



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

Report on Managing the Schools' Estate

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Report: NIA 117/22-27 Public Accounts Committee

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Powers and Membership

Powers

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.

Membership

The Committee has 9 members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, and a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee is as follows:

- Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA (Chairperson)
- Ms Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)⁴
- Mr Cathal Boylan MLA
- Mr Tom Buchanan MLA
- Mr Jon Burrows MLA^{1,2,3,6}
- Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA
- Mr Stephen Dunne MLA⁵
- Mr Colm Gildernew MLA
- Mr David Honeyford MLA

¹With effect from 5 March 2024 Mr John Stewart replaced Mr Robbie Butler

²With effect from 21 October 2024 Mr Colin Crawford replaced Mr John Stewart

³With effect from 31 July 2025 Mr Colin Crawford resigned

⁴With effect from 16 September 2025 Ms Diane Forsythe replaced Ms Cheryl Brownlee as Deputy Chairperson

⁵With effect from 23 September 2025 Mr Stephen Dunne replaced Ms Cheryl Brownlee

⁶With effect from 6 October 2025 Mr Jon Burrows replaced Mr Colin Crawford

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in this Report

C&AG	Comptroller and Auditor General
DfE	Department for Education (England)
EA	Education Authority
GEMS	Good Estate Management for Schools
GMI	Grant-Maintained Integrated
HSENI	Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland
IWMS	Integrated Workplace Management System
NI	Northern Ireland
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
PFI/PPP	Public Finance Initiative/Public Private Partnership
SBRI	Small Business Research Initiative
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SSEC	Strule Shared Education Campus
The Assembly	The Northern Ireland Assembly
The Committee	Public Accounts Committee
The Department	Department of Education
TOA	Treasury Officer of Accounts
VG	Voluntary Grammar

Executive Summary

1. The Public Accounts Committee (the Committee) met on 12 June 2025 to consider the Comptroller and Auditor General's (C&AG's) Report "Managing the Schools' Estate". The main witnesses were senior staff from the Department of Education (the Department) and the Education Authority (the EA):

12 June 2025, the Department of Education and the Education Authority

- **Ronnie Armour**, Acting Permanent Secretary/Accounting Officer, Department of Education;
 - **Stephen Creagh**, Deputy Director, Investment and Infrastructure, Department of Education;
 - **Richard Pengelly**, Chief Executive/Accounting Officer, Education Authority;
 - **Paul Crooks**, Assistant director of Facilities Management, Estates and Operations, Education Authority;
 - **Dorinnia Carville**, C&AG, Northern Ireland Audit Office; and
 - **Stuart Stevenson**, Treasury Officer of Accounts, Department of Finance.
2. Following its oral evidence sessions, the Committee sought written submissions from the Department and the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) in respect of several issues raised during their initial oral evidence.
 3. The Committee's inquiry has revealed a worrying picture of systemic failure in the management of Northern Ireland's school estate. The evidence presented confirmed that many schools are in a state of disrepair, with significant maintenance backlogs which may pose a risk to the health and safety of pupils and staff, and to educational outcomes for pupils.

4. The Committee is concerned by the absence of a comprehensive, long-term estate management strategy. It heard that for over a decade, the Department and the EA have operated without a clear plan for the estate, relying instead on a reactive, short-term approach that has failed to deliver value for money or meet the needs of school users. The Committee view this prolonged absence of an estate strategy as an alarming example of poor governance which has likely contributed to the deterioration of safety and quality across the estate.
5. Governance and accountability arrangements are fragmented and ineffective, and oversight structures have failed to provide strategic leadership. The Committee heard that, 10 years on from the formation of the EA, poor collaboration between it and the Department has continued to undermine the effectiveness of estate management.
6. The lack of reliable, up-to-date data on school condition and investment outcomes is a critical weakness. Without robust information systems, effective strategic planning is impossible, and performance cannot be measured or improved.
7. The maintenance backlog, which shows a significant degree of uncertainty, has reached unacceptable levels. It is now projected to range anywhere from £600 to £800 million, up from the previous estimate of £450 million. A more reliable estimate is not possible until all surveys are completed. There is currently no preventative maintenance plan, even though investment in preventative maintenance has the potential to deliver significant savings in medium to long term. Statutory remedial works are also significantly backlogged (£29 million). The Committee is deeply concerned that this situation is unsafe.
8. The Committee is particularly worried about the disproportionate impact of poor estate conditions and availability on children with special educational needs (SEN). SEN provision is under severe strain. There is a growing need for additional SEN capacity in the estate and many existing facilities are unfit for purpose.

9. The Committee has also learned that the Department and the EA are not on track to meet statutory obligations under the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. There is no funded strategy for achieving net zero compliance, and legacy infrastructure issues continue to drive high energy costs and emissions.
10. The Committee is concerned that there are no clear plans for the management and maintenance of Public Finance Initiative/Public Private Partnership (PFI/PPP) assets returning to public ownership. If neglected, these assets will deteriorate and add to the backlog maintenance burden.
11. Additional issues raised in evidence included the lack of transparency in funding allocation for minor works, the potential for a system of delegated maintenance to address perceived inefficiencies, and the absence of a coherent plan for managing vacant school properties.

Conclusion

12. The Committee concludes that urgent, system-wide reform of the schools' estate management and maintenance is required. A modern, safe, and inclusive school estate is not a luxury—it is a fundamental entitlement for every child in Northern Ireland.
13. The Department's current approach to estate management is unsustainable, ineffective, and economically wasteful. The absence of a comprehensive strategy, reliable data, and effective governance has led to a growing maintenance crisis, poor value for money, and unacceptable risks to pupils and staff.
14. A new approach is required to improve collaborative working relationships between the Department, the EA and schools and to ensure better value for money. Listening to schools and involving them earlier could lead to faster, more informed responses to problems, and could support a more preventative approach to maintenance. A new estate management strategy must be developed and implemented without delay. This strategy must be underpinned by robust data systems, transparent governance, and a clear focus on educational outcomes.

15. The school estate must be seen as a valued asset and a key enabler of educational success - not just a collection of buildings to be maintained.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Department develops and publishes a comprehensive estate management strategy by the Department's planned date of early 2026, together with an associated, annual delivery plan and prioritisation framework. This should be underpinned by estate management guidance, which should be updated within 12 months of the strategy being published. The Strategy should have a clear focus on educational outcomes, in compliance with health and safety legislation, with associated delivery plans, and guidance reviewed and updated periodically.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that, within six months, the Department and the EA review the roles and responsibilities of all oversight mechanisms to ensure effective governance and oversight of this significant spend. It must put in place appropriate governance structures and ensure that estate performance, based on agreed metrics, is regularly monitored.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends the Department and the EA expediate the five-year cycle of condition surveys so that future survey cycles will align to the three-year timescale previously agreed. The Department and the EA must ensure condition data remains up to date, and is used to inform annual delivery plans under the strategy.

Recommendation 4

The Department and the EA should implement the proposed integrated workplace management system by the planned date of March 2026. Within six months of system implementation, system functionality should be reviewed to ensure that it fully meets the Department's estate management needs and aligns with their Estate Management Strategy.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA's plan to bring the statutory remedial backlog (£29 million) under control within two financial years is submitted to the Minister within six months. The risks and implications of the plan should be clearly outlined and have appropriately assigned governance responsibilities.

Recommendation 6

The Department and the EA should develop clear plans to address the overall maintenance backlog and establish a preventative maintenance programme within 12 months, including targets for the reduction of backlogs. Progress and impact should be monitored, measured and reported to the appropriate oversight group.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that, within six months, the Department and the EA complete and evaluate the current delegated maintenance pilot. If the pilot is successful, a plan should be developed to expand delegated powers to schools, with appropriate safeguards within a further six months. This should include training and guidance, incorporating best practice from across the estate, to ensure compliance and value for money. The committee expects to see demonstrable evidence of active engagement with schools in relation to maintenance issues.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that, within eighteen months, the Department and the EA develop clear plans for ensuring that current SEN provision is fit for purpose in advance of a targeted capital investment plan to expand the SEN provision across the schools' estate.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends the Department and the EA develop and publish a climate action plan for the school estate setting out the path to net zero, in line with the Climate Change Act (NI) 2022. The plan should be developed within 12 months and performance reported annually.

They should also ensure that major refurbishments and all new build schools, from now onwards, meet or exceed net-zero design standards.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that ahead of each PFI/ PPP contract ending, the Department and the EA fully assess and plan for both the costs and savings from PFI/PPP contracts ending, and factor them into future budgetary considerations.

Recommendation 11

The Committee recommends the Department and the EA urgently undertake a full assessment of vacant properties for condition, potential reuse, and market value within 12 months. The Department should develop a plan for surplus properties and set annual targets for the most value for money use of the vacant estate.

Introduction

16. The Public Accounts Committee (the Committee) met on 12 June 2025 to consider the Comptroller and Auditor General's (C&AG's) Report "Managing the Schools' Estate". The main witnesses were senior staff from the Department of Education (the Department) and the Education Authority (the EA):

12 June 2025, the Department of Education and the Education Authority

- **Ronnie Armour**, Acting Permanent Secretary/Accounting Officer, Department of Education;
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 - **Paul Crooks**, Assistant director of Facilities Management, Estates and Operations, Education Authority;
 - **Dorinnia Carville**, C&AG, Northern Ireland Audit Office; and
 - **Stuart Stevenson**, Treasury Officer of Accounts, Department of Finance.
17. Following its oral evidence sessions, the Committee sought written submissions from the Department and the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) in respect of several issues raised during their initial oral evidence.

Background

18. Northern Ireland's school estate is a critical public-sector asset, encompassing over 1,100 schools, and valued at approximately £4.6 billion. Buildings across the estate vary widely in age, size, and condition. Over several years, there has been significant and sustained underinvestment in the school estate.
19. The Department is responsible for providing funding and setting the strategic direction and policy framework, while the EA is responsible for operational delivery in controlled and maintained schools. Voluntary grammar (VG) schools and grant-maintained integrated (GMI) schools do not fall under EA's remit for the delivery of maintenance services, but are funded by the EA for maintenance.

20. In November 2024, the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) published "Managing the Schools' Estate," which identified significant and systemic failings in the way the school estate is governed, maintained, and enhanced. The Committee's hearing on 12 June 2025 explored these issues with officials from the Department and the EA.
21. The Department is operating in a difficult financial environment. Over 40 percent of the Department's 2025-26 capital budget is earmarked for projects included in the Fresh Start Agreement and the Strule Shared Education Campus project. The remaining 60 per cent, which must cover all other capital programmes, is a decrease in allocation from the start of 2024-25, and significantly less than the Department determined it required. Additional bids were submitted in the June monitoring round but only 12 percent of the requested capital was allocated.
22. In giving evidence, the Department made it clear that it welcomes the NIAO report and its recommendations. However, it was keen to point out that it has faced, and will continue to face, significant challenges in implementing those recommendations due to resource constraints. It also acknowledges that many schools are in unacceptable condition and that it is often unable to provide the level of service that schools require.

The School Estate is in unacceptably poor condition for children and staff and action is long overdue

23. It is of great concern to the Committee that the organisations responsible for the management and maintenance of the schools' estate cannot provide the services needed. While resources are a factor, the Committee considers that the Department has failed to take appropriate action to adequately manage the estate within the resources available to it.
24. Many schools are in a state of disrepair, with children and teachers working in overcrowded, poorly heated and failing structures and facilities. Such conditions may undermine educational outcomes, mental health, and equality of opportunity. The impact of poor education infrastructure on learning is widely accepted but remains unquantified in Northern Ireland.

25. The Committee notes that, while substantial major and minor capital works are ongoing, when it comes to maintenance the Department and the EA can only undertake the most urgent and immediate works required to keep schools open and safe. Meanwhile, the maintenance backlog is increasing.

A comprehensive estate management strategy, and a clearly prioritised framework, to manage the schools' estate are urgently needed

26. The NIAO report makes clear that the Department and the EA have failed to develop a long-term strategy for the estate. There is no published plan setting out how the estate will be maintained or improved, how investment decisions will be prioritised, or how schools will be supported to meet future demand.
27. When asked about the last time a strategy was in place, officials were unable to give a definitive answer. Witnesses told the Committee that the current programme-driven approach has been in place since 2012, with a mix of policies and frameworks but no overarching strategy.
28. The Committee considers it unacceptable that hundreds of millions of pounds are being spent every year on the estate without an estate management strategy in place. Given the scale of public investment and the critical role of the estate in delivering education, it is the Committee's view that the lack of a long-term strategy over such an extended period is a serious failing and has likely compromised the quality and safety of the learning environment for pupils and staff. The Department acknowledges this lack of an estate management strategy and accepts that the current approach is "unsustainable".
29. The absence of a strategic approach has undermined long-term investment and effective prioritisation of spend. Funding based on short-term pressures rather than evidence-based strategic need is reactive and lacks accountability. The Committee recognises that overcoming the consequences of this long-term under-investment will not be easy but considers it critical that the Department acts immediately to get control of estate management.

30. When asked about targets for the implementation of the NIAO recommendations, particularly relating to an estate management strategy, the witnesses indicated that a strategy was in development and would be put before the Minister in the Autumn, with a view to having a strategy in place by early 2026. Previously the Department told the NIAO that the strategy would be available in March 2025. Any further delay by the Department is simply unacceptable to the Committee in the context of an increasingly deteriorating estate.
31. The Committee's examination also revealed that the provision and application of guidance - both strategic and operational - has been inconsistent or absent. It heard that the Department for Education (DfE) in England provides comprehensive guidance on schools' estate management ('Good Estate Management for Schools' (GEMS)), which is not used by the Department here and for which there is no Northern Ireland equivalent. The Committee has no doubt that the lack of clear, up-to-date guidance has contributed to inefficiency, and a lack of accountability.
32. Witnesses told the Committee that the strategy being developed will be its GEMS equivalent and that it is already following some of the practices outlined in GEMS. However, the Committee believes that estate management guidance should be maintained separately from the estate management strategy. The Department should adopt or develop its own estate management guidance and follow it, keeping it up to date to ensure best practice.

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Department develops and publishes a comprehensive estate management strategy by the Department's planned date of early 2026, together with an associated, annual delivery plan and prioritisation framework. This should be underpinned by estate management guidance, which should be updated within 12 months of the strategy being published. The Strategy should have a clear focus on educational outcomes, in compliance with health and safety legislation, with associated delivery plans, and guidance reviewed and updated periodically.

Greater collaboration, together with improved governance and accountability arrangements are required

33. One of the findings of this inquiry is that no single accountable body has full responsibility for the management of the estate. The Department and the EA are jointly responsible, but the arrangement is complex and lacks clarity. In practice, no one is held to account for delays, poor outcomes, or underinvestment. The Committee is concerned that the absence of appropriate accountability is undermining public confidence and not achieving value for money.
34. The Committee considers that governance failures have contributed to the lack of strategic direction and oversight. We find it unacceptable that key groups, established for governance and oversight, were not meeting. There is an urgent need for officials to clearly set out oversight responsibilities and clear lines of accountability for estate management and related performance.
35. The Committee also heard evidence of a broader cultural and systemic issue in the relationship between the Department and the EA. The witnesses acknowledged that, historically, working relationships have been poor between the organisations, with limited collaboration and mutual frustration. The Committee considers that this poor collaboration has been detrimental to effective management of the estate and must be addressed with urgency.
36. Witnesses indicated that the current Accounting Officers are working to improve the relationship and accept that a cultural shift is necessary to empower individuals to act more effectively. The Accounting Officers told the Committee that they “want to genuinely re-engineer how we do things.” This commitment to cultural reform is welcomed by the Committee who believe such a change is absolutely necessary.

37. However, the evidence presented to the Committee points to a lack of coordination, unclear lines of responsibility, and a system that has struggled to adapt or improve. While there are signs of improvement and a willingness to change, these must be translated into concrete actions throughout the culture of the Department and the EA. The Department must urgently improve governance, accountability and collaboration (with both the EA and schools) in line with an overarching estate management strategy. The Committee expects to be updated on the review of the current working arrangements and the development of a clear plan to 're-engineer' and improve working relationships across the two organisations.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that, within six months, the Department and the EA review the roles and responsibilities of all oversight mechanisms to ensure effective governance and oversight of this significant spend. It must put in place appropriate governance structures and ensure that estate performance, based on agreed metrics, is regularly monitored.

The Department needs a single system to significantly improve its inadequate and outdated data

38. The Committee was surprised to learn that the Department and the EA do not have robust data on school condition, nor do they measure how capital investment affects educational outcomes. Without reliable data it is not clear how the Department or the EA inform decision making, adequately prioritise works, or demonstrate the impact of spending. There is no evidence that the Department evaluates the impact of the physical condition of schools on pupils' well-being and educational outcomes.

39. The first five-year cycle of condition surveys is now into its third year, and 39 per cent of schools have been surveyed. However, data systems remain fragmented and incomplete. Previously, in a Memorandum of Agreement signed in 2018, the Department and the EA agreed a cycle time of three years for condition surveys. Witnesses confirmed the limitations of current condition surveys and the data systems that rely on them. The EA outlined plans to implement a new Integrated Workplace Management System (IWMS) by March 2026, however, it is not clear if this will be achieved.
40. The lack of up to date, integrated data (together with the absence of a comprehensive estate management strategy) impedes the Department's ability to demonstrate any aspect of effective estate management (including decision-making and resource allocation). Furthermore, the absence of performance indicators means it is difficult to judge whether current spending is delivering the results children, parents, teachers and taxpayers expect.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends the Department and the EA expediate the five-year cycle of condition surveys so that future survey cycles will align to the three-year timescale previously agreed. The Department and the EA must ensure condition data remains up to date, and is used to inform annual delivery plans under the strategy.

Recommendation 4

The Department and the EA should implement the proposed integrated workplace management system by the planned date of March 2026. Within six months of system implementation, system functionality should be reviewed to ensure that it fully meets the Department's estate management needs and aligns with their Estate Management Strategy.

41. Throughout the evidence session the Committee heard that a lack of robust, up-to-date information has hindered strategic planning and decision-making, particularly in relation to maintenance prioritisation and capital investment. The current system, largely reliant on manual spreadsheets, does not allow for comprehensive analysis.

42. Witnesses described the current scoring and prioritisation system as fair and sector-neutral but the committee fears that it is not underpinned by a transparent, publicly accessible dataset and that decisions are not easily scrutinised. This apparent lack of data transparency and potential for regional or sectoral inequity in the management of the school estate undermines public confidence in delivery efforts.

The already substantial maintenance backlog is growing and must be urgently addressed

43. Estate maintenance focuses only on priority works fixing what is already broken and keeping schools open and safe. This work comes at the expense of longer-term investment in preventative maintenance and inevitably compromises the long-term value for money of the spending. Witnesses cited funding constraints and the need to prioritise statutory compliance as the main reasons for the lack of a preventative maintenance programme.
44. The Committee is shocked to learn that there has been no preventative maintenance undertaken and no plans to put preventative maintenance programmes in place. It is worried that, under the Department's current approach, work has virtually been reduced to the prioritisation of critical health and safety repairs; and that despite this focus, there is currently a £29 million backlog of statutory remedial works.
45. Beyond this, the broader maintenance backlog is now projected to range anywhere from £600 to £800 million (up from the previous estimate of £450 million, provided by the Department for the NIAO report). The level of uncertainty in these figures is significant and highlights the Department's lack of understanding of the estate's condition. The delay of appropriate maintenance, in some cases, means that elements of the estate then require capital replacement rather than repair, this does not represent value for money.

46. Whilst we accept that the Department's statutory responsibilities should be a priority, it seems to have become its sole focus, at the expense of all other forms of maintenance; and yet there is still a backlog of £29 million, which indicates that the Department is not meeting its statutory responsibilities. The Health and Safety Executive (HSENI) told the Committee that, in 2023, it raised concerns with the Department about the backlog including its failure to meet its statutory responsibilities and the potential impact on the delivery of education.
47. Preventative maintenance provides opportunities to invest earlier and make savings in the medium to long term. The lack of preventative maintenance means these opportunities are lost and has led to a cycle of deterioration, where minor issues are left unaddressed until they escalate into major problems, heightening the risk to safety and increasing long-term costs. It also means that the maintenance backlog continues to grow, and the estate continues to deteriorate. The witnesses concede that, without additional resources, the Department cannot keep pace with the deterioration of the estate.
48. The Committee heard that the Department and the EA are working on a proposal to clear the statutory backlog over the next two-year period, but that this could require a pause in funding for other works.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA's plan to bring the statutory remedial backlog (£29 million) under control within two financial years is submitted to the Minister within six months. The risks and implications of the plan should be clearly outlined and have appropriately assigned governance responsibilities.

Recommendation 6

The Department and the EA should develop clear plans to address the overall maintenance backlog and establish a preventative maintenance programme within 12 months, including targets for the reduction of backlogs. Progress and impact should be monitored, measured and reported to the appropriate oversight group.

49. The Committee heard that there was a “stop-start” approach to the delivery of some projects, where schemes are progressed to a point and then paused due to budget uncertainty. This can impact everything from major capital projects to maintenance. The Committee was told that, in some cases, maintenance and minor works may have to be halted halfway through the financial year to redirect limited resources to statutory compliance and safety-critical issues. Such a cycle of delay, restart, and uncertainty drives up costs, reduces efficiency, and compounds the deterioration of the estate.

The opportunity to maximise the potential benefits of delegated maintenance and enhanced school autonomy must be prioritised

50. The issue of delegated maintenance and school autonomy emerged as a significant theme during the Committee’s inquiry. Evidence presented reveals a growing frustration among school leaders regarding their limited ability to carry out basic maintenance tasks independently. They believe that the current system, which requires them to use the EA framework contractors for even small works, such as painting, is inefficient and costly. There is a fear that this lack of flexibility has led to delays and increased costs.
51. The Committee is pleased to hear that the EA plans to pilot a delegated maintenance scheme. This pilot will initially focus on floor coverings and painting, allowing schools greater autonomy in managing these aspects of their premises. The EA also highlighted that new term service contracts, structured across 18 regional lots, include key performance indicators and financial penalties to ensure effective contract management. However, any expansion of delegated powers must be carefully managed to avoid risks related to procurement, quality assurance, and statutory compliance.

52. Despite these developments, the Committee is afraid that the current system continues to constrain schools unnecessarily and does not in all circumstances represent best value for money. Witnesses told the Committee that some schools have raised funds to carry out maintenance independently, only to be blocked by bureaucratic processes. The Committee notes that VG and GMI schools, which manage their own maintenance budgets, may offer useful models of best practice that could inform future reforms. The Committee considers that a broader cultural and structural shift may be needed to empower schools and improve efficiency. Empowering schools to manage aspects of their own maintenance, within a framework of accountability and support, could lead to better outcomes for pupils, staff, and the public purse.
53. The Committee believes that there is a clear opportunity to strengthen engagement with schools in the management of the education estate. It welcomes the pilot for a delegated maintenance scheme, but it considers that schools and school leaders, who experience the condition of buildings daily, are best placed to identify emerging issues early. Their voices must be heard as active partners in maintenance planning. Involving them earlier could lead to faster, more informed responses to problems.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that, within six months, the Department and the EA complete and evaluate the current delegated maintenance pilot. If the pilot is successful, a plan should be developed to expand delegated powers to schools, with appropriate safeguards within a further six months. This should include training and guidance, incorporating best practice from across the estate, to ensure compliance and value for money. The committee expects to see demonstrable evidence of active engagement with schools in relation to maintenance issues.

Inadequate Special Educational Needs (SEN) estate provision is a significant and growing issue that must be addressed urgently

54. Both the Department and the EA acknowledge that the current estate is struggling to meet the needs of pupils with SEN and the growing demand for SEN places. The Committee heard that a dedicated budget has been established for SEN capital investment, with an allocation of £70 million for 2025-26. However, despite this financial commitment, the delivery of new SEN capacity remains constrained. The Committee is worried that children with additional needs are being disproportionately impacted.
55. The Committee was told that while some schools are willing to expand their SEN provision, the capital infrastructure to support this is not always available in time, leading to missed opportunities and increased pressure on existing facilities.
56. Witnesses assured the Committee that the Department was working with the Department of Health to try and address the known issues. It recognises the need to prioritise SEN and sees two main estate related issues. Firstly, ensuring that existing SEN provision is fit for purpose; and secondly, addressing the particular challenge of creating additional SEN capacity. The Committee welcomes, and would encourage, the preliminary discussions about a taskforce to address SEN issues. It considers that a cross-departmental SEN taskforce (DE, EA, Department of Health) should be established to coordinate planning and delivery of SEN provision. The Committee urges the department to develop clear plans for ensuring that current provision is fit for purpose and provides the services and facilities required. It expects the Department to provide an update on progress within six months.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that, within eighteen months, the Department and the EA, in association with schools, develop clear plans for ensuring that current SEN provision is fit for purpose in advance of a targeted capital investment plan to expand the SEN provision across the schools' estate.

Educational outcomes and impact on safety must be a key focus of estate management

57. The Department is responsible for managing the school estate, so that children can learn in safe and well-maintained buildings, maximising their chances of success. It acknowledges that many schools are in a poor state of repair. It is extremely disturbing that the Department does not have a good enough understanding of the condition and safety risks across the estate to ensure that children and staff are safe.
58. An unquantified, but nonetheless significant, proportion of children are learning in buildings that are not fit for purpose, impacting their learning experiences and ultimately limiting their educational outcomes. This is clearly unacceptable. The Committee is worried about the impact of poor conditions on pupil well-being and educational outcomes and notes the absence of any formal assessments by the Department. This should be addressed in the strategy, as the lack of outcomes data represents a significant gap in understanding and undermines efforts to make the case for investment.
59. The poor condition of schools also has an adverse impact on teachers and support staff. This is also unacceptable. We cannot allow our schools to reach a level of deterioration where the health and safety of children and staff are at risk.
60. The witnesses confirmed that statutory inspections are being carried out and that high-risk issues are prioritised. However, the Committee considers that the scale of the backlog means that important issues are being deferred. Evidence provided shows that five years ago, 70 per cent of statutory disciplines were not being met; this has since improved to 12 per cent, with a target of reducing it to 4–5 per cent in-year (2025-26).
61. Nonetheless, the Committee is troubled to hear that the HSENI has raised concerns about the backlog of statutory remedial work. In written evidence to the Committee, HSENI said that whilst it routinely engages with EA, as the employer, it took the unusual step of engaging with the Department in 2023 over its concerns. It highlighted the importance of ensuring statutory inspection and maintenance requirements are met but considers that challenges remain in the delivery of timely health and safety controls.

62. HSENI also noted that an aging estate represents an increased risk of age-related defects requiring reactive maintenance. In written evidence from the Department, the Committee was told that in the 39 percent of completed condition surveys (306 schools) around 870 critical health and safety issues were identified. It is important to ensure funding is available to maintain existing facilities. The absence of such maintenance will present unnecessary risk to employees and pupils.

Climate change and net zero responsibilities cannot be ignored

63. The Committee has significant doubts about the ability of the Department and the EA to meet statutory obligations under the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 and contribute meaningfully to the Executive's net zero carbon emissions targets. While there is a commitment to addressing these responsibilities, the evidence shows that progress is limited, fragmented, and constrained by funding shortfalls and legacy infrastructure challenges.
64. There is no clear plan to address responsibilities and the cost of retrofitting the estate to net zero standard is estimated to be in the region of £2 billion. The Department confirmed that it does not have the funding and is unlikely to secure it in the foreseeable future. The Committee is concerned that, as a result, the school estate will continue to operate with outdated, energy-inefficient infrastructure that contributes to high energy costs and higher than necessary carbon emissions.
65. Witnesses told the Committee that all new build projects currently in design from 2020 onwards are being developed with carbon reduction measures in line with current regulations. However, some major projects, such as the £375 million Strule Shared Education Campus (SSEC), were designed under older standards and will not meet the current net zero requirements. The Committee is not clear why the SSEC project was able to proceed in May 2025 with the old design, given the Climate Change Act has been in place since 2022. The Committee was told that redesigning the Strule project to comply would result in a cost uplift of approximately 40 per cent, raising serious questions about value for money of a project that is already significantly delayed and over-budget.

66. The Committee welcomes the pilot programmes initiated by the Department and the EA to explore low-cost energy efficiency measures, such as insulation and double glazing. These include work to improve data collection and working with the Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) to capture energy usage data and supports schools in reducing consumption. However, while commendable, these efforts remain limited in scope and impact.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends the Department and the EA develop and publish a climate action plan for the school estate setting out the path to net zero, in line with the Climate Change Act (NI) 2022. The plan should be developed within 12 months and performance reported annually.

They should also ensure that major refurbishments and all new build schools, from now onwards, meet or exceed net-zero design standards.

The risks and potential benefits of transitioning PFI/PPP assets need to be planned for and addressed

67. There are no clear plans for the post-transfer maintenance or management of PFI/PPP schools. Given the scale of the maintenance backlog, the Committee fears that returning PFI/PPP schools will not be properly maintained and funded. While these schools are expected to be handed back in good condition, they will then be absorbed into the wider estate, subject to the current funding constraints.
68. This lack of forward planning presents a significant risk. Prior to being returned to public ownership, PFI/PPP schools should have benefited from consistent, contracted maintenance standards. Without a clear plan for their integration, there is a danger that these assets will deteriorate, undermining the value of decades of investment and placing additional strain on an already overstretched maintenance system.

69. The Department and the EA should develop a transition plan to ensure returning PFI/PPP schools are appropriately factored into future maintenance programmes. Following handover, the Department has a clear opportunity to explore whether the savings from the PFI/PPP contract payments can be reallocated.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that ahead of each PFI/ PPP contract ending, the Department and the EA fully assess and plan for both the costs and savings from PFI/PPP contracts ending, and factor them into future budgetary considerations.

Better planning is required for the management of vacant school properties

70. Members raised concerns that the current approach appears to lack the flexibility and coordination required to make timely decisions about the disposal, redevelopment, or repurposing of surplus assets. Once again, the Committee is troubled by the lack of data, given the context of severe financial constraints and a growing maintenance backlog. In subsequent written evidence the Department informed the Committee that the EA owns a total of 55 unused sites.
71. The Committee heard that some vacant sites are earmarked for future educational use (including special educational needs (SEN) facilities) and that local communities are expressing interest in repurposing these sites for alternative uses, such as sports facilities. There is a lack of comprehensive and up-to-date information on vacant school properties., This represents a missed opportunity to identify and support the effective management of these properties to make more responsive decisions that could generate revenue, reduce security and maintenance costs, and support wider community development.

Recommendation 11

The Committee recommends the Department and the EA urgently undertake a full assessment of vacant properties for condition, potential reuse, and market value within 12 months. The Department should develop a plan for surplus properties and set annual targets for the most value for money use of the vacant estate.

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: Correspondence

[View correspondence issued and received related to the report](#)

Appendix 4: Other Documents

[View other documents related to the report](#)

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

- **Ronnie Armour**, Department of Education;
- **Stephen Creagh**, Department of Education;
- **Richard Pengelly**, Education Authority;
- **Paul Crooks**, Education Authority;
- **Dorinnia Carville**, Northern Ireland Audit Office; and
- **Stuart Stevenson**, Department of Finance

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