- 4.4 Primary schools with fewer than seven classes often encounter problems. The smaller the school, the more acute these problems can become in providing a broad and balanced curriculum. The Education and Training Inspectorate advises that ideally a primary school should have a minimum of seven classrooms (one for each year group). With classrooms accommodating up to 29 pupils this would indicate an enrolment of around

200 pupils as an optimal, as distinct to minimal, level for primary schools.

Whilst one teacher per primary year group is the ideal, the strict application of this criterion may not be achievable in a significant number of communities.

- 4.5 The Department has periodically reviewed the minimum intakes which should be required for recognition of a new primary school for funding. In funding a new school an essential consideration is that it will be viable for the long term. In recent years it has generally been the integrated and Irish-medium sectors which have sought to establish new schools in response to parental demand, though the criteria apply to all sectors. In respect of the intakes, the minimum numbers required for new primary schools have operated as in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1 Enrolment Thresholds for Primary Schools

Primary schools	Recurrent funding	Capital Funding
(i) Urban areas of Belfast/ Derry City Council areas	Minimum intake of 15 year 1 pupils	Minimum of 20 pupils per year (over 3 years) (Equates to 140 pupils over 7 years)
(ii) Other areas	Minimum intake of 12 year 1 pupils	Minimum intake of 15 pupils per year (over 3 years) (Equates to 105 pupils over 7 years)

- 4.6 The Department has therefore considered that for a new primary school to be sustainable in the longer term and receive capital funding for permanent accommodation, it should be projected to reach a minimum enrolment of 140 in urban areas and 105 in rural areas.
- 4.7 The Bain Report recommended that, as a minimum, an urban school should have 140 pupils (or an average of 20 pupils per year group). The minimum

enrolment for rural areas should be 105 (an average of 15 pupils per year group) in recognition of population levels in rural areas. The criteria for investment in new primary schools are therefore in line with the recommended minimum thresholds and will continue to apply.

- 4.8 These enrolment levels will be the basis for considering new primary schools and the replacement of existing schools. Thus a replacement primary school in a rural area will be expected to reach a minimum of 105 pupils, and at least 140 in Belfast and Derry City Council areas. The Department will therefore not normally replace school buildings unless the enrolments are projected to be at least at these levels. Nevertheless it is also recognised that the position at each individual school needs to be considered in the context of local circumstances. Decisions on schools below these levels will need to be taken in the context of area-based plans that identify schools which will be needed for the longer term to serve the local areas.
- 4.9 Whilst new schools are one means of providing for identified preferences on the ground, there needs to be a strong expectation of viability for the longer term. There may be alternative means for developing provision in response to local demand without the establishment of a new school. For example a federated model is an option whereby small schools on separate sites may form a single school. As for new schools, there will be a need to ensure the longer term educational viability of such an approach.
- 4.10 The option of meeting educational needs through units⁶ or streams⁷ attached to an English medium host school may be a particular route for the development of Irish-medium education. Units in primary schools should achieve a minimum intake of 8 pupils in Year 1 to be considered educationally viable. In line with the overall policy approach, the combined unit and host school enrolment should be expected to have the minimum enrolment levels of 105 for rural primaries and 140 for urban primaries. This would not rule out

⁶ Irish-medium units deliver the complete curriculum through Irish.

⁷ Irish-medium streams deliver parts of the curriculum through Irish and parts through English.

a stand-alone school at a later stage if there was a demonstrated need and agreement for it.

Post-Primary Schools

- 4.11 In view of the number of subjects to be taught at post-primary schools, the Department has considered previously that serious problems can arise when enrolments fall below 300, an average of 60 per year. The Department has expected post-primary schools to be reviewed when the numbers fall below this level.
- 4.12 Proposals for new post-primary schools have been expected to achieve minimum intakes of 50 pupils per year in urban and rural areas and that they will be viable in the long term to attract capital funding.
- 4.13 The Bain Review has commented that the previous level for a post-primary school of 300 would not be appropriate to meet the needs of pupils and that for Years 8-12 the report recommended that the minimum level should be 500 and sixth forms should have a minimum of 100. The Review stressed that these are not put forward as optimal levels; nor do they imply that schools at or above these levels do not share the obligation of those below the thresholds which is to pursue the highest possible quality of provision for children. The average size of schools may be significantly greater than the minimum sizes recommended.
- 4.14 The minimum enrolment level should apply to the establishment of new schools and replacement of existing schools. In effect therefore, a post-primary school would be expected to have a minimum annual intake of 100 pupils on average. The minimum enrolment for new sixth forms will be 100. For new post-primary schools, the minimum intake to qualify initially for recurrent funding will be 50 but, to retain recurrent funding, this would be expected to increase to 80 in the second year and then 100 in the third year in anticipation that a minimum enrolment of 500 for Years 8-12 would be achieved. As for primary schools, there are options for sustainable provision

such as a federated model involving more than two schools and intakes at each site should be such that the federated school is viable.

- 4.15 The development of Irish-medium post-primary education through units or streams should also be on the basis that they should be educationally viable. There is an expectation of a minimum intake of 12 pupils in Year 8 but the combined Irish-medium and host school enrolment should be 100 per year group for an age 11-16 school, and 100 for a sixth form.
- 4.16 Post-primary schools are much more expensive to provide than primaries because of the need for specialist classrooms and other facilities. In addition to the financial implications, smaller post-primaries can have the effect of narrowing the range of provision available to pupils within their schools. The larger the school, the more scope there is to recruit, develop and retain teachers to teach subjects and to offer a broad range of extra-curricular activities and enrichment opportunities. It is a requirement of the Entitlement Framework that, when it comes to making decisions at 14 and again at 16, pupils have access to a genuine and much broader choice of courses. It will require schools to provide access to minimum numbers of applied and general courses in Key Stage 4 and post-16. This presents a particular challenge in a small school. While some larger schools may be able to deliver the full Entitlement Framework, it is likely that many schools will need to collaborate with other schools, further education colleges and other providers to provide the required access.
- 4.17 There are a number of structural possibilities for providing pupils with access to the range of courses and choices at 14 including 11-16, 11-19, 11-14 and 14-19 schools with those schools with KS4 and post-16 pupils having the option to collaborate with other schools, further education colleges and other providers to provide the required minimum access. However, children would still be expected to spend most of their time in the school in which they are registered. It is the objective of sustainable schools to have as much of the Entitlement Framework as possible delivered in-school. Therefore schools will need to be of sufficient size to provide the teaching and other resources from

their budgets to achieve this. It is anticipated that children at Key Stage 4 and post -16 should spend, at least 80% of their time in their home school. The time spent in the home school is relevant to 11-16, 11-19 and 14-19 models of delivery and should inform the shaping of the schools estate for the future.

- 4.18 The introduction of area-based planning will be important in establishing the provision which is needed to meet future requirements. There may be schools where it is decided that they are needed for the longer term though their enrolments fall below recommended minimum enrolment thresholds. In such circumstances the schools would need to share and collaborate with others to ensure pupils have access to the Entitlement Framework. The establishment of the Education and Skills Authority with responsibility for area-based planning will mean that new schools which are approved to meet parental demand will be developed in the context of agreed area plans. The current work on area-based planning for post-primary provision will help inform the assumptions on intakes and enrolments required for sustainable schools to deliver the Entitlement Framework. This will be kept under review.

Rural Issues

- 4.19 The criteria recognise that there can be different issues facing primary and post-primary schools. It is also recognised that there may be greater travel and transport issues for pupils living in rural communities which are relevant to consideration of rural provision. Schools are often at the heart of rural communities and provide valuable, often scarce, facilities. It is important that children in rural communities have access to a quality education in cost-effective provision. The Rural Development Council (RDC) in its report *Striking the Balance* has set out an approach to rural proofing of education provision. Rural proofing means having regard to the potential of a policy to impact differently on rural populations, in comparison with those living in urban areas. Proofing may help identify adjustments which might be made to reflect rural needs and ensure that services are accessible on a fair basis to rural communities. The RDC report examines the range of key policy and social factors that influence school provision including educational, economic

and physical viability of schools and the impacts on the ground of changes in education provision. The Council also sets out a range of options to consider in rural areas including collaboration, clustering and federation which may be relevant to delivery in a local area, with guiding principles for provision in rural areas. The issues raised in the report and the approach to rural proofing should prove helpful in considering how to ensure schools are sustainable in rural areas. In this policy, a lower enrolment threshold has been set for primary schools serving rural areas, and a school accessibility criterion has also been included. The policy was assessed against the RDC rural proofing checklist (*Striking the Balance*, Annex 1) and no adverse impact was identified.

5 FINANCIAL POSITION

- 5.1 Under the Local Management of Schools (LMS) Common Funding Formula (CFF), the level of funding allocated to a school is determined mainly by pupil numbers. In schools with declining enrolments, it has become a challenge to live within the budget allocation and in some cases small schools have built up significant financial deficits. Deficits are not however necessarily a consequence of school size: financial management at the school can itself be a factor.
- 5.2 As school size reduces, funding calculated on a per pupil basis rises sharply. The Department for Children, Families and Schools found that primary schools with between 80 and 100 pupils cost 16% more per-pupil when compared with the average across all primary schools. Below 50 pupils the cost per pupil increased substantially. Primary schools with fewer than 20 pupils are three times as expensive per-pupil when compared with the average.
- 5.3 Small schools require additional financial support if they are to make appropriate curriculum provision for their pupils and so the LMS formula includes elements designed to target their particular needs. A key element of this is the Small Schools Support Factor. In 2007/08 a total of £33.4m was distributed through this factor comprising £26.2m (78%) to primary schools and £7.2m (22%) to post-primary schools. In the primary sector, a lump sum of £45.5k was allocated to each school with 100 or fewer pupils, tapering to zero at enrolments over 300. This totalled around £15.2m for the 334 schools⁸ with 100 or fewer pupils with a further £11m to those with enrolments between 101 and 300. In the post-primary sector, schools with an enrolment of 200 or fewer received a lump sum maximum of around £128.9k tapering to zero at 551. This totalled around £2.6m for the 20 schools with 200 or fewer pupils with a further £4.6m to those with enrolments between 201 and 550.

⁸ This differs from Table 5.1 below because it uses primary school enrolments including reception classes and Years 1-7 but not Nursery classes. Table 5.1 includes Nursery classes.

- 5.4 The main per pupil element within formula funding is the Age Weighted Pupil Unit (AWPU) funding which, on average, distributes over 80% of all funding. The Small Schools Support Factor targets additional resources towards smaller schools to facilitate the delivery of the curriculum. Also, in the case of small primary schools, it provides some support to principals to release them from a full time teaching commitment to undertake management and administrative responsibilities.
- 5.5 Smaller schools also benefit proportionately from funding under the Teachers' Salary Protection Factor within formula funded distributions for all schools. Schools with up to 30 full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers are eligible for compensation where their teaching costs are above the average for their phase (nursery, primary or post-primary). In such cases, a school will receive a compensatory amount which takes account of the number of teachers employed, and the extent to which the school's salary bill is above average. Compensation is payable at 100% of the above average costs for schools of four teachers or fewer, tapering to zero for schools of 30 teachers. Of the £5.8m distributed to all schools under this formula factor in 2007/08, around £4.7m (80%) went to primary schools, with a further £0.2m to nursery schools and £0.9m to post-primary schools.
- 5.6 An inevitable consequence of the support provided to small schools is that the LMS per-pupil allocations for small schools are significantly higher than for larger schools. These are set out below in Tables 5.1 and 5.2 for primary and post-primary schools respectively.

Table 5.1 Primary School Allocations, 2007/08

FTE Pupils ⁹	Schools	% All primary schools	Average allocation per pupil £ ¹⁰	Diff to Average all Primary £	% more per pupil than average
60 or fewer	159	18.1	3,594	1,051	41.3
100 or fewer	326	37.1	3,147	604	23.7
180 or fewer	526	59.8	2,883	340	13.4
300 or fewer	706	80.3	2,709	166	6.5
All schools	879	100.0	2,544	-	-

Source: Budgets to Schools 2007/08 - Common Funding Formula and CYP allocations

Table 5.2 Post-Primary School Allocations, 2007/08

FTE Pupils ¹¹	Number of Schools	% All Post-primary schools	Average allocation per pupil £ ¹⁰	Diff to Average all Post-primary £	% more per pupil than average
300 or fewer	35	15.4	4,511	526	13.2
600 or fewer	107	46.9	4,109	124	3.1
900 or fewer	176	77.2	4,010	24	0.6
All schools	228	100.0	3,985	-	-

Source: Budgets to Schools 2007/08 - Common Funding Formula and CYP allocations

5.7 Figures 5.1 and 5.2 below plot the per capita funding by enrolment for primary and post-primary schools respectively. In the primary sector, funding allocations per pupil (reflecting increased costs when calculated on a per pupil basis) start to rise for schools with fewer than 200 pupils and increases significantly when enrolments fall below 50. Similarly, in the post-primary sector, allocations per pupil start to rise with enrolments below 500 and escalate significantly when enrolments fall below 200.

⁹ Includes Nursery class pupils within primary schools

¹⁰ Based on overall delegated funding including the direct to schools element of the Children and Young People Funding package

¹¹ Excludes Preparatory pupils in grammar schools

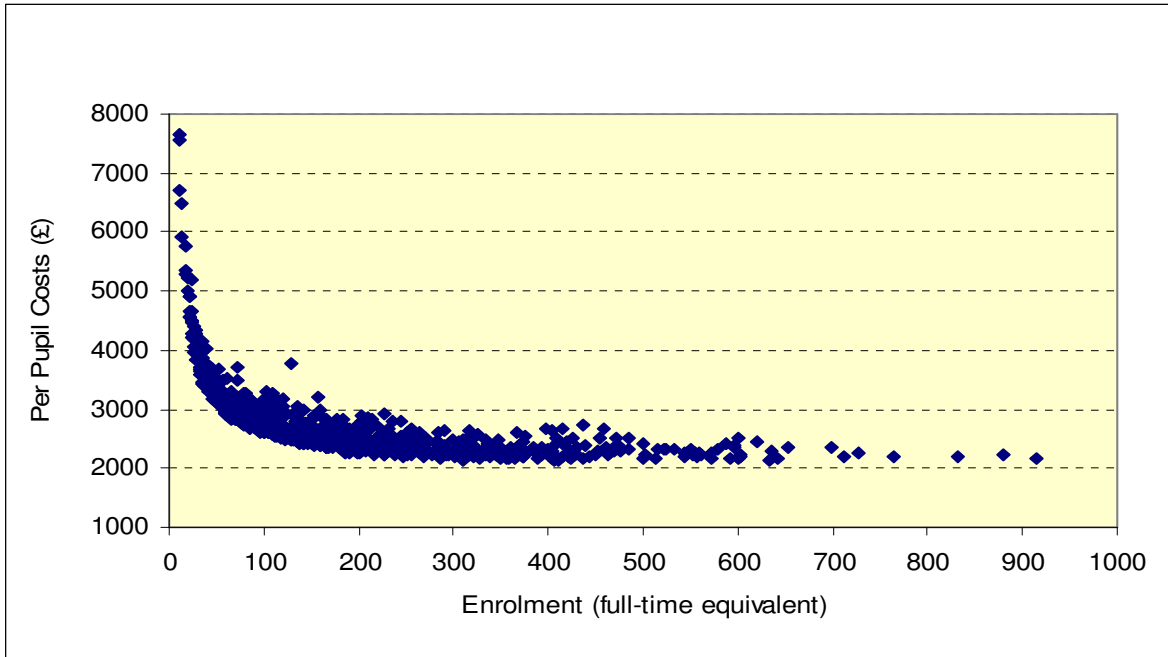


Figure 5.1: Primary School per Pupil Funding Allocations, 2007/08

Source: Common Funding 2007/08 (excludes two schools with exceptional £11,000+ per capita levels)

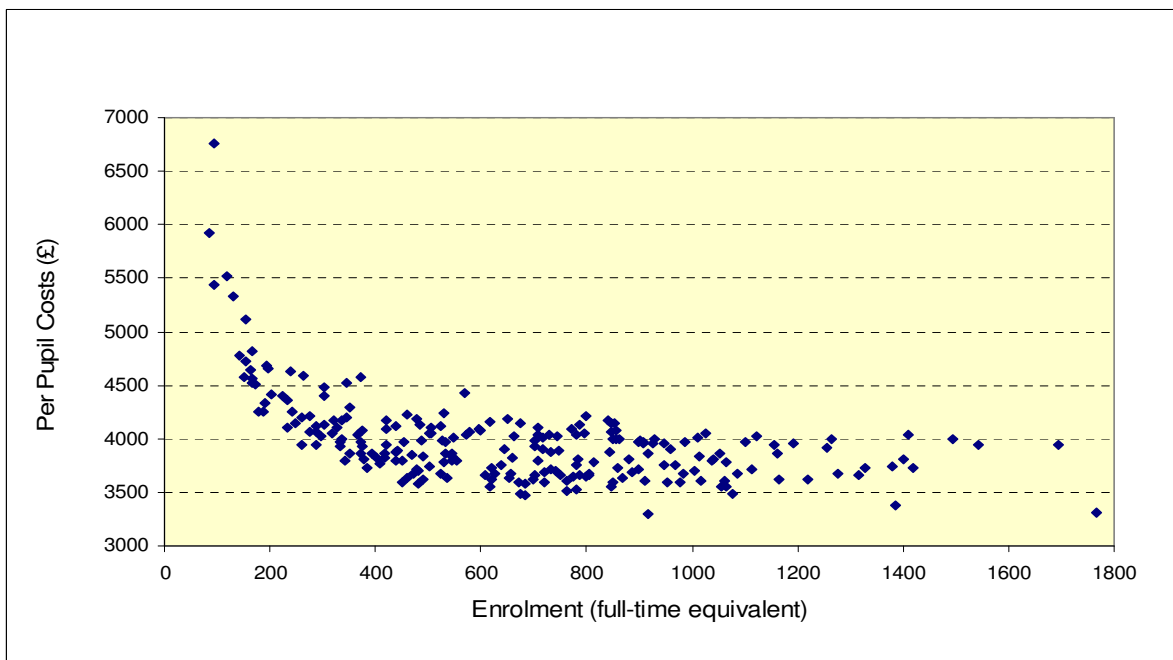


Figure 5.2: Post-primary School per Pupil Funding Allocations, 2007/08

Source: Common Funding 2007/08

- 5.8 The costs associated with providing additional support to smaller schools or schools which are considered non-sustainable inevitably means that there is less funding available to distribute across all schools.
- 5.9 When it comes to school budget management, some small schools find it difficult to live within budget. The current school funding arrangements provide the flexibility for schools to have short-term surpluses or deficits but over time there is a requirement that the budgets remain broadly in balance, so that pupils are benefiting fully from the allocations made to the schools without having a detrimental impact on the resources available for the wider education sector.

6 SUSTAINABILITY CRITERIA AND INDICATORS

6.1 The characteristics of a sustainable school are widely recognised and have been promoted in Government policy and guidance and highlighted by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). They are also covered in the Bain Report. There are a number of quantitative and qualitative criteria and indicators linked to consideration of the longer-term viability of a school which are summarised under six headings. These are:-

- A. **Quality Educational Experience** - Are there indications that the school will not be able to provide a broad and balanced educational experience for the pupils and sustain and realise high standards of educational attainment? Pupils should be able to have a full set of option choices and pursue their chosen subjects to the highest level. The indicators here also recognise the needs of teachers.
- B. **Stable Enrolment Trends** - Is the enrolment stable or decreasing year on year, increasing surplus capacity and financial difficulties? In a situation of declining enrolments across many areas, it is a challenge for schools to sustain their intake levels. Sustainability considers whether the annual changes should raise concerns for the longer term.
- C. **Sound Financial Position** - Is the school expected to sustain financial viability or will it have an ongoing budget deficit?
- D. **Strong Leadership and Management by Boards of Governors and Principals** - Is there evidence of strong leadership and effective management in the school? Absence of effective leadership and management can affect morale and motivation, and contribute to inconsistent standards of attainment and lead to a lack of direction and accountability. Ineffective teaching can reduce learning opportunities and lead to poor academic achievement. It can lead to pupils' disaffection and pupils' poor attendance and behaviour which can in

turn disrupt teaching and divert teaching resources, add to the administration burden, and reduce staff motivation.

E. **Accessibility** - Is the distance to school and the travel time for pupils reasonable? In the absence of a suitable alternative school in the local area should the school be retained? Are there suitable transport arrangements between local schools? The Bain Report recommended that maximum travel distances and times for all pupils should be established to inform siting of new schools. This would need to take account of both the ages of pupils and the needs of the area.

F. **Strong links with the Community** - Are the links and relationships with parents and the local community strong? Where poor relationships exist, the standing of the school within the community can be affected adversely and subsequently generate negative attitudes towards the school and the value that the community places on education. This must also be viewed in the context of overall provision of places in the local area.

6.2 These form the set of quantitative and qualitative criteria which, together with the associated indicators set out separately in Annex A below, provide a framework for assessing the range of factors which may affect a school's sustainability. Some indicators will be more important than others to the criteria but all those considered relevant are shown.

6.3 It is important to stress that the intention is not to have a mechanistic application of the criteria and indicators, but to provide a view of how effectively a school is functioning and of the range of factors affecting its performance. As such, the criteria cover both structural factors which cannot easily be addressed, such as enrolment levels and accessibility, and operational issues, such as quality of education and quality of leadership. It is clear that the criteria are inter-related and there is expected to be a significant correlation across sustainability factors, e.g. poor educational performance may lead to reduced school intake numbers, causing financial pressures,

which may lead to staff demotivation leading to a spiral of increasing problems. Similarly, poor leadership may lead to local parents' reluctance to send their children to the school, again leading to reduced intakes. It may also manifest itself in a failure to establish and maintain positive attitudes to learning amongst pupils and a resulting fall in educational performance. In such circumstances, unless the schools recover their positions and become sustainable, the quality of education to their pupils will suffer and they will face further decline and eventual rationalisation.

- 6.4 Schools must be considered on a case by case basis taking into account the levels of social disadvantage, how the school compares to schools of similar characteristics, and any particular circumstances pertaining, e.g. a school may serve an isolated population of one community. There are neither formulae nor weightings attached to the criteria and indicators. The importance of the various factors may vary from case to case, e.g. accessibility is likely to assume a much greater importance for an isolated rural school than for an urban school. It is entirely reasonable, indeed necessary, that the common goal of a high quality education for all children should not imply a strictly uniform application of the criteria regardless of circumstances. This underlines the need for transparency in terms of clarity on the reasons for decisions about a school's future.
- 6.5 The sustainability criteria and indicators do not determine whether a school should automatically be considered for closure or amalgamation. They are intended rather to provide an indication of whether action may be required to address an emerging trend. Given that enrolments may fall sharply over a relatively short period, trends over the past three years will provide an early indication that action may be needed. In considering long-term viability, all available information will be used to project future enrolments. Where a small school with enrolments under the threshold is required it will not normally be subject to further review on the basis of the enrolment level unless this continues to fall. Enrolment is only one of the sustainability criteria and other considerations may also apply depending on individual circumstances. Not all schools which record a negative assessment against a criterion may have a

cause for concern since there may be reasons of a temporary nature. However, the key issue must be to avoid a protracted period of decline due to financial, educational or other factors.

- 6.6 The Bain Report commented that we have too many schools but that the key issue for the question of sustainability must be the quality of the education provided. Economic reasons should not be the only consideration determining whether a school should close or stay open. Where it is decided to maintain a small school support should be made available if required to ensure that the school is educationally sustainable.

Equality Considerations

- 6.7 The Department is required under Section 75 of the NI Act 1998 to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity:

- Between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
- Between men and women generally; and
- Between persons with a disability and persons without; and between persons with dependents and persons without.

This policy was subject to equality screening and was found to have no adverse impact on any groups, and therefore a full equality impact assessment was not required.

- 6.8 At the heart of this policy is the aim of providing all children with a quality education, with access to the full curriculum in fit for purpose facilities. This is irrespective of the sector within which they are educated, and in the context of falling rolls at primary and post-primary level across many areas. Children in schools which may no longer be viable are unlikely to have access to the same quality and range of provision as those in other schools.

- 6.9 Without prejudice to the obligations set out in paragraph 6.7 above, the Department is also required to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.
- 6.10 The criteria and indicators are to assist education authorities and schools themselves in evaluating sustainability on a consistent basis, allowing for individual circumstances where appropriate. It is not intended to be an automatic approach for taking action to rationalise schools where criteria suggest there may be a difficulty. The application of the criteria may indicate that the future of a school should be reviewed and, in undertaking the review, there is an opportunity to examine the potential options for sharing across sectors, which could also deliver quality educational provision and improved community relations. The Department will examine future school proposals to ensure they deliver a more inclusive approach (see paragraph 2.4 above). Extended Schools will facilitate positive engagement with families, sharing facilities with local community groups. It will help to establish close links with statutory and voluntary agencies, highlighting the school's pivotal role in terms of its contribution to personal and community development.
- 6.11 Teachers will also benefit from sustainable schools in terms of teaching and professional development, and the avoidance of undue pressures which can often arise in schools which are not educationally and financially viable. It is the responsibility of the Boards of Governors and senior management to manage the demands on staff to ensure that, not only are the needs of the pupils met, but also that staff welfare is considered. To meet this obligation, a school should monitor the morale of its teaching staff on an ongoing basis. This will also be measured by the Education and Training Inspectorate as part of the pre-inspection questionnaire.

Addressing Sustainability Issues

- 6.12 Sustainability issues may be addressed through increased co-operation and working with other schools particularly where the main issue is affecting a

small school with declining rolls. The Bain Report identified various forms of association that can provide the opportunities for schools, primary or post-primary, to agree collaborative arrangements on a range of curricular and other issues to achieve efficiencies and to secure improvements in the quality of education provided. This may also include sharing expertise to support pupils with Special Educational Needs. Collaboration and sharing may help sustain provision in an area without a diminution of a school's ethos. Indeed, such sharing could provide an enhanced learning experience. The Bain Report explores practical models including co-location, federation, confederation, extended schools, and a shared campus and considers the potential benefits. The Report suggested a number of questions, neither exhaustive nor necessarily applicable in all circumstances, which may be used to help assess arrangements for collaboration and sharing. Do the arrangements:

- Help to maintain local provision?
- Provide the pupils with access to a wider range of educational opportunity?
- Allow the pupils to have good learning experiences and to achieve high standards?
- Enable human and material resources to be used more effectively and efficiently?
- Support those pupils with Special Educational Needs and other barriers to learning?
- Support the pastoral care arrangements for pupils
- Reduce capital costs, recurrent costs or both?
- Entail additional costs, and are these justified by the benefits?
- Address the issue of over provision?
- Result in feasible solutions in which the benefits outweigh the costs, in terms of, for example, timetabling and travel?
- Involve significant, purposeful and regular engagement and interaction in learning by pupils, and teachers, from the partnership schools?
- Involve both intra-sector and cross-sector sharing and collaboration?

- Have the confidence and support of Governors and parents?

6.13 The following paragraphs cover the main forms of working together to address the need for sustainable schools, including amalgamation and various forms of clustering and cooperation, and which are consistent with the Bain Report:

Amalgamation - a new school is formed to replace two or more schools of similar size coming together and usually means a new name, uniform etc. (This differs from a closure where a small school closes and pupils are able to transfer to available larger schools);

Confederation – where schools of the same or different management types work in partnership, exchanging teachers, pupils or both, but with each retaining its own principal and Board of Governors. Schools may share specialist facilities and/or administrative staff;

Federation - involving small schools combining to form a single school with one principal and one Board of Governors but operating on two or more sites;

Co-location – where the proximity of schools facilitates collaboration although each retains its particular ethos and identity. Collaboration may be cross phase (primary and post-primary) or across sectors; and

Shared Campus – where schools retain autonomy but share infrastructure.

This list is not exhaustive and schools may enter into individual agreements on specific areas or sharing facilities to work together for the general good of their pupils.

6.14 Amalgamations may provide an effective means of addressing the educational and financial sustainability issues facing smaller schools. Access to enhanced premises and facilities, better spread of teacher expertise, and a greater opportunity for teachers to interact with their colleagues and pupils with their peers, can create the potential to provide enriched educational

experiences for the children and stimulate higher standards of achievement. The greater inherent stability in a larger school promotes teachers' confidence and security.

- 6.15 While the educational needs of the immediate area must be a prime objective, there may also be financial implications for the whole school system. As well as savings, these options may involve additional cost, particularly at the outset. In each case, a thorough assessment of the available options for addressing sustainability should be carried out with all relevant costs and benefits examined before a decision is reached. The appraisal process must comply with the standards set out in the Practical Guide to the Green Book published by the Department of Finance and Personnel. This requires that the principles of economic appraisal should be applied, with appropriate and proportionate effort to all decisions and proposals for spending or saving public money, including European Union funds and any other decisions or proposals that involve changes in the use of public resources. The Practical Guide also requires that proportionate post-project evaluations be carried out in order that the achievement of benefits can be demonstrated and that lessons are learned which can add to the effectiveness of future decision making.
- 6.16 In rural areas where it is practical and possible to replace small schools with better facilities, this can be a key factor in retaining rural populations and encouraging rural development. At the core of the issue of sustainability, is the need to find the most effective way of providing significantly improved educational opportunities for children within the context of their local and wider community. Amalgamation can provide a positive outcome for rural communities. Effective communication and collaboration, together with good leadership and management are central to achieving a positive outcome from a situation where amalgamation is determined to be the best option.
- 6.17 A successful rationalisation should not give rise to undue travel difficulties for pupils. In rural areas, it is also essential that the school can provide an effective and significant focus for the community which it serves. Transport

implications are a significant factor in calculating the projected financial benefits of any proposed reorganisation in rural areas and the current arrangements already provide for transport assistance to the nearest suitable school, if there is no such school (or no place available at such a school) within statutory walking distance. This does not mean that the local schools should remain open whatever the number of pupils on the roll. However, it recognises that there may be relevant reasons to retain a particular small school when it may not be justified in other parts of the country.

6.18 Clustering and co-operation with neighbouring schools can help to overcome the relative isolation that small schools and their teachers face. Clustering can take a wide variety of forms distinguished by the degree of collaboration:-

- informal and purposeful exchanges between teachers and principals in neighbouring schools;
- principals meeting to discuss management and organisational issues;
- joint planning and teaching of the curriculum;
- discussing and sharing effective practice; and
- use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to share resources and enrich learning experiences.

6.19 Such arrangements may not however overcome real difficulties faced by small schools. Nor are they an alternative to reaching difficult decisions on rationalisation. Any form of collaboration will require considerable preparation and commitment on the part of all concerned, to keep learners' interests to the fore.

6.20 The paragraphs above have identified forms of working together. There may also be other forms worth examining as outlined in the Bain Report, depending on circumstances in an area. Given surplus capacity and falling rolls, it is important that opportunities for sharing both across and within sectors are fully considered and evaluated, to improve current educational

standards, to make better use of existing resources, and to serve even better the needs of all young people and those who teach them.

7 Roles and Responsibilities

- 7.1 Responsibility for monitoring, evaluating and amending the policy on Sustainable Schools rests with the Department.
- 7.2 The application of the policy to a particular school may be defined simply in terms of three steps, viz. request the review, conduct the review, and implement the outcome. Given the variation in management arrangements, roles and responsibilities for these steps need to be considered for each of the different management types.
- 7.3 Once established, the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) will initiate and conduct reviews for all schools, regardless of management type. Either the Department or the Board of Governors may also request ESA to review a school. The most recent ETI report on a school will take due cognisance of the indicators. If this is not sufficiently recent, ESA may request an ETI inspection. ESA will utilise data from the Annual School Census, together with data held within ESA and from whatever other sources are considered necessary to assess the school's viability against the criteria set out above. These will include DE, NISRA and the school's administrative systems. ESA will also wish to consider input from the Board of Governors, the Principal and teachers, and the local community. Where a school is to be retained, ESA will ensure that adequate support and resources are made available to ensure that it provides a high quality education for its pupils.
- 7.4 Prior to the establishment of ESA, roles and responsibilities will vary across management types. For Controlled schools, Education & Library Boards will initiate and conduct reviews and for Catholic Maintained schools, CCMS will fulfil this role. For both of these management types, either the Department or Board of Governors may also request that a school be reviewed. As an interim measure until ESA is operational, the Department will conduct reviews deemed required for Grant Maintained Integrated, Irish-medium, and Voluntary Grammar schools. Where the Department conducts a review, the

team conducting the review will have no role in advising the Minister on the review's recommendations.

- 7.5 Where a school is to be retained, the Department will ensure that adequate support and resources are made available to ensure that it provides a high quality education for its pupils. If the recommendation is for closure, the body conducting the review will produce a Development Proposal (published by the Education & Library Board) upon which the Minister will make the final decision.

8 CONCLUSIONS

- 8.1 Over 1250 schools representing a variety of sectors have developed over the years, but there has been a lack of a consistent planning framework. While there are many excellent schools, there are also schools, at both primary and post-primary levels, which are experiencing difficulties. The good quality teaching provided can often be at a professional cost to the teachers. Too many small schools within the system can also result in a drain on the overall education budget, leaving too little resource across the system.
- 8.2 This document sets out six criteria for helping to assess the important issue of the viability of schools. They cover the educational experience of children, enrolment trends, financial position, school leadership and management, accessibility, and strength of links to the community. These were also identified in the Bain Report. Each of the criteria brings together a number of relevant quantitative and qualitative indicators.
- 8.3 The consideration of sustainability criteria and indicators does not mean that where problems are identified, closure or amalgamation needs to be pursued. However, difficulties with one or more factors should draw attention to the need for a more detailed review and evaluation. Otherwise, a school may gradually decline over a period of years at the expense of children's education. It is important therefore, that the criteria are monitored closely. It is also recognised that local circumstances need to be considered in determining what action may be appropriate e.g. the remoteness of the area may be important. When considering options such as potential amalgamation or closure options, educational, economic and community issues will need to inform decision-making. There will therefore need to continue to be a case by case evaluation of the circumstances, to ensure that the children have access to the best educational experiences possible and attain the highest possible standards.

Annex A Criteria and Indicators

Criterion	Indicator
A Quality Educational Experience	<p>1.1 Attainment levels of pupils¹², Key Stage tests pending development of new indicators for Primary Schools, GCSE results for Post-Primary Schools.</p> <p>1.2 No more than <u>two</u> composite year groups in a single classroom at primary school level.</p> <p>1.3 A <u>minimum</u> of four teachers¹³ at a primary school. This recognises both the needs of pupils and the demands on teachers.</p> <p>1.4 The ability of the school to cater for children with Special Educational Needs.</p> <p>1.5 The ability at post-primary level to be able to provide suitable access to the entitlement framework including, where appropriate, linkages with other schools, the FE sector or other providers.</p> <p>1.6 The standards and the quality of learning and teaching at the school.</p> <p>1.7 The range of curricular and extra-curricular activities available for children including career guidance, physical education, music, art, drama and science.</p> <p>1.8 The quality of the <u>physical</u> environment for learning and teaching i.e. the condition, energy and water efficiency and suitability of the buildings.</p> <p>1.9 The quality of, and arrangements for, pastoral care including the active promotion of the principles of social justice in all areas of the formal and informal curriculum.</p>

¹² Given the importance of factors such as the background of the children, the socio-economic conditions in the community and levels of parental support in pupils' attainment levels, the Department is working towards a contextualised 'value-added' approach.

¹³ Where a small school is retained the teaching principal post will remain.

Criterion	Indicator
B Stable Enrolment Trends	<p>2.1 The enrolment trends in the school in the past three years and projected demand in the area.</p> <p>Primary:¹⁴</p> <p>2.2 Ideally a primary school should have at least seven classrooms (one for each year group). The minimum (not optimal) enrolment for newly established schools or existing schools should be 140 in urban areas and 105 in rural areas.</p> <p>Post-Primary:¹⁵</p> <p>2.3 The minimum (not optimal) enrolment for newly established schools or existing schools should be 500 pupils for an 11-16 school, i.e. an annual average intake of 100 per year.</p> <p>2.4 The sixth form should be self-sufficient financially and have a minimum of 100 pupils.</p> <p>2.5 Key Stage 4 and sixth form enrolments should enable pupils to spend 80% or more of their time in their home school.</p>
C Sound Financial Position	<p>3.1 The school's annual finances indicate that it can live within its delegated budget.</p> <p>3.2 The school's financial trends indicate that it will continue to be able to live within its annually delegated budget.</p> <p>3.3 The school's three year financial plans, based upon realistic assumptions, indicate that where there is a deficit this can be substantially reduced or recovered.</p>

¹⁴ Initial minimum thresholds for new primary schools to start up are given at paragraphs 4.7 and 4.8.

¹⁵ Initial minimum thresholds for new post-primary schools to start up are given at paragraph 4.14.

Criterion	Indicator
D Strong Leadership and Management by Boards of Governors and Principals	4.1 Governors' views on the school based on quantitative and qualitative evidence. 4.2 Composition of Board of Governors – skills and experience of Board members and number of vacancies. 4.3 Management of staff attendance and absenteeism. 4.4 Levels and nature of staff turnover and unfilled staff vacancies. 4.5 Teacher morale. 4.6 Management of curricular and organisational demands on the principal and staff. 4.7 Ensuring that the resource allocated is available so that the principal has at least 1 day per week to attend to leadership and management duties. 4.8 There is a school development plan in place and progress is being made to achieve the plan's aims and objectives. 4.9 Pupil behaviour, expulsions, suspensions and non-attendance as well as positive behaviours such as involvement in school management (e.g. buddying and mentoring schemes).
E Accessibility^{16 17}	5.1 Home to school transport travel times of less than 30 minutes for primary pupils (ie 1 hour per day in total) and 45 minutes for post-primary pupils (ie 1.5 hours per day in total). 5.2 ¹⁸ Distance to another suitable ¹⁹ primary school. 5.3 Existing co-operative arrangements with other schools and further education colleges/ training organisations - max travel time 30 minutes for a single journey and total of 2 hours per week. 5.4 Capacity in nearest schools.

¹⁶ It should be noted however that the distances and times stated are guidance. It is not possible to be absolutely prescriptive.

¹⁷ Free transport is provided where there are no places at suitable schools within defined distances.

¹⁸ Indicator 5.2 only refers to primary schools as parents often choose to send their child further afield for post-primary provision.

¹⁹ A suitable primary school is one belonging to one of the recognized categories of school, namely: Controlled, Integrated, Irish-medium, and Maintained.

Criterion	Indicator
F Strong links with the Community	<p>6.1 Degree and quality of parental involvement (schools will be asked to provide evidence on this).</p> <p>6.2 Number of children in the vicinity attending (and not attending) the school.</p> <p>6.3 Contribution of the school to the community (schools will be asked to provide evidence on this).</p> <p>6.4 Presence of other features of provision, e.g. nursery or specialist unit.</p> <p>6.5 Multi-functional use of buildings outside formal education, for example, for sport, voluntary and community use.</p>

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