



## Belfast City Council

<b>Report to:</b>	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
<b>Subject:</b>	<b>SCHOOLS OF THE FUTURE – A POLICY FOR SUSTAINABLE SCHOOLS</b>
<b>Date:</b>	Friday 6 <sup>th</sup> February 2009
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<b>1.0</b>	<b><u>Relevant Background Information</u></b>
1.1	On the 12 <sup>th</sup> January 2009, the Education Minister Caitriona Ruane announced the publication of “Schools of the Future – A Policy for Sustainable Schools” (copy attached at <b>Appendix 1</b> ) 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"> <li>• Vision for Education (<i>refer to pages 4 – 5</i>)</li> <li>• Baseline profile of the current position in regards to school enrolments within Northern Ireland (<i>refer to page 7</i>)</li> <li>• 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, intergrated and Irish-medium schools (<i>refer to pages 11-17</i>)</li> <li>• The educational, financial and other factors affecting sustainability including, for example, enrolment trends and costs per pupil (<i>refer to pages 22-27</i>)</li> <li>• Sustainability criteria and indicators (<i>refer to pages 34-37</i>)</li> <li>• Approaches to address sustainability issues including, for example, amalgamation; confederation, federation, co-location and shared campus (<i>refer to pages 38-40</i>)</li> </ul>
<b>2.0</b>	<b><u>Key Issues</u></b>
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"> <li>1) the educational experience of children</li> <li>2) enrolment trends</li> <li>3) financial position</li> <li>4) school leadership and management</li> <li>5) accessibility</li> <li>6) strength of links with the community.</li> </ol>
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 educaational 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

<b>Appendix 1</b>	Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools
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