

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Department of Education

A FAIR START: FINAL REPORT AND ACTION PLAN; PROGRESS REPORT

Published on 16 December 2021.

Ms McIlveen (The Minister of Education): The following statement provides a progress report to the NI Assembly in respect of “A Fair Start” Final Report and Action Plan, six months after the report was published by the Expert Panel on educational underachievement.

Responsibility for delivery of this report now rests with the NI Executive and as Minister for Education, I am delighted to report on the significant progress achieved to date, which continues to deliver on a “New Decade, New Approach” commitment and one which I am personally proud to endorse.

Within the ‘New Decade, New Approach’ agreement, there was a requirement that “The Executive will establish an expert group to examine and propose an action plan to address links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background, including the long-standing issues facing working-class, Protestant boys”.

The panel concluded its work and published its report on 1 June 2021 following full endorsement by the NI Executive on 27 May 2021.

The report includes eight key areas within which the panel recommended 47 actions for change. The Key Areas are:

- i. Redirecting the focus to Early Years.
- ii. Championing Emotional Health and Wellbeing.
- iii. Ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of Curriculum and Assessment.
- iv. Promoting a whole community approach to education.
- v. Maximising boys’ potential.
- vi. Driving forward Teachers Professional Learning.
- vii. Supporting the professional learning and wellbeing of school leadership.
- viii. Ensuring Interdepartmental collaboration and delivery.

I would like to thank my Ministerial colleagues for their commitment, collaboration and contribution to date. A Programme Board has been established, five meetings have taken place to date and meetings will continue for the moment on a monthly basis to maintain momentum on delivery across the Programme. Senior Responsible Officers have been established for each of the eight key areas identified within the report. Due to the cross-cutting design of the report, there is representation on the Programme Board from a number of Departments and Arm’s Length Bodies. This will be crucial in embedding the collaborative approach envisaged in the report.

A Stakeholder Reference Group has also been established to support the Programme Board to develop and refine the actions. This includes Teaching Union representation, schools, community groups, and youth organisations to provide a voice for children and young people.

I allocated £4m during this financial year to begin this work which I have determined is Year 0 of the programme. Year 1 will begin from April 2022.

The ‘A Fair Start’ Programme of work is wide-ranging and expansive but I believe it is important to generate early momentum across a more focused number of actions that can be impactful and demonstrate early tangible progress from early years through to youth. With this in mind, I have focused resource on the following key areas:

- Key Area 1 - Redirecting the focus to Early Years - a review of Sure Start staffing, expansion of Early Years SEN Inclusion Service and support for children with visual impairment.
- Key Area 2 - Championing Emotional Health and Wellbeing - we are bringing forward the expansion of Nurture Groups 2 years earlier than planned and Health and Social Care Trusts are delivering a range of interventions to support children looked after, children with English as an additional language and children with SEN.
- Key Area 3 - Ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of Curriculum and Assessment including the provision of digital devices to children who need them.
- Key Area 5 – Maximising Boys’ Potential – a new Horizons programme will, over a two-year period, produce well skilled, qualified and experienced youth work volunteers.

In addition to these areas of focus, activity is continuing across a range of aspects of the Action Plan and more detail on this is outlined in the attached Annex. This represents a positive package of measures that will animate the programme and generate momentum.

It will take time to put the required staffing in place and develop the necessary Business Cases however I am pleased to report the significant progress to date and that two of the forty seven actions are already being delivered in full. These are reporting by schools in respect of the use of Targeting Social Need funding and a new advertising campaign entitled “Try and Stop Me” which is about instilling hope and aspiration in our children and young people.

This report is a NI Executive priority and goes much wider and deeper than education alone. If we are serious about wanting to address the issues associated with educational underachievement, the actions within “A Fair Start” must be supported for the long term benefits of our children and young people. Educational underachievement underpins many of the wider societal challenges that the Executive is seeking to address and a collaborative approach both across departments and sectors will be critical not only to achieving the outcomes set out within the report “A Fair Start” but also to building a strong, resilient and cohesive community.

The report represents a unique opportunity in how it presents a coherent programme of work that seeks to address the range of issues underpinning educational underachievement on the continuum from before birth through to adolescence and adulthood, while focusing on formal education as well as the other influences on a child’s life.

A Communication Strategy is now in train to highlight the collaboration and cross-departmental and cross-sectoral working that is taking place to deliver the actions within the Action Plan and to help improve visibility of delivery. This is being supported by “A Fair Start” branding which will be used throughout its implementation.

I have held a number of meetings with Ministerial colleagues to discuss the value and significance of this report and the need to support its delivery by continuing to provide for the necessary funding in future years. Collaboration lies at the heart of the ‘A Fair Start’ Report and I very much welcome the partnership approach that is already being developed through the early delivery across the Programme.

I am committed to continue to work with Executive colleagues to further develop this collaboration and ensure that the report “A Fair Start” is adequately funded moving forward. The scale of the ambition outlined within the Report must be matched by the necessary resourcing to bring about the change needed for both our children and young people now and for generations to come.