



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

**Public Accounts Committee**

## **Report on Closing the Gap - Social Deprivation and Links to Educational Attainment**

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Report: NIA 169/17-22 Public Accounts Committee

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## Powers and Membership

The Public Accounts Committee is a Standing Committee established in accordance with Standing Orders under Section 60(3) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It is the statutory function of the Public Accounts Committee to consider the accounts, and reports on accounts laid before the Assembly.

The Public Accounts Committee is appointed under Assembly Standing Order No. 56 of the Standing Orders for the Northern Ireland Assembly. It has the power to send for persons, papers and records and to report from time to time. Neither the Chairperson nor Deputy Chairperson of the Committee shall be a member of the same political party as the Minister of Finance or of any junior minister appointed to the Department of Finance.

The Committee has nine members including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson and a quorum of five.

The membership of the Committee since 20 January 2020 has been as follows:

Mr William Humphrey (Chairperson)

Mr Roy Beggs (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Cathal Boylan

Ms Órlaithí Flynn

Mr William Irwin <sup>1 4</sup>

Mr David Hilditch

Mr Maolíosa McHugh

Mr Andrew Muir<sup>2</sup>

Ms Cara Hunter <sup>3 5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> With effect from 17 February 2020 Mr Harry Harvey replaced Mr Gary Middleton

<sup>2</sup> With effect from 31 March 2020 Mr Andrew Muir replaced Mr Trevor Lunn

<sup>3</sup> With effect from 19 May 2020 Mr Matthew O'Toole replaced Mr John Dallat

<sup>4</sup> With effect from 21 June 2021 Mr William Irwin replaced Mr Harry Harvey

<sup>5</sup> With effect from 18 October 2021 Ms Cara Hunter replaced Mr Matthew O'Toole

## List of Abbreviations used in the Report

The Committee	Public Accounts Committee (PAC)
C&AG	Comptroller and Auditor General
CFS	Common Funding Scheme
CFF	Common Funding Formula
CCEA	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
The Department	Department of Education
EA	Education Authority
FSME	Free School Meal Entitlement
KS	Key Stage
NI	Northern Ireland
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
NIMDM	Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PfG	Programme for Government
SDP	School Development Plan
SEN	Special Educational Needs
TSN	Targeting Social Need

## Executive Summary

1. The Department of Education (the Department) provides funding for a range of interventions targeted at children who are socially deprived or who live in a disadvantaged community, to help raise attainment in numeracy and literacy and narrow the gap in educational outcomes.
2. In 2019-20, the Department provided £138 million (6.8 per cent of its overall budget) of funding to schools and bodies in support of these aims, using Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) and the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures (NIMDM) as measures of social deprivation.
3. The Public Accounts Committee (the Committee) met on 7 October 2021 to consider the Comptroller and Auditor General's (C&AG's) report "Closing the Gap - Social Deprivation and Links to Educational Attainment".
4. The C&AG's report looked at the two main interventions, Targeting Social Need (TSN) and SureStart, which account for almost 74 per cent of the £138 million provided by the Department in 2019-20 to target children from socially deprived backgrounds. The report found that, despite providing £913 million of TSN funding since 2005, the Department does not have any data to clearly demonstrate if this funding has improved the performance of pupils with FSME. The report also found that although the educational attainment of all pupils is improving, progress to close the attainment gap between FSME and non-FSME pupils has been slow.
5. The Committee was advised that currently 60 per cent of schools have provided information on the use of TSN funds. Although this is an improvement on the 6 per cent input for the 2018-19 academic year, both the Department and the Education Authority need to do much more to ensure that the remaining 40 per cent of schools provide the required information to ensure that schools are making the best use of these funds and achieving better outcomes for pupils.

6. On 4 November 2021, the Committee heard evidence from the Expert Panel which had been set up as a priority in 'New Decade, New Approach' to examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background.
7. The Expert Panel's Final Report and Action Plan, 'A Fair Start', published in May 2021 contains 47 actions with the cost of implementing the recommendations estimated at £11 million in the first year, rising to over £73 million per annum in year five and beyond<sup>1</sup>. The Committee agrees with the Expert Panel that the Department of Education alone cannot address the issues identified and stressed that there is a need for collaboration and commitment of funding across Government Departments.
8. On 4 November 2021, members of the Committee visited the Belfast Boys' Model School to see first-hand how the school was using TSN funding and how this was having a demonstrable impact on the academic performance of pupils with FSME. The Committee was impressed with the strategies and practices implemented by the school and considers that there is scope for these to be adopted by other schools.
9. The Committee held a further evidence session on 2 December 2021 with the Department and the Education Authority (EA), providing the opportunity for the Committee to explore in greater depth the issues discussed at the previous two sessions.

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<sup>1</sup> A summary of the costs is set out on page 78 of the report – Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland, 'A Fair Start', Final Report and Action Plan, May 2021.

## Summary of Recommendations

### Recommendation 1

10. The Committee is unconvinced how the current funding mechanism will address the attainment gap (given the limited impact to date) and deliver value for money.

**The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA review how funds to target social need and address educational underachievement are provided to schools. The review should assess the current funding mechanism, how funding is used by schools to target those most in need and the impact of the funded interventions. The Committee also expects that, where appropriate, school-led flexibility is provided to allow further autonomy in the use of SEN funds.**

### Recommendation 2

11. Although the Committee had raised concerns about the use of FSME as a measure of social disadvantage in 2013, the Department is still using this measure to allocate TSN funds.

**The Committee recommends that the Department completes its review of the suitability of the Free School Meal Entitlement as the measure of social disadvantage as soon as possible to ensure that the most appropriate measure is being used and support is provided to those pupils who need it most.**

### Recommendation 3

12. Only 6 per cent of schools provided the Department with information on their use of TSN funds for the 2018-19 academic year. In addition, only 15 per cent of schools provided Key Stage (KS) data for the 2018-19 academic year.

**The Committee recommends that the Department ensures that all schools provide information on the use of TSN funding and Key Stage**

**assessment data to enable the Department to develop effective guidance and policies and allocate resources to those areas that will lead to better outcomes for pupils. This should include consideration of what action needs to be taken to ensure schools comply.**

#### **Recommendation 4**

13. Actual performance was below the targets for all KS 2 and 3 milestones set by the Department for the 2018-19 academic year. The KS 4 target for school leavers with FSME was also not achieved.

**The Committee recommends that the Department identifies what actions are required to achieve existing Key Stage targets and ensures that these actions are implemented and targets are achieved.**

#### **Recommendation 5**

14. The Department and the EA have not set a target or series of targets to address the attainment gap.

**The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA put in place a measureable, time-bound target to address the attainment gap and ensure that challenging targets to address the attainment gap are included in each school's development plan.**

#### **Recommendation 6**

15. The Department only started to collect SureStart attendance information in the 2015-16 school census. Consequently, the Department is only at the early stages of understanding how to demonstrate the long-term benefit of the SureStart programme which has been in place for over 20 years.

**The Committee recommends that the Department establishes a methodology to clearly demonstrate how SureStart and other early interventions funded by the Department contribute to closing of the attainment gap and provide value for money.**

## **Recommendation 7**

16. The Committee was left unclear about what the Department and the EA do when good practice is identified, how it is shared, communicated and implemented. It was also unclear what direct support the Department or the Education Authority provided to school leaders to help them identify and implement known best practice.

**The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA put in place appropriate mechanisms for the identification and dissemination of current educational best practice, including international best practice, and that support is provided for school leaders to implement appropriate initiatives.**

## **Recommendation 8**

17. The Committee heard of some shocking rates of school attendance in Northern Ireland and is concerned that tackling absenteeism is not seen as a priority issue.

**The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA must provide additional support to schools to improve attendance rates so as to ensure pupils from socially deprived backgrounds benefit from educational opportunities and from the funding provided to close the attainment gap.**

## **Recommendation 9**

18. There is a need to ensure that teachers and leaders with suitable skills and experience are placed in schools where pupils' need is greatest and that teaching quality is developed and maintained through appropriate interventions.

**The Committee recommends that the Department and the wider Executive ensure that there is appropriate investment in the training and development of teaching staff, especially those in socially deprived areas,**

**to address educational underachievement and the wider implications of social deprivation on pupil well-being.**

### **Recommendation 10**

19. More needs to be done to ensure that people with the right skills are recruited as School Governors to meet the particular needs and circumstances of each school.

**The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA ensure that Principals and Governors are supported and developed to be more effective in their leadership roles, especially in relation to the management of school finances and the attainment of required outcomes.**

### **Recommendation 11**

20. Considerable reliance is placed on the work of the EA's School Improvement Team regarding the scrutiny of school development plans and the work of the Education Training Inspectorate (ETI) regarding the use of TSN funds, improvement and the identification of best practice.

**The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA urgently review the current impact of the ETI and the School Improvement Team on improving educational attainment and how this impact can be maximised to contribute to closing the attainment gap. It is further recommended that the EA review the capacity and capability of its School Improvement Team and strengthen it where appropriate.**

### **Recommendation 12**

21. The Committee heard evidence from and welcomed the findings of the Expert Panel's Final Report and Action Plan, 'A Fair Start', to address links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background.

**The Committee recommends that funding is provided by the Department and wider Executive to implement the Expert Panel's recommendations in**

**full and that appropriate mechanisms are put in place to monitor and report on the efficiency and effectiveness of the funding. In addition, the Department should clearly define the future role to be played by the Expert Panel in supporting the implementation of the Action Plan to ensure it achieves the outcomes envisaged. Such a role might involve provision of assurance to the Implementation Committee that recommendations are being implemented as envisaged by the Expert Panel.**

### **Recommendation 13**

22. Collaboration across Government Departments is required to address social deprivation and educational attainment issues.

**The Committee recommends that mechanisms are established to ensure a collaborative approach is taken to address the issues identified in this report and deliver its recommendations. This activity should be led by the Department of Education and the Education Authority and should ensure appropriate joint working with schools, other NI Departments, community groups, local government and other organisations as required.**

## Introduction

23. The Public Accounts Committee (the Committee) met on 7 October 2021 to consider the Comptroller and Auditor General's (C&AG's) report "Closing the Gap - Social Deprivation and Links to Educational Attainment". The main witnesses were:

- **Dr Mark Browne**, Department of Education
- **Ms Alison Chambers**, Department of Education
- **Mrs Linda Drysdale**, Department of Education
- **Dr Suzanne Kingon**, Department of Education
- **Mr Stuart Stevenson**, Department of Finance
- **Mr Rodney Allen**, Northern Ireland Audit Office

24. The Committee met again on 4 November 2021 to hear evidence on the Report and Action Plan, A Fair Start<sup>2</sup>, produced by the Expert Panel which had been established as a priority under a 'New Decade, New Approach' to examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background. The main witnesses at this second session were:

- **Dr Noel Purdy**, Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement
- **Ms Joyce Logue**, Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement
- **Ms Mary Montgomery**, Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement
- **Ms Kathleen O'Hare**, Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement
- **Mr Jackie Redpath**, Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement
- **Mr Stuart Stevenson**, Department of Finance
- **Mr Rodney Allen**, Northern Ireland Audit Office

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<sup>2</sup> Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland, 'A Fair Start', Final Report and Action Plan, May 2021.

25. On 4 November 2021, a number of Committee members visited the Belfast Boys' Model School to see first-hand how the school was using Targeting Social Need funding.
  
26. A third evidence session, on 2 December 2021, provided an opportunity for the Committee to explore in greater depth the issues discussed at the previous two sessions, with the benefit of the attendance of the Chief Executive from the Education Authority. Issues arising from the Committee visit to Boys' Model School were also explored at this session. The main witnesses at this second session were:
  - **Dr Mark Browne**, Department of Education
  - **Ms Sara Long**, Education Authority
  - **Ms Alison Chambers**, Department of Education
  - **Mrs Linda Drysdale**, Department of Education
  - **Dr Suzanne Kingon**, Department of Education
  - **Ms Michele Corkey**, Education Authority
  - **Ms Patricia Cooney**, Education Authority
  - **Mr Stuart Stevenson**, Department of Finance
  - **Mr Kieran Donnelly CB**, Northern Ireland Audit Office

## Background

27. The Department of Education (the Department) provides funding for a range of interventions targeted at children who are socially deprived or who live in a disadvantaged community, to help raise attainment in numeracy and literacy and narrow the gap in educational outcomes.
28. In 2019-20, the Department provided £138 million (6.8 per cent of its overall budget) of funding to schools and bodies in support of these aims, using Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) and the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures (NIMDM) as measures of social deprivation.
29. In his report issued in May 2021<sup>3</sup>, the Comptroller and Auditor General focussed on two interventions, Targeting Social Need (TSN) and SureStart, which account for almost 74 per cent of the annual funding provided by the Department targeted at children who are socially deprived or who live in a disadvantaged community.
30. The C&AG found that:
  - Despite providing £913 million of TSN funding to schools since April 2005, the Department does not have any data to clearly demonstrate if this funding has improved the performance of pupils with FSME.
  - Although the educational attainment of all school leavers has been improving, progress to close the attainment gap between FSME and non-FSME pupils has been slow.
  - The gap in achievement of at least five GCSEs including English and Maths has not changed significantly in the last 15 years, with the long-term trend being a gap of approximately 30 percentage points.

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<sup>3</sup> Closing the Gap - Social Deprivation and Links to Educational Attainment, Northern Ireland Audit Office, 5 May 2021

- There is no requirement for schools to spend TSN funding solely on supporting pupils from socially deprived backgrounds.
- The Department has not collated information on the use and impact of TSN funds. A new TSN Planner, designed to capture such information, had a very low uptake, with only six per cent of schools providing a return for the 2018-19 academic year.
- Provision of Key Stage assessment data is a statutory requirement. However, due to the industrial action by teachers which ended on 28 April 2020, only 14 per cent of Primary schools and 15 per cent of Post-primary schools provided assessment data for the 2018-19 academic year.

## **The current funding mechanisms need to be re-considered**

31. Under Local Management of Schools (LMS) arrangements, Boards of Governors and school principals have the autonomy to make decisions on resource allocation and priorities in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning in their school. TSN funding is allocated to schools via the Common Funding Scheme (CFS) and is based largely on the number of pupils in the school with FSME.
32. The Committee is concerned that there is no requirement for schools in receipt of TSN funding to spend it solely on supporting pupils from socially deprived backgrounds. Consequently, these funds may be used to top-up the general school budget. This flexibility is inconsistent with other education funding such as that for Special Education Needs (SEN) where, for the majority of schools, the use of funding is prescribed. The Committee recognised benefits in flexibility but emphasised the importance of earning autonomy with the use of funds, especially as, despite almost £1 billion having been provided to support disadvantaged pupils over the last 15 years, limited progress has been made to close the attainment gap.
33. The Department advised the Committee that giving schools the autonomy to lead on appropriate interventions and to provide tailored local solutions to individual problems is the most effective way in which to improve outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Whilst the Committee witnessed good use of TSN and SEN funding at the Belfast Boys' Model School, the Committee is unconvinced how the current funding mechanism will address the attainment gap and deliver value for money.

**The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA review how funds to target social need and address educational underachievement are provided to schools. The review should assess the current funding mechanism, how funding is used by schools to target those most in need and the impact of the funded interventions. The Committee also expects**

**that, where appropriate, school-led flexibility is provided to allow further autonomy in the use of SEN funds.**

34. The Committee was concerned that some schools had to use funding intended for front-line education services to buy-in professional services such as mental health and wellbeing. The Committee therefore welcomed the Department's news that the Minister had launched a £5 million pilot, 'Healthy Happy Minds', in November 2021 to support therapeutic and counselling services in primary schools. However, the Committee stressed that, in the long term, there is a need to ensure that mental health and wellbeing services are appropriately funded.
35. In 2013, the Committee had raised concerns about the use of FSME as a measure of social disadvantage. The Committee was therefore surprised that a decade later the Department is still using this measure and that a review of its suitability had not been undertaken. The Committee welcomed the Accounting Officer's acknowledgement of the shortcomings of the use of the FSME measure to identify those in most need of support and his assurance that a review of the suitability of the FSME measure has now commenced.

**The Committee recommends that the Department completes its review of the suitability of the Free School Meal Entitlement as the measure of social disadvantage as a soon as possible to ensure that the most appropriate measure is being used and support is provided to those pupils who need it most.**

## **Improvements in Accountability and Assessment arrangements are required**

36. The Committee was shocked to learn that a central record of what schools had used TSN funds for had not been collated since a change in the School Development Plan (SDP) process occurred in 2010 and that only 6 per cent of schools provided the Department with information on their use of TSN funds for the 2018-19 academic year.
37. The Department told the Committee that despite the disappointing return rate, the returns received and NIAO's survey indicate that schools are directing the funding to the right sort of things: supporting teacher development, smaller teaching groups and the materials required to support pupils.
38. At the third evidence session, the Department told the Committee that currently 60 per cent of schools have provided information on the use of TSN funds. Although this is an improvement on the 2018-19 academic year, the Department needs to ensure that the remaining 40 per cent of schools provide the required information.
39. The Committee was also disappointed to learn that although provision of Key Stage (KS) assessment data has been mandatory since 2013, due to industrial action, only 15 per cent of schools provided KS data for the 2018-19 academic year.
40. The Committee considered that these accountability and assessment arrangements were inadequate and, as such, do not provide the Department with sufficient evidence to inform policy and support decision-making.

**The Committee recommends that the Department ensures that all schools provide information on the use of TSN funding and Key Stage assessment data to enable the Department to develop effective guidance and policies and allocate resources to those areas that will lead to better outcomes for pupils. This should include consideration of what action needs to be taken to ensure schools comply.**

## **Setting and monitoring of targets need to be improved**

41. The Committee noted that for the 2018-19 academic year, actual performance was below the targets for all KS 2 and 3 milestones set by the Department. Similarly only 49.5 per cent of school leavers with FSME achieved five GCSE A\* - C (or equivalent) including English and Mathematics compared with a KS 4 target of 60 per cent.

**The Committee recommends that the Department identifies what actions are required to achieve existing Key Stage targets and ensures that these actions are implemented and targets are achieved.**

42. The Committee noted that the Department has not set a target or series of targets to address the attainment gap. The Committee felt that in the absence of such a target there is risk that so long as the academic achievement of FSME pupils is improving and there is some narrowing of the gap, the gap will not narrow by any significant degree.

**The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA put in place a measureable, time-bound target to address the attainment gap and ensure that challenging targets to address the attainment gap are included in each school's School Development Plan.**

## **The long-term impact of early interventions such as SureStart need to be measured**

43. The Committee heard that there is compelling evidence to support the importance of early years' interventions for children's social, emotional and cognitive development and for enhancing their educational prospects, and their health and well-being in school and beyond.
44. The Committee recognised the positive impact of the SureStart programme and the Department's efforts to improve the evidence of achievement of policy outcomes in relation to this programme. However, the Department only started to collect SureStart attendance information in the 2015-16 school census. Consequently, the Committee was disappointed that the Department is only at the early stages of understanding how to demonstrate the long-term benefit of the SureStart programme which has been in place for over 20 years.

**The Committee recommends that the Department establishes a methodology to clearly demonstrate how SureStart and other early interventions funded by the Department contribute to closing the attainment gap and providing value for money.**

## **Good Practice needs to be identified and disseminated**

45. The Committee's visit to Belfast Boys' Model School<sup>4</sup> identified good practice in the use of funding provided to close the educational attainment gap and which had a demonstrable impact on the academic performance of pupils with FSME. The Committee noted that the school has implemented strategies to address the deficits in guidance, support and resources at home; mental health; and social capital, particularly in the development of skills such as employability.
46. The Committee was encouraged to note that health and well-being classes are part of the school's timetable rather than an after school activity, ensuring pupils were acquiring appropriate life skills in addition to academic qualifications as part of the curriculum.
47. Although the Department referred to its "Star" Case Studies Paper<sup>5</sup> issued in 2020, the Committee was left unclear about what the Department does when good practice is identified, how it is shared, communicated and implemented. It was also unclear what direct support the Department or the EA provided to school leaders to help them identify and implement known best practice.
48. The EA advised the Committee that the inaugural meeting of the School Leaders Engagement Group had taken place recently and that, going forward, meetings would take place quarterly. The Committee welcomed this and considered that such meetings would provide a starting point for the dissemination and sharing of best practice from those schools which were using TSN and other funds effectively.

**The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA put in place appropriate mechanisms for the identification and dissemination of current educational best practice, including international best practice,**

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<sup>4</sup> Report on PAC Visit to Belfast Boys Model, 4 November, 2021

<sup>5</sup> Tackling Educational Disadvantage - 10 Features of Effective Schools - "Star" Case Studies Paper, Department of Education, January 2020

**and that support is provided for school leaders to implement appropriate initiatives.**

## **High levels of absenteeism need to be addressed**

49. Attendance at school is critical to ensure that children benefit from their education and the funding provided to address the attainment gap that is utilised in a school setting. The Committee noted that previous research has indicated that pupils with no absence from school were nearly 3 times more likely to achieve 5 A\* to C GCSEs, including English and Maths, than pupils missing 15 to 20 percent of school across Key Stage 4. The Committee heard of some shocking rates of school attendance in Northern Ireland including one disadvantaged area where 35 per cent of post-primary pupils had less than 85 per cent school attendance. If the child is not at school, they cannot benefit from the funding provided.
50. The Committee is concerned that despite all schools being required to have an attendance policy and a number of Departmental initiatives, tackling absenteeism is not seen as a priority issue.

**The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA must provide additional support to schools to improve attendance rates so as to ensure pupils from socially deprived backgrounds benefit from educational opportunities and from the funding provided to close the attainment gap.**

## **School Leaders need additional support and training**

51. The Committee recognised the key role that teachers and school leaders, that is Principals and Boards of Governors, play in maintaining Northern Ireland's excellent record for academic achievement. The Committee considered that there is a need to ensure that teachers and leaders with suitable skills and experience are placed in schools where pupils' need is greatest and that teaching quality is developed and maintained through appropriate interventions.

**The Committee recommends that the Department and the wider Executive ensure that there is appropriate investment in the training and development of teaching staff, especially those in socially deprived areas, to address educational underachievement and the wider implications of social deprivation on pupil well-being.**

52. Under the Local Management of Schools arrangements, Principals and Boards of Governors are responsible for making decisions on resource allocations and priorities for funding that they receive. The Committee considered that given the challenges in moving from teaching to school leadership, it is important that all Principals, but especially those new to the role, are provided with adequate training, support and mentoring to assist them in making these decisions.
53. The Committee also recognised that Governors recruited from the local community can act as a bridge to that community and bring authenticity. However, more needs to be done to ensure that people with the right skills are recruited as Governors to meet the particular needs and circumstances of each school.

**The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA ensure that Principals and Governors are supported and developed to be more effective in their leadership roles, especially in relation to the management of school finances and the attainment of required outcomes.**

## **Current scrutiny arrangements need to be enhanced**

54. The Committee noted that there is a considerable reliance placed on the work of the EA's School Improvement Team regarding the scrutiny of School Development Plans (SDPs) and the work of the Education Training Inspectorate (ETI) regarding the use of TSN funds, improvement and the identification of best practice. However, the Committee understands that schools set their own targets, including those for improvements in literacy and numeracy and that a number of years may pass between inspections as each school is not inspected every year. The Committee considered that there is need for the School Improvement Team to be strengthened by identifying and recruiting relevant staff with appropriate knowledge of school operations and a track record of delivering improvement in educational settings. The School Improvement Team should also ensure that schools' improvement targets, especially those for pupils with FSME, are challenging.

**The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA urgently review the current impact of the ETI and the School Improvement Team on improving educational attainment and how this impact can be maximised to contribute to closing the attainment gap. It is further recommended that the EA review the capacity and capability of its School Improvement Team and strengthen it where appropriate.**

## **Funding needs to be provided to implement the Expert Panel's Action Plan**

55. One of the 'New Decade, New Approach' education priorities was to establish an Expert Panel to examine and propose an Action Plan to address links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background. The six-member Expert Panel which was appointed by the Education Minister in July 2020, submitted its Final Report and Action Plan, 'A Fair Start', to the Minister in May 2021.
56. The Action Plan contains 47 actions for change across eight key areas:
  - Redirecting the focus to Early Years.
  - Championing Emotional Health and Wellbeing.
  - Ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of Curriculum and Assessment.
  - Promoting a whole community approach to education.
  - Maximising boys' potential.
  - Driving forward Teachers' Professional Learning.
  - Supporting the professional learning and wellbeing of school leadership.
  - Ensuring Interdepartmental collaboration and delivery.
57. The Expert Panel's report provided estimated costs to implement their recommendations, rising from £10.9 million in year one to £73.1 million in year five and beyond.
58. The Committee heard evidence from and welcomed the findings of the Expert Panel, noting that a number of issues and recommendations raised in 'A Fair Start' and in discussion with the Expert Panel, had been identified as issues following the evidence session with the Department on 7 October 2021.
59. The Committee recognised that a number of reports on underachievement have been produced over the years but that the underlying issues have not been tackled to date. The Committee therefore agreed that it is critical that the

47 recommendations contained in the report are delivered and that the required funding is provided by the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that this happens.

60. The Committee stressed that the Department of Education alone could not address the issues identified in the report and that there is a need for commitment of funding across Government Departments.
61. The Department advised the Committee that work has already commenced to deliver on the Action Plan. A Programme Board has been set up comprising officials from a number of Departments, including Education, Health, Communities and Economy, along with representatives from the Education Authority and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.
62. The Committee endorsed the Expert Panel's recommendation that the delivery of the Action Plan be subject to oversight by an Implementation Committee chaired by the First Minister/Deputy First Minister.

**The Committee recommends that funding is provided by the Department and wider Executive to implement the Expert Panel's recommendations in full and that appropriate mechanisms are put in place to monitor and report on the efficiency and effectiveness of the funding. In addition, the Department should clearly define the future role to be played by the Expert Panel in supporting the implementation of the Action Plan to ensure it achieves the outcomes envisaged. Such a role might involve provision of assurance to the Implementation Committee that recommendations are being implemented as envisaged by the Expert Panel.**

## **Collaboration across Government Departments is required to address social deprivation and educational attainment issues**

63. The Committee recognised that a broad range of factors contribute to educational attainment, including school leadership, classroom teaching, and parental and community involvement and that social deprivation is a societal issue which impacts not only educational attainment but also a child's health and life chances.
64. The Committee was pleased to note that the Department recognised a need for a more holistic approach to the development of young people and that collaboration and cooperation with other Departments is already happening in relation to the Programme for Government and in taking forward the recommendations of 'A Fair Start'. However, the Committee has ongoing concerns that collaboration does not come naturally to the Northern Ireland Civil Service and that a silo mentality persists.

**The Committee recommends that mechanisms are established to ensure a collaborative approach is taken to address the issues identified in this report and deliver its recommendations. This activity should be led by the Department of Education and the Education Authority and should ensure appropriate joint working with schools, other NI Departments, community groups, local government and other organisations as required.**

## Links to Appendices

### Appendix 1: Minutes of Proceedings

[View Minutes of Proceedings of Committee meetings related to the report](#)

### Appendix 2: Minutes of Evidence

[View Minutes of Evidence from evidence sessions related to the report](#)

### Appendix 3: Other Documents relating to the report

[PAC School Visit Report, 4 November 2021](#)

[View other documents in relation to the report](#)

### Appendix 4: Correspondence received in relation to the report

[View correspondence sent and received in relation to the inquiry](#)

### Appendix 5: List of Witnesses that gave evidence to the Committee

- **Dr Mark Browne**, Department of Education
- **Ms Alison Chambers**, Department of Education
- **Mrs Linda Drysdale**, Department of Education
- **Dr Suzanne Kingon**, Department of Education
- **Dr Noel Purdy**, Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement
- **Ms Joyce Logue**, Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement
- **Ms Mary Montgomery**, Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement
- **Ms Kathleen O'Hare**, Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement
- **Mr Jackie Redpath**, Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement
- **Ms Sara Long**, Education Authority
- **Ms Michele Corkey**, Education Authority
- **Ms Patricia Cooney**, Education Authority
- **Mr Stuart Stevenson**, Department of Finance
- **Mr Kieran Donnelly CB**, Northern Ireland Audit Office

- **Mr Rodney Allen**, Northern Ireland Audit Office

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