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.
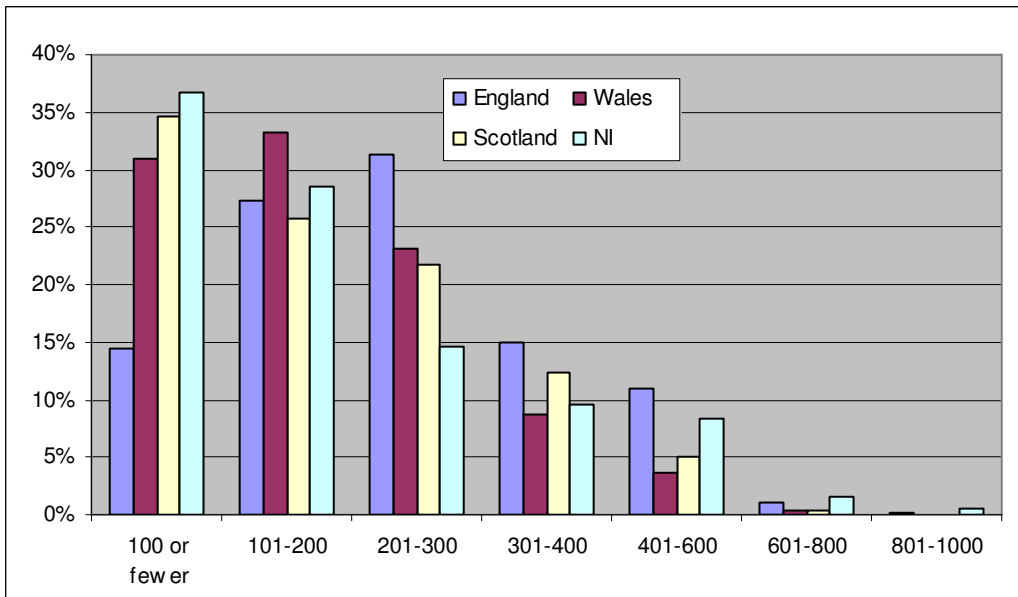
Figure 1.1: Percentage of Primary Schools by Enrolment Band, 2006/07[1]
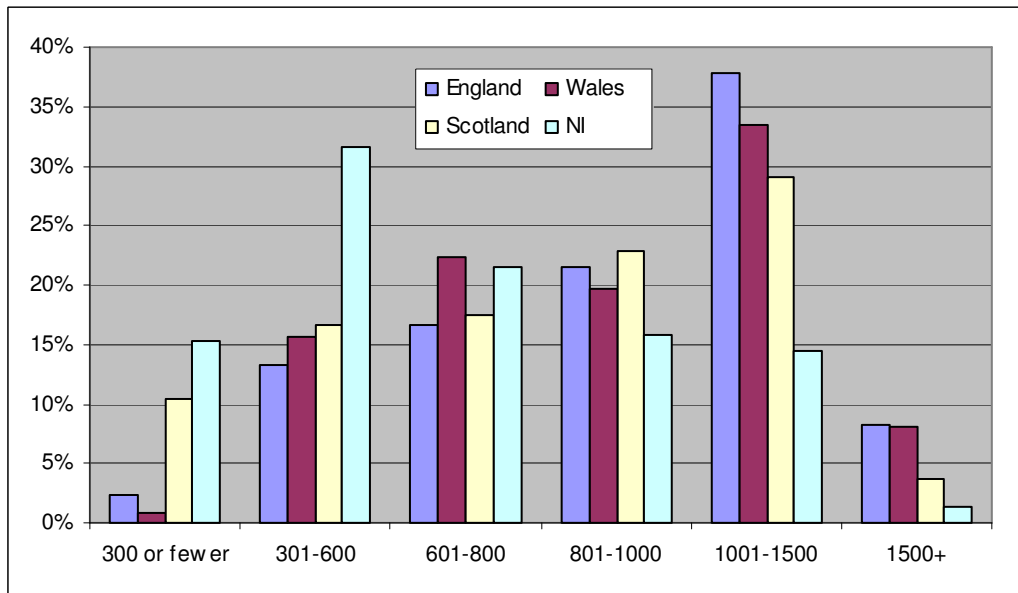
Figure 1.2: Percentage of Post-primary Schools by Enrolment Band, 2006/07[2]

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

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[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 2016[3]. 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 projected[4]. 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

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[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 schools[5].

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[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 units[6] or streams[7] 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

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[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 schools[8] 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.

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[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.

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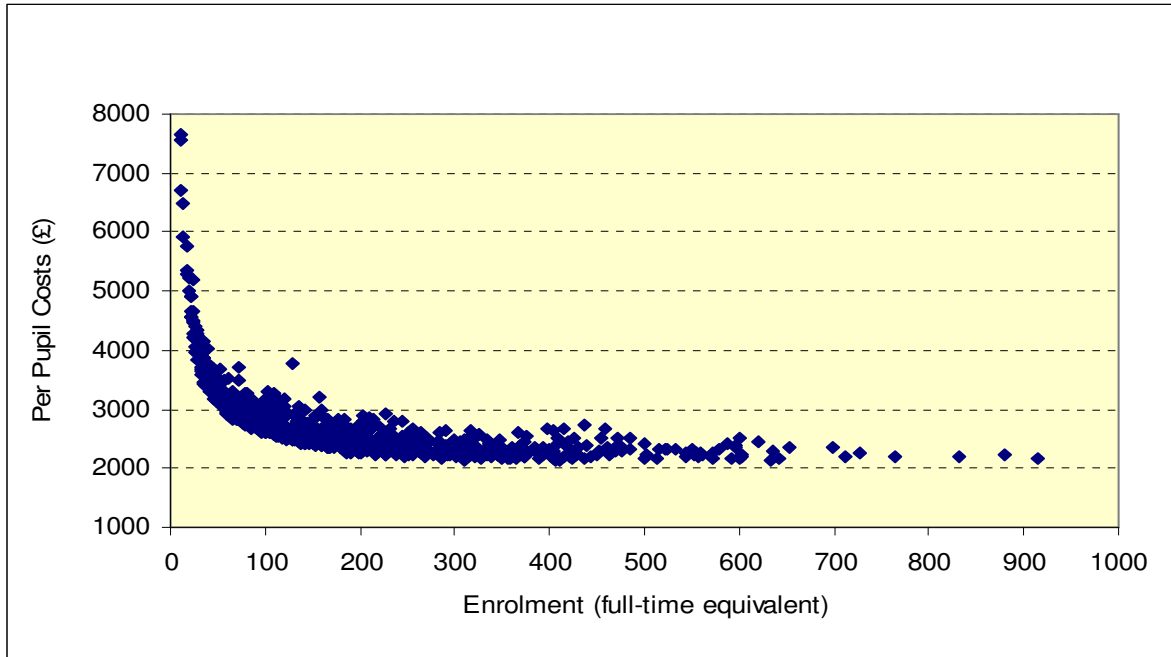
Figure 5.1: Primary School per Pupil Funding Allocations, 2007/08

Source: Common Funding 2007/08 (excludes two schools with exceptional £11,000+ per capita levels)
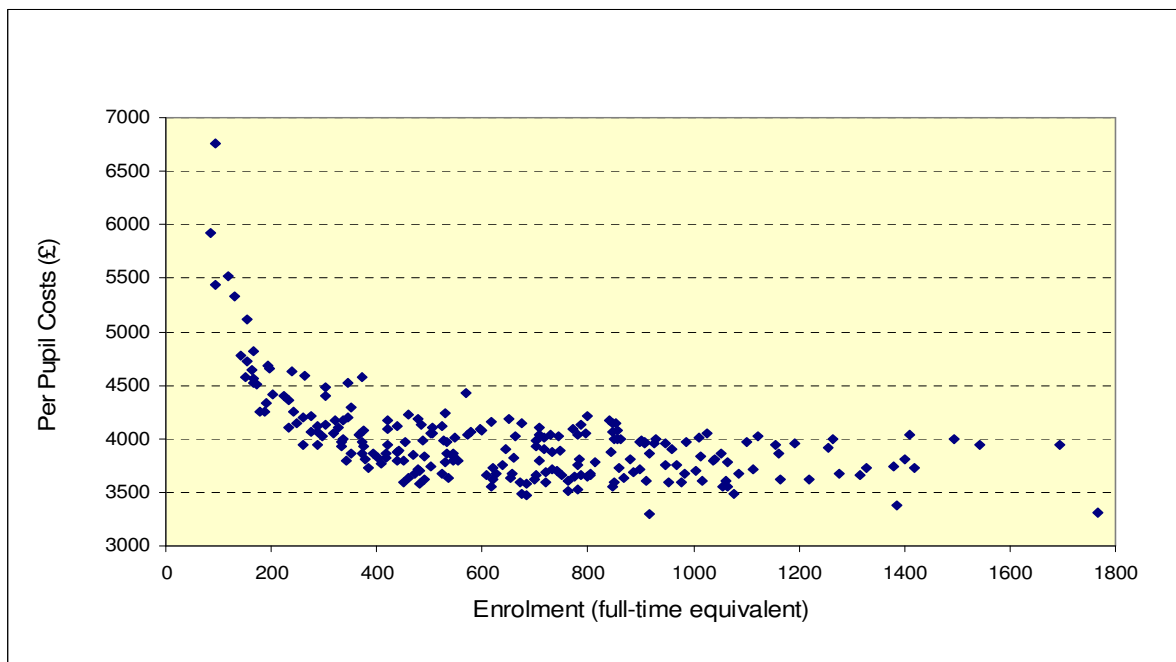
Figure 5.2: Post-primary School per Pupil Funding Allocations, 2007/08

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	1.1 Attainment levels of pupils[12], Key Stage tests pending development of new indicators for Primary Schools, GCSE results for Post-Primary Schools. 1.2 No more than <u>two</u> composite year groups in a single classroom at primary school level. 1.3 A <u>minimum</u> of four teachers[13] at a primary school. This recognises both the needs of pupils and the demands on teachers. 1.4 The ability of the school to cater for children with Special Educational Needs. 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. 1.6 The standards and the quality of learning and teaching at the school. 1.7 The range of curricular and extra-curricular activities available for children including career guidance, physical education, music, art, drama and science. 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. 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.

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[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**	2.1 The enrolment trends in the school in the past three years and projected demand in the area. **Primary:** [14] 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. **Post-Primary:** [15] 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. 2.4 The sixth form should be self-sufficient financially and have a minimum of 100 pupils. 2.5 Key Stage 4 and sixth form enrolments should enable pupils to spend 80% or more of their time in their home school.
C **Sound Financial Position**	3.1 The school's annual finances indicate that it can live within its delegated budget. 3.2 The school's financial trends indicate that it will continue to be able to live within its annually delegated budget. 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.

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[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.

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