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2 July 2025

Dear Daniel,

Thank you for your letter of 13 June 2025 requesting further information to assist the Public Accounts Committee with their considerations, following the Evidence Session.

A response issued on 26 June 2025 however further information was required.

Please note this is a further response to complete all questions asked in your letter. The response is provided in the attached Annex.

I hope you find this information useful.

Yours sincerely

RONNIE ARMOUR

Q7: Details of any work that the Department have done to establish best practice in dealing with the issues of school's maintenance.

A7: The Department has engaged with colleagues in other jurisdictions, including the Republic of Ireland, all of whom report similar issues, with aging estates and increasing levels of backlog maintenance.

The Department has undertaken to bring forward an Estate Strategy. A key focus of this will be the handling of maintenance with a view to getting to a more proactive/planned approach, rather than the current approach, which we agree is reactive.

A key focus will be measures aimed at reducing the Maintenance Backlog. Such measures must of course be realistic and achievable within the available budget envelope.

In order to inform the development and measure progress against this element of the Estate Strategy, backlog maintenance must be baselined to determine the current position. To inform this, the Committee will be aware that the Department commissioned the EA to take forward a programme of condition surveys across the estate. These are currently in year three of a five-year programme and are already indicating a significant increase in previously reported levels of backlog maintenance.

The Department, working with the EA and colleagues in other jurisdictions and indeed other sectors with sizeable estates to consider best practice methods to not only reduce the backlog, but also move to a more proactive platform of planned maintenance, which in turn will better support bids for the funding of maintenance activity.

The Department has opened engagement with the Department of Health, who are also facing similar issues, and we plan to further this engagement.

The EA recently commissioned a "critical friend" to undertake a short independent objective review of the EA's Capital Minor Works and Maintenance Service processes. The objective of the review was to recommend changes which will improve the effectiveness/efficiency of delivery of EA's proposed works.

The findings and /recommendations for improving the processes, both in terms of shortening delivery times and reducing staff costs were presented to the EA Board meeting on 26 June 2025.

In summary, the "critical friend" found that two key issues. EA's low level Delegated Financial Authority and the need for business cases, which if resolved, will allow EA to realise significant efficiency benefits for its Maintenance Service and Minor Capital Works Delivery Service. The efficiency benefits being staff time/cost savings and shorter delivery times. In particular, the staff time/cost savings from not having to complete business cases can be reallocated to other EA work such as Asset Management.