



Northern Ireland Audit Office

MEDIA RELEASE

Closing the Gap – social deprivation and links to educational attainment

Over £900 million of funding has not made any demonstrable difference in narrowing the educational attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent counterparts. This is among the conclusions of a report published today (5 May 2021) by Northern Ireland's Comptroller and Auditor General, Mr Kieran Donnelly CB.

Mr Donnelly's report, 'Closing the Gap – social deprivation and links to educational attainment', focuses on two Department of Education interventions, Targeting Social Need (TSN) and Sure Start. Collectively, the two interventions accounted for £102 million of annual funding to schools in 2019-20 (and 74 per cent of the Department's £138 million of annual funding targeting children from socially deprived backgrounds).

The report finds that, despite providing £913 million of TSN funding to schools since April 2005, the Department does not have any data to clearly demonstrate if this funding has improved the performance of pupils with Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME)¹. Although the educational attainment of all school leavers is improving, progress to close the attainment gap between FSME and non-FSME pupils has been slow. The gap in achievement of at least five GCSEs including English and Maths has not changed significantly in the last 15 years, with the long-term trend being a gap of approximately 30 percentage points.

There is no requirement for schools to spend TSN funding solely on supporting pupils from socially deprived backgrounds. Today's report found that the Department has not collated information on the use and impact of TSN funds. A new TSN Planner, designed to capture such information, has had very low uptake, with only six per cent of schools providing a return for the 2018-19 academic year. The Department advised that uptake was impacted by the timing of the introduction of the Targeting Social Need Planner during teachers' action short of strike.

Mr Donnelly commented:

"I understand that improving educational attainment is more than a matter of providing funding and that a broad range of factors contribute, including school leadership, classroom teaching, and parental and community involvement. However, for over 15 years, targeted funding totalling hundreds of millions of pounds has been provided to support disadvantaged pupils and close the attainment gap. It is simply unacceptable that the Department does not have adequate information to establish how these funds have been targeted by schools, or the effectiveness of the interventions used."

"The improved performance of all school leavers is to be welcomed. However, there is clearly still work to be done to address educational attainment inequalities, and these are likely to have been exacerbated by the disruption to schools as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The issues raised in my report must be addressed urgently in order to maximise outcomes for pupils, and value for money for taxpayers."

¹ The Department of Education uses FSME and Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures (NIMDM) as measures of social deprivation.

**THIS STATEMENT IS ISSUED ON THE STRICT UNDERSTANDING THAT IT IS NOT FOR PUBLICATION
OR BROADCAST BEFORE 00.01 hrs ON WEDNESDAY 5 MAY 2021**

Other findings noted in the report were as follows:

- In 2018-19, 50 per cent of FSME schools leavers achieved at least five GCSEs including English and Maths, against a Departmental target of 60 percent for these pupils. In the same year, 79 percent of non-FSME school leavers achieved at least five GCSEs including English and Maths.
- There has been a persistent performance gap between FSME and non-FSME pupils in Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 in Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT.
- Provision of Key Stage assessment data is a statutory requirement. However, due to the industrial action by teachers which ended on 28 April 2020, only 14 per cent of Primary schools and 15 per cent of Post-primary schools provided assessment data for the 2018-19 academic year.
- An Expert Panel to examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background was identified as a priority of the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. The Panel provided an interim report in April 2021 and is due to submit its final report and action plan to the Education Minister by the end of May 2021.

ENDS

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. The report is available on the Audit Office website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk. The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on Wednesday 5 May 2021.
3. Background briefing can be obtained from the Audit Office by contacting Patrick Barr (028 9025 1063) or Andrew Allen (028 9025 1019).