



Northern Ireland Audit Office

MEDIA RELEASE

The Sustainability of Schools

Mr. Kieran Donnelly, the Comptroller and Auditor General, today published his report on the sustainability of schools in Northern Ireland. This report evaluates the progress made by the Department of Education in delivering sustainable schools since the Bain Review (December 2006)¹. Bain concluded that because of falling pupil numbers and the many school sectors here, there were too many schools and some would become educationally unsustainable. In order to address this problem the Department introduced the Sustainable Schools Policy (January 2009) and Area Planning (September 2011) to develop a network of viable and sustainable schools.

Mr. Donnelly said *‘There has been overall improvement in schools performance, and school enrolments and the number of schools have reduced since 2006. There are 71,000 surplus school places (20 per cent of capacity), a reduction of 12,000 since 2009. However, this is still double the 10 per cent recommended in the Bain Review.’*

Main Findings

- Assessing the wider delivery of the Sustainable Schools Policy has been hampered because of difficulties with the quality of management information
- There have been improvements in schools performance, but there are still significant problems with underachievement and the quality of leadership and management is not good enough in a significant minority of post-primary schools.
- The Department’s approach to area planning could have been better. Not all stakeholders were clear on their role and responsibilities, guidance was limited and there was a lack of clarity on the measurement of the criteria for sustainable schools. The Department has not set output focussed targets and there is no communication strategy.
- The Department has not estimated the financial costs of surplus school places.

¹ Schools for the Future: Funding, Strategy, Sharing: Report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education, (Professor George Bain), (December 2006)

THIS STATEMENT IS ISSUED ON THE STRICT UNDERSTANDING THAT IT IS NOT FOR PUBLICATION OR BROADCAST BEFORE 00.01 hrs ON Tuesday 30 June 2015

- Around £36 million (just over 3%) of 2014/15 school budgets are allocated to schools because they are small
- Overall there has been some progress in implementing the sustainable schools policy through area planning. By 2015 schools' approved enrolments had reduced by 24,000 since 2006 (a 6 per cent decrease) and the school estate had been reduced by 89 schools (an 8 per cent decrease).
- There were 71,000 surplus school places (20 per cent of capacity), a reduction of 12,000 (14 per cent) since 2009. However, this is still double the 10 per cent recommended in the Bain Review. Almost three quarters of the surplus places are in the primary schools and over a third of these had less than the Bain recommended minimum number of pupils.
- We acknowledge that delivering sustainable schools is difficult due to the following factors:
 - education is delivered by a number of sectors: controlled; catholic maintained; voluntary grammar; Irish-medium and integrated.
 - with the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) not being established ², Area Planning was implemented in a more fragmented way than envisaged in the Bain Review
 - Area Planning is a highly contested space and local communities have close attachments to schools. This has led to some litigation and scrutiny by the courts
 - the open enrolment policy – where parents can apply to have their children enrolled in schools outside their area – makes it very difficult to predict demand for places in schools

Notes for Editors

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). He, and the NIAO, are totally independent of Government. He certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. He has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. His reports are published as Assembly papers.
2. This report is available on the Audit Office website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk. The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on Tuesday 30 June 2015.
3. Background briefing can be obtained from the Audit Office by contacting Eddie Bradley (028 9025 1011) or Alan Orme (028 9025 1136).

² The Education and Skills Authority (ESA) was proposed in 2007 and was to be the single authority for the administration of education, subsuming the functions, assets and liabilities of the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs), the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Staff Commission and the Youth Council. However, in 2014, because of political disagreement, the Northern Ireland Assembly decided against the implementation of ESA