

Submission to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Inquiry into Education Funding in Northern Ireland

14th September 2018

Summary and Recommendations

NICCY's vision for the education system is one where the education received by all children in Northern Ireland is of high quality and which develops every child's personality, talents and abilities to the full. NICCY wants to see inequalities in educational attainment being comprehensively addressed and all children succeeding in education and developing to their maximum potential in line with Article 29 of the UNCRC.

NICCY published its Cost of Education Report in October 2017.¹ The research examined costs associated with education and the impact of meeting these costs on the educational experience of children and young people. NICCY wishes to see all children in Northern Ireland having access to a free education and adequate financial assistance being made available where required in line with the obligations on Government under Article 28 of the UNCRC. In this report NICCY recommended that the Northern Ireland Executive, Department of Education and Education Authority should ensure that schools are adequately funded solely through public expenditure, and should not rely on parents and guardians to pay for the shortfall in the costs of their children's education.

The school population in Northern Ireland is rising and becoming increasingly diverse. In August 2017 funding per primary and nursery pupil was reduced by £56² and in March 2018 funding for pupils in all schools in Northern Ireland was again cut by £6 per pupil.³

Overall education spending per school age child in Northern Ireland is lower than any other region of the UK. The proportion of the education budget allocated specifically to preschool, primary and secondary education is higher in other regions than in Northern Ireland.⁴

¹A 'free' education? The cost of education in Northern Ireland, NICCY, October 2017.

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-41088725>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-43393375>

⁴ HM Treasury (July 2017), Public Expenditure: Statistical Analyses 2017, (London: Treasury).

Are the funds allocated to the Department of Education in the Northern Ireland Budget Act 2018 sufficient to improve educational outcomes in Northern Ireland?

NICCY is very concerned that the 2018-19 Budget is only a single year Budget, impacting on the ability to carry out vital planning in education. NICCY is also extremely concerned about insufficient funding for education and schools in Northern Ireland and the detrimental impact this is having on children and young people's access to quality education and their families. Budget Trend information supplied by the Department of Education shows there has been an alarming real term reduction of £233m (12%) in the Department's Resource Budget between 2010-11 and 2018-19.

Almost £37m of Confidence and Supply funding will be used by the Department of Education in 2018-19 to address funding pressures, reduce cuts and maintain levels of education funding across a number of key education policies. While it is welcome that policies are being sustained at present, it is extremely concerning that in terms of the Department of Education's budget, these policies and the services following from them have already effectively been cut and funding for their continuation is coming from a short term, non-recurrent and insecure funding source which could result in these policies being withdrawn with very little notice. Cuts to such services will impact on our most disadvantaged pupils.

The Department of Education continues to face significant challenges and, following on from the 2016-17 overspend, the Education Authority (EA) has again reported a £18.9m overspend in its block grant for 2017-18.⁵ The pressures creating this position remain the same, including schools' expenditure in excess of their 2017-18 allocations and the escalating costs associated with providing special educational needs (SEN) services. This issue will not be fully addressed until there is significant transformation of the education sector.

School budgets have remained flat in cash terms for a number of years, the Permanent Secretary for the Department of Education has indicated it is inevitable that increasing numbers of schools will move into deficit given the limited scope to find ways of making alternative cuts in running costs. Pressure on school budgets, increasing numbers of pupils and other issues meant the 'system is under considerable strain'.⁶

⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-43952285>

⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-45037429>

In NICCY's experience reductions in budgets will impact on many children and particularly our most vulnerable children, including those with special education needs are not enjoying equality of opportunity in education. There is a clear obligation on the Department of Education to recognize this and carry out a comprehensive equality impact assessment and introduce mitigations or alternative policies to protect vulnerable groups of children who are protected under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

In 2017-18 33.8% or 233 rural primary schools, 18.1% or 23 urban primary schools, 38.7% or 77 post primary schools and 28.2% or 46 sixth forms have enrolments below Department of Education sustainability thresholds. In total, 379 schools or 32% of all schools in Northern Ireland that are currently below the Department of Education's policy thresholds for school sustainability. There are a total of 63,063 available places in total across primary and post primary schools in Northern Ireland, equating to 17.5% of available places as a percentage of all approved school places.

The pace of change regarding Area Planning in education has been slow and the volume of published Development Proposals fell far short of expectations following the publication of the Education Authority's 2017-18 Annual Action Plan. The quality of the education received by children in schools earmarked for closure is a serious concern for NICCY.

NICCY is deeply concerned about the inadequate levels of funding for education in Northern Ireland, inefficient use of resources and delays in progressing key areas of policy, arising from a lack of Northern Ireland Executive ministerial level decision-making on many key issues. There is an urgent need for decisions to be taken with regard to public services in Northern Ireland. While the UK Government intends to introduce legislation which will empower senior public officials to make decisions 'in the public interest', in the context of ongoing democratic deficit in Northern Ireland it remains unclear how such strategic decisions will be made and how these will be independently scrutinised. This legislation should be used to enable decision making in Northern Ireland as an interim measure only. Decisions about public services in Northern Ireland should be taken forward by elected representatives and be subject to the accountability and scrutiny mechanisms in place within the Northern Ireland Assembly.

There are marked inequalities in Northern Ireland with regard to attainment in education. Specific groups of children and young people are much more likely to do better or worse in education depending on their characteristics and /or circumstances. There is a pressing need for additional investment in education to improve the educational outcomes of a huge range of groups of children who are currently under-attaining in education.

NICCY is particularly concerned about the impact of inadequate levels of funding, inefficient use of scarce or limited resources and delayed decision-making is having on children and young people's access to a safe school / learning environment which will help them fulfil their potential and deliver good education and well-being outcomes.

Recommendations

NICCY calls on members of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee to use this Inquiry as an opportunity to ensure a much needed increase in funding for education in Northern Ireland.

NICCY calls on the Committee to recommend a core investment increase in the education of children under achieving in education and to renew the Government's commitment to the provision of support to address the educational underachievement of disadvantaged pupils.

NICCY also urges the Committee to make clear recommendations about the need for the education system in Northern Ireland to be fundamentally reformed in order to ensure that it is operating at its most efficient and making best use of public money by guaranteeing all children and young people in Northern Ireland equal access to an excellent quality education in line with Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC.

The Commissioner asks the Committee to investigate the costs and inefficiencies of supporting a system which comprises multiple education sectors, at different levels of education.

The Commissioner asks the Committee to consider her Cost of Education Report⁷ recommendation that the Northern Ireland Executive, Department of Education and Education Authority should ensure that schools are adequately funded solely through public expenditure, and should not rely on parents and guardians to pay for the shortfall in the costs of their children's education.

⁷ *Op cit* 1.

How should the UK Government manage additional funding earmarked for education as part of the confidence and supply arrangement?

The financial monitoring systems attached to the management of the Confidence and Supply monies should follow the same principles and stringent rules as apply in other areas of public expenditure. The monitoring process should include gathering information about the progress, or otherwise, on delivering of key outcomes in relation to priorities supported by ear-marked Confidence and Supply monies. Final Departmental Confidence and Supply spending plans and progress reports should be publicly available to aid transparency and accountability. It will also be vitally important that there is transparency around what is funded through the Confidence and Supply money, as opposed to through the Department of Education's core budget.

Recommendations

NICCY recommends that the UK Government puts in place a robust measurement of efficiency with regard to the use of Confidence and Supply monies to ensure that educational outcomes are measured using Outcomes Based Accountability, in line with the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government.

A comprehensive public consultation exercise should also be carried out to improve the transparency and accountability of the use of such monies, as well as the involvement of members of the public in the decision making process. Plans should be screened and equality impact assessed to ensure that equality of opportunity is at the core of key budgetary decisions.

NICCY recommends that the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee requests all Northern Ireland Government Departments, including the Department of Education, to produce Confidence and Supply specific Spending Plans. Spending Plans should set out key priorities and specific initiatives that will be supported within ring-fenced and non-ring-fenced DEL Resource and Capital Confidence and Supply allocations and for how long.

What are the areas of greatest need in the education sector in Northern Ireland?

Upon examination of the educational outcomes of children and young people in Northern Ireland with certain characteristics, is clear that for specific groups of children and young people inequalities exist in education.

Recommendations

NICCY recommends that the education of children and young people and ensuring that all children can achieve to their maximum potential must be the focus of developments and investment in education going forward. It is vital that the educational inequalities which exist in Northern Ireland are addressed without delay.

NICCY also recommends that the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee gives consideration to how best to scrutinise the use of Confidence and Supply monies within the In-Year Monitoring Rounds process as this is likely to require amendments to Department of Finance's In-Year Monitoring Guidance.

Are levels of capital funding sufficient to support investment in improvements to Northern Ireland's schools?

The Department of Education's Performance Statement in the Accounts for 2017-18 states that the budgetary environment is likely to remain as constrained as it has been in previous years.⁸

NICCY is aware that there are concerns about the levels of health and safety compliance with regard to a number of school buildings that may not be fit for purpose. A number of school principals and elected representatives have contacted NICCY regarding individual schools with issues relating to a lack of facilities on school premises, long delays in the delivery of promises of a new build, overcrowding and health and safety concerns due to old and poorly maintained school buildings. The Education Authority's consultation document on Area Planning⁹ acknowledged that there is no capital funding for the accommodation of schools and that the education budget is unable to provide the investment required.

Recommendations

NICCY recommends that the Committee use this Inquiry to make recommendations to ensure adequate capital investment in education so that the education system in Northern Ireland is fit for purpose, where children are safe, equipped to learn and

⁸ Department of Education's Annual Report and Accounts for 2017-18, August 2018.

⁹ Strategic Area Plan for School Provision 2017-2020, Education Authority, December 2016. Final document published April 2017.

develop to their maximum potential

How can funding be best deployed to ensure value for money in education spending?

The education system in Northern Ireland is unnecessarily complex. There are a range of education sectors, almost all of which are funded by the Department of Education. Each sector has at least one Government funded agency which carries out a range of different functions. These are not common functions across sectoral bodies. A number of political representatives have called for a fundamental review of education in Northern Ireland.¹⁰ NICCY concurs with this recommendation and believes that the education system in Northern Ireland is long overdue fundamental reform in order for it to be fit for purpose.

NICCY's Cost of Education Report¹¹ contains a recommendation regarding the need to fundamentally reform the education system in Northern Ireland and end duplication of spend on numerous education sectors –

The Northern Ireland Executive must ensure an end to the duplication of spend on the administration of the various education sectors in Northern Ireland. The focus of the provision of education within restricted budgets must be on ensuring that all children receive an education in line with Article 29(1) of the UNCRC and fulfil their maximum potential. Education should therefore focus on the development of the skills, talents and abilities of children as well as formal schooling.

It is clear that short term solutions will not be enough to address long term inefficiencies and problems with the composition of the education system in Northern Ireland.

Recommendations

NICCY urges the Committee to take the opportunity of this Inquiry to address some of the fundamental problems with the education system in Northern Ireland and to call for a whole system review. This review should focus, first and foremost, on meeting the needs of children and young people in education and ensuring that education funding is spent on all children in Northern Ireland succeeding to their maximum potential.

¹⁰ Chris Lyttle, Alliance Party NI, MLA call for Bengoa style review of Education – See <https://allianceparty.org/article/2018/0011889/lyttle-reiterates-call-for-bengoa-style-review-of-education>

¹¹ *Op cit* 1.

How can funding be used to support the different school sectors in Northern Ireland, including schools for children with special educational needs and disabilities?

More than 5,700 pupils are enrolled in 39 dedicated special schools and more than 1,800 are educated in learning support centres in primary and post-primary schools across 92 schools. Pupils with special educational needs (SEN) are increasingly being educated in mainstream schools. More than 79,000 pupils in schools have some form of special educational needs; this is 23.0% of the entire school population. Of this, more than 17,800, or 5.2% of pupils, have a statement of special educational needs. The number of pupils with special educational needs has been steadily rising.

The UNCRPD and UNCRPD UN 2011 Guidance, the UNCRC and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Order (SENDO) 2005 all very are clear about the need for an inclusion framework whereby children with SEN who wish to be educated in mainstream education should be. It is vital that services for children with SEN are available immediately to all children who need it and are not contingent on children receiving a statutory statement of special educational need. This is currently not the case in Northern Ireland and many children are being denied their right to access services which they need in order to uphold their right to an effective education. Many children, especially those who are not considered a priority for an educational psychology referral may wait very long times for a referral or may never be referred, thus denying them access to services which would be of immense benefit to their education.

The Education Authority overspent its budget by approximately £19m in 2017-18. The reason for this overspend is mainly due to increased spending on schools and pupils with SEN.

Recommendations

NICCY urges the Committee to recommend significantly increased investment in SEN. This is vital if we are to adequately meet the needs of the SEN population in Northern Ireland.¹²

¹² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-45037429>