

# Written Ministerial Statement

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## Department of Education

### “A FAIR START” FINAL REPORT AND ACTION PLAN – PROGRESS REPORT JUNE 2022

*Published on Friday 29 July 2022*

**Miss 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, twelve months after the report was published by the Expert Panel on educational underachievement on 1 June 2021

As Minister for Education, I am delighted to report on the continuing and significant progress achieved to date, which delivers on a “New Decade New Approach” commitment and one which I am 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 on-going commitment, collaboration and contribution to date. A Programme Board has been meeting regularly since the report was published and Senior Responsible Officers for each area have been working to progress the actions. Due to the cross-cutting design of the report, there is representation on the Programme Board from several Departments and Arm’s Length Bodies. This is crucial in embedding the collaborative approach envisaged in the report.

A Stakeholder Reference Group has also met regularly over the past twelve months. Its role is to support the Programme Board to develop and refine the actions. This includes Teaching Union representation, schools, community groups, uniformed organisations and youth organisations to provide a voice for children and young people.

I allocated £4m during the 2021/22 financial year to begin this work which was Year 0 of the programme. Year 1 of the programme began in April 2022 to which I have allocated £6.1m Other Resource and £1.6m Capital, representing £7.7m in total. The programme ‘A Fair Start’ is strategic in scale, wide-ranging and expansive and I believe it is important to continue with the early momentum we have started across each of the Key Areas of the report to deliver impactful interventions which demonstrate tangible progress and outcomes from early years through to youth provision.

## Progress to 31 March 2022

By 31 March 2022, 23 of the 32 actions initiated were classed as “Green” (i.e. started, underway or achieved). These actions included:

- **Key Area 1 - Redirecting the focus to Early Years** - a review of the Sure Start staffing structure to ensure there is access to the necessary health professions including health visitors and midwives. Independent review of DE funded Targeted Early Years Intervention including Sure Start, the Pathway Fund and Toybox Project. Habilitation Project – CYP with Visual Impairment. The project supported 33 children and young people with visual impairment.
- **Key Area 2 - Championing Emotional Health and Wellbeing** - Sixteen additional nurture groups are being taken forward two years earlier than planned. A range of interventions were undertaken by Health and Social Care Trusts and the Fostering Network to support children who are looked after.
- **Key Area 3 - Ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of Curriculum and Assessment** - Four thousand new digital devices were purchased in 2021/22. DE / EA will distribute these to schools in 2022/23 for in-school and at home use and measure the impact / effectiveness.
- **Key Area 4 - Promoting a whole community approach to education** – 80% of schools have completed the TSN Planner which is used by schools to record how they are supporting children from socio-economically deprived backgrounds. A Reducing Educational Disadvantage Policy has been drafted and data has been analysed to help inform eligibility for the programme. Initial workshops have been held in June 2022. By way of promoting collaboration and a whole community approach to education, Urban Village delivery partners took forward a range of education centred work and a refresh of guidance for Deaf Friendly Schools was published.
- **Key Area 5 – Maximising Boys’ Potential** – work is on-going with practitioners and will result in an interactive hub for all stakeholders to access an ‘Educating and Engaging Boys’ Framework for school leaders on addressing the factors limiting boys’ progress. The EA is completing a baseline of schools currently taking forward work relating to boys learning and engagement. A “Pathways to Partnership” Framework has been developed and will be launched across the system over the coming months. A new communication strategy to promote education focused on those most at risk of underachievement was launched in 2021/22 entitled “[Try and Stop Me](#)” and is continuing in 2022/23. The Horizon Programme is being taken forward by the EA Youth Service and aims over a two-year period, to produce 630 skilled, qualified and experienced youth work volunteers. Programme has been established and work is on-going
- **Key Area 6 – Driving forward Teacher’s Professional Learning (TPL)**. EA is delivering individual Learning Leaders aligned projects and working to establish a new Preparation for Headship / Principalship programme.
- **Key Area 7 – supporting the professional learning and wellbeing of school leadership** - As part of the Learning Leaders Strategy’s commitment to building leadership capacity at all levels, an accreditation and professional development programme for principals has been provided via the Association of Education Advisers (AoEA) for 73 principals across four cohorts during 2021/22. The Education Authority has identified a need to recruit a small number of school principals to examine and identify improvements to the efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of the recruitment and selection of school principals.
- **Key Area 8 – Ensuring interdepartmental collaboration and delivery** - Cross Departmental collaboration is in place within the Programme Board and Stakeholder Reference Group. First report was provided to NI Executive and NI Assembly on 16 December 2021 and this statement reflects the position as at 30 June 2022. It is too early to say at what level the next Programme for Government (PfG) will be designed but we are very aware of the need for “A Fair Start” to have a presence within PfG. We will continue to work with departments to highlight the cross-cutting nature of the issues pertaining to educational under-attainment and to build collaborative approaches.

## **Actions in 2022/23**

Building on the progress made last year, further progress is continuing across a range of actions in the Action Plan and more detail on this is outlined in the attached Annex. This represents a very positive package of measures that will animate the programme and continue to build momentum.

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 as they reach adulthood. 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 strong, resilient and cohesive communities.

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 in place 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 supported by “A Fair Start” branding which will be used throughout its implementation.

I held a number of meetings with Ministerial colleagues last year 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 being developed through the early delivery of the Programme and its linkages with programmes in other departments.

I am committed to continue to work with colleagues to further develop this collaboration. 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.