

Written Ministerial Statement

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Education

MAJOR CAPITAL PROJECTS TO BE ADVANCED IN PLANNING

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Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): I should like to make a written statement updating this Assembly on the Schools' Capital Programme and my further capital investment plans for the coming period.

In my previous statements to the house, I set out the challenges faced by a schools' estate, comprising 1,164 schools (96 nursery, 827 primary, 202 post-primary and 39 special) of varying sizes, of differing types and under the control of various Managing Authorities. The estimated capital value of the Education Estate is substantial at just over £3billion.

My Department's strategy for capital investment has been and will remain focussed on supporting the development and delivery of a network of viable and sustainable schools, set firmly in the context of 'Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools' and shaped by the outworking of the Area Planning process.

Throughout my time in office, I have always ensured that investment plans primarily focus on providing a first class education experience for the pupils, teachers and indeed school communities, to ensure our young people have the type and quality of accommodation required to help them fulfil their potential.

I am conscious that it is incumbent on me to balance the limited capital resources made available to me against the scale of investment needed across, what can only be described as a wide and diverse schools' estate.

While it would be good to be in a position to make a statement that promises investment to all schools in need, I must be realistic and ensure that any school I announce for any form of investment is not only deliverable but will be sustainable into the future.

In the period since June 2012 I have made three major capital announcements of projects to be advanced in planning. These projects total over £500m and to date seven are complete, ten are currently on-site, a further twenty-six are in design with many of these likely to move on-site in the in-coming financial year.

In addition to these major projects, I was pleased to announce 51 project proposals under the Schools' Enhancement Programme (SEP) with an estimated value of £134million in March 2014. Nine of these projects are complete, seventeen are currently on site and a further eight projects are expected on site before the end of this financial year. I have recently approved a further twelve projects to move to construction and these are expected to be on site early in the new financial year. The remaining seven projects continue to advance in planning.

This represents a substantial pipeline of major and SEP projects and I hope you will agree as we reach the end of this Assembly term, and indeed the end of my time in office as Minister for Education, that this signifies considerable progress in terms of investment in the schools' estate.

Implementing major works in schools is not my only priority in any given year. I have delivered a sizeable programme of much needed minor capital works across the estate. These works have included addressing statutory obligations across the estate in regard to health and safety, fire safety and DDA. They have also dealt with a range of accommodation issues and additional provision. I have also invested substantially in maintenance works across the estate in recent years despite the considerable constraints on the resource budget.

But turning to the substantive purpose of my written statement to the house today, I wish to announce a further tranche of major capital projects to ensure that the pipeline of projects in planning continues to be filled. While the construction work on these projects will not take place for several years, it is important that we continue to plan and complete the design work to ensure that should funding become available for construction the Department is ready and able to take advantage of the opportunity.

I feel it is important in the first instance to set out the process used to select these specific schools for announcement today.

As was the case in my previous announcements in 2012, 2013 and 2014, I have agreed a protocol which has been developed to assess the list of proposed projects. A copy of this protocol has been placed on the Department's website.

The basic underpinning rationale of the protocol is that all projects will be considered within the context of the emerging area plans and confirmed as forming part of the core provision in an area going forward, including confirmation of the size of the school.

The approach was as follows:

- call for project proposals from School Authorities, limited to fifteen each from Controlled and Catholic Maintained and five each from the Integrated and Irish Medium Sectors;
- apply 'gateway' criteria to develop a shortlist of projects to proceed to the scoring stage;
- score each of the shortlisted projects in accordance with the scoring frame set out in the Protocol for Selection of Major Works Projects to Proceed in Planning 2016, which is available to view on the Department's website; and
- consider the prioritised list of projects in the context of the available budget.

Following the application of this process and consideration of the degree to which the future capital budget will be utilised by projects currently in planning, I have decided that a further ten Primary School projects should now be advanced in planning. These are:

- St Vincent de Paul PS, Belfast (Catholic Maintained).
- New Primary School to amalgamate: St Mary's PS, Annalong; St Joseph's PS, Kilkeel; and Moneydarragh PS, Annalong (Catholic Maintained).
- Islandmagee PS – a new Primary School created from the amalgamation of Mullaghduh PS and Kilcoan PS, Islandmagee (Controlled).
- Gaelscoil Aodha Rua, Dungannon (Irish Medium).
- St Peter's PS, Dungannon (Catholic Maintained).
- Gaelscoil Eanna, Newtownabbey (Irish Medium).
- Crawfordsburn PS (Controlled).
- Seaview PS, Belfast (Controlled).
- St Malachy's PS, Armagh (Catholic Maintained).
- King's Park PS, Lurgan (Controlled).

The total capital value of these schools is broadly estimated to be circa £40million.

While this will be welcome news for these schools, there will be others that will be disappointed not to be announced today. I can reassure those schools that not being part of this list will not impact their chances of being selected as part of a future call. I would also encourage these schools to consider making applications to future School Enhancement Programme calls for proposals. While these SEP projects cannot entirely rebuild a school, they have the potential to move more quickly than a major project and with an upper ceiling of £4m can still make a substantial difference to a school in need of capital investment.

In terms of budget, the spend profile associated with the ten recommended projects will be spread over a number of years (as is the case with previous announcements).

While different projects will progress at different speeds, timescales required to complete site searches, technical feasibility studies, business cases, procurement and design processes for the announced projects mean that significant construction spend is unlikely before the 2018/19 financial year.

I would like to conclude by stating that this announcement today is not only good news for those schools to be advanced in planning but it is also good news for the economy. It represents in the order of £40m of capital investment and will be a welcome boost to the construction industry over the coming years as the projects come to fruition.