

Session 2011/2016



**Northern Ireland  
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION**

# Position Paper: Area Planning

**TOGETHER WITH COMMITTEE PAPERS RELATING TO THE  
POSITION PAPER**

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***This position paper is embargoed until commencement of  
the debate in Plenary.***

# **Committee for Education Remit, Powers and Membership**

## **Powers**

The Committee for Education is a Statutory Departmental Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly established in accordance with paragraphs 8 and 9 of the Belfast Agreement, section 29 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and under Standing Order 48 of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Committee has power to:

- Consider and advise on Departmental budgets and annual plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;
- Consider relevant secondary legislation and take the Committee stage of primary legislation;
- Call for persons and papers;
- Initiate inquiries and make reports; and
- Consider and advise on any matters brought to the Committee by the Minister of Education.

## **Membership**

The Committee has 11 members including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson and a quorum of 5. The membership of the Committee is as follows:

Peter Weir (Chairperson)<sup>7, 11</sup>

Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)

Maeve McLaughlin<sup>5</sup>

Jonathan Craig

Sandra Overend<sup>6</sup>

Nelson McCausland<sup>3, 8</sup>

Chris Hazzard<sup>1</sup>

Trevor Lunn

Robin Newton<sup>4</sup>

Pat Sheehan<sup>2</sup>

Sean Rogers<sup>9, 10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> With effect from 10 September 2012 Mr Chris Hazzard replaced Mr Phil Flanagan

<sup>2</sup> With effect from 10 September 2012 Mr Pat Sheehan replaced Mr Daithi McKay

<sup>3</sup>With effect from 16 September 2013 Mr Stephen Moutray replaced Miss Brenda Hale

<sup>4</sup> With effect from 16 September 2013 Mr Robin Newton replaced Miss Michelle McIlveen

<sup>5</sup> With effect from 02 December 2013 Ms Maeve McLaughlin replaced Ms Michaela Boyle

<sup>6</sup> With effect from 04 July 2014 Mrs Sandra Overend replaced Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson

<sup>7</sup> With effect from 23 September 2014 Ms Michelle McIlveen replaced Mr Mervyn Storey as Chairperson

<sup>8</sup> With effect from 06 October 2014 Mr Nelson McCausland replaced Mr Stephen Moutray

<sup>9</sup> With effect from 17 November 2014 Mr Colum Eastwood replaced Mr Seán Rogers

<sup>10</sup> With effect from 08 December 2014 Mr Sean Rogers replaced Mr Colum Eastwood

<sup>11</sup> With effect from 12 May 2015 Mr Peter Weir replaced Ms Michelle Mcilveen as Chairperson

# Recommendations

- 1. The Committee recommends that the Department should adequately resource its Arms Length Bodies and provide with the Education Authority the necessary leadership, in order to ensure that Area Planning is undertaken in a transparent and consistent manner with clearly communicated sustainability criteria for schools and with Area Plans which are produced and updated within reasonable timescales.**
- 2. The Committee recommends that the Department and its Arms Length Bodies: make greater efforts to ensure close alignment between Area Plans and capital programmes and engage with school communities in order to explain the benefits associated with relevant capital projects and the associated synergies flowing from Area Planning resolution.**
- 3. The Committee recommends that the Department should recognise the shortcomings of its current measure of surplus places in schools and accept that the application of the so-called Bain criteria does not provide a guarantee of excellent educational provision. The Committee further recommends that the Department should base its assessment of the sustainability of the schools' estate as a whole, and in respect of individual schools, on a dashboard of measures including financial viability indicators but which also reflect the context of the school and the quality of the educational provision as assessed by a professionally independent Northern Ireland Education Improvement Service.**
- 4. The Committee recommends that the Department should accept the shortcomings of the Needs Model and revise it so as to recognise the increasingly diverse school population and changes to traditional designations and so as to promote increased mixing in schools.**

- 5. The Committee recommends that the Department should require its ALBs to plan educational provision on a truly area basis to a single timescale including all sectors and Further Education colleges where possible and that cross-sectoral solutions should be given consideration as appropriate.**
- 6. The Committee recommends that the Department and its Arms Length Bodies should work with schools, communities and Area Learning Communities to facilitate sharing, co-operation and innovative solutions to Area Planning problems particularly in rural areas so as to promote higher quality, better value for money educational provision.**
- 7. The Committee recommends that the Department and its Arms Length Bodies review their consultation practices and consider the use of other processes and supporting activities including policy development pre-consultations and linkages to community planning activities in order to actively explain policies and persuade stakeholders of their efficacy.**

# Area Planning - Background

1. In 2013-14, there were approximately 162k primary school pupils in 839 schools. Enrolments in one third of all primaries were described as falling below the DE sustainable schools threshold. Enrolments in one quarter of all primaries were less than 86 pupils. One in ten primaries had less than 50 pupils. The Department suggests that the overall number of primary school places exceeds the number of pupils by around 54k – the surplus being fairly evenly divided among ELB areas (with a few thousand more in the Western ELB area and a few thousand less in Belfast) and fairly evenly distributed between Controlled and Catholic Maintained schools with about 2k more surplus places in the latter. DE suggests that the number of enrolments in primaries has reduced since Area Planning commenced by around 4k.
2. In 2013-14, there were approximately 144k post-primary pupils. The Department suggests that the number of post-primary school places exceeds the number of pupils by around 20k – there was some variation across ELB areas with 2k more surplus places in the Southern ELB area compared to the Belfast ELB area and with 1.5k more surplus places in the Catholic Maintained sector compared to the Controlled sector.
3. The school surplus places figures given above are based on a comparison between actual enrolment and approved enrolment and do not include pupils with statements of Special Educational Needs or pupils admitted over and above a school's approved enrolment level. Approved school enrolments - i.e. the number of school places - are set by the Department and are initially calculated using the physical dimensions of the classrooms etc. in the school. Thus it appears that if a school complies with the School Building Handbook in respect of the dimensions of its classrooms, the upper limit of its enrolment can be easily calculated – for a primary school this appears to be 29 times the number of classrooms. Conversely if a new demand for school places is identified, the size of school / number of additional classrooms required can be determined by simply taking the steady state demand and dividing by 29.

4. Approved enrolments can be adjusted using the Development Proposal process which among other things considers actual enrolment, anticipated demand, the impact on existing or planned provision in the same area and the physical capacity of the school to expand or contract.
5. In order to better manage the surplus places in schools and to improve educational provision, on 26 September 2011, the Minister commissioned the 5 Education and Library Boards (ELBs) to co-ordinate, with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and other sectors, the Area Planning process.
6. Area Planning appeared to begin with the production of Viability Audits for all schools. The Viability Audits were to rely on robust and verifiable information and focus on so-called stress indicators – namely: the quality of the educational experience (including the requirements of the Revised Curriculum and at post-primary the Entitlement Framework); enrolment trends; and the financial position of the schools.
7. The Viability Audits were published on 6 March 2012 and indicated at that time that:
  - 46% of primary schools were evidencing stress in respect of either:
    - educational attainment (FSME attainment in English and Maths) or were in Formal Intervention; or
    - enrolment (i.e. less than 105 pupils (rural) or 140 pupils (urban)); or
    - financial management (projected deficit of more than 5%).
  - 84% of secondary schools and 35% of grammar schools were evidencing stress in respect of either:
    - educational attainment (5 A\*-C GCSEs including English and Maths) or were in Formal Intervention; or
    - enrolment (of less than 500 pupils in total or 100 pupils for the 6<sup>th</sup> form); or
    - financial management (projected deficit of more than 5%).
8. In response to suggestions that the Viability Audits were a prelude to a wide-ranging rationalisation of the schools' estate, the Department advised that a school demonstrating stress was simply "...a trigger for discussion and review and would lead to consideration of other factors (including those identified in the Bain Report (2006)): school leadership and

management; accessibility; and the strength of their links with the community". Following on from the Viability Audits, Area Profiles have since been produced by the ELBs in 2013 and 2014. These list each school and report key information. The information reported varies somewhat - with e.g. considerably less financial information published for Voluntary Grammar schools.

9. The Area Planning process was designed to:
  - ensure a network of sustainable schools within reasonable travelling distance;
  - identify and meet the needs of all children and young people in the area;
  - enhance the quality of provision and raise standards;
  - reduce surplus places and duplication of provision;
  - identify realistic, innovative and creative solutions to address need including opportunities for shared schooling on a cross sectoral basis;
  - identify potential for co-location of mainstream and special schools;
  - take account of relevant FE sector provision; and
  - explore opportunities for cross-border planning.
  
10. The Department established an Area Planning Co-ordination Group (APCG) later replaced by an Area Planning Steering Group (APSG) chaired by a Deputy Permanent Secretary. The APSG's work programme is aimed at filling the gaps in the draft plans, embedding a single approach to Area Planning and identifying priority areas for action in the short to medium term. Membership of the Group was to include the Controlled, Maintained, Integrated and Irish-Medium sectors. The new Controlled Schools sectoral support body is expected to be included in the APSG as well as the chief executive of the Education Authority.
  
11. The ELBs were charged with ensuring that the planning process is inclusive and that "all educational interests, including FE Sector and Trades Unions, have had the opportunity to present their views, consider the options and the final draft area plan for education provision". The ELBs were also to "provide appropriate and timely information to schools, parents and the wider community."
  
12. The Area Plans were to: outline education provision in an area; provide an analysis of past and projected enrolment and project the level of future demand given the strategic plans of

all school sectors (and the FE sector); assess how existing provision is likely to address anticipated changes in need; identify changes to provisions to meet future needs; and take account of existing and emerging policies.

13. In order to assess demand for educational provision at primary and post-primary, the Department adopted the Needs Model. This is designed to provide long term projections of the need for places in grant-aided schools across all sectors in both primary and post-primary phases within defined geographical areas. Nursery and Special School provision are not included in the Needs Model. The Needs Model is not designed to predict the demand for places in individual schools rather it is focused on the aggregate demand in a geographical area. The Needs Model does not calculate separately for gender nor does it provide separate totals for Years 8-12 and post-16 projections.
14. The Needs Model uses pupil population data in primary and post-primary schools gained from school census data and projections based on data from the Government Actuaries Department (GAD). The Needs Model categorises the educational sectors as follows:
  - **Controlled** – i.e. all Controlled schools excluding Controlled Integrated and Irish Medium Controlled schools BUT including Other Maintained Protestant church schools AND Non-Catholic Voluntary Grammar schools
  - **Maintained** – i.e. all Maintained schools including all Irish Medium units and schools AND Catholic Voluntary Grammar schools but not including the Other Maintained Protestant church schools
  - **Integrated** – i.e. all Grant Maintained and Controlled Integrated schools
15. The Needs Model does NOT differentiate between grammar and non-grammar provision in line with the Department's policy of removing academic selection. The Needs Model indicates that it is "assumed that the current proportionate demand in District Council area for Controlled, Maintained (including IM) and Integrated education will carry forward in need projections unless there is agreement on variations for particular sectors." Where changes are agreed these must be consistent with the existing pattern of so-called cross border flows i.e. the proportion of children travelling in and out of a district council area to attend school. The Needs Model also indicates that growth "in the Integrated sector at the Northern Ireland level will be assumed to be described equally from the 'Controlled and Main-

tained sectors'. ...Any variation from this at local planning level must be agreed by the sectors." The Needs Model assumes that growth in the Irish Medium sector will be derived solely from the 'Maintained sector'.

16. The Needs Model indicates that the level of surplus capacity to be included "may vary across the sectors and geographically but must be agreed locally and must not exceed 10% of the total calculated need for Northern Ireland."
17. DE also advised that it interpreted the recent Drumragh judgement as requiring it to avoid the inflexible/mechanistic use of the Needs Model which might prevent it from carrying out its Article 64 duty – to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education. DE indicated that it viewed the Needs Model projections as reflecting current patterns of enrolment and that the Model would not necessarily cap growth in a sector. DE indicated that it viewed the Needs Model projections as a starting point for planning and that "sectoral totals may be adjusted in discussion with the integrated sector to recognise the need for growth beyond that suggested solely through population changes." The Department/ELBs/CCMS have been unable to provide examples of when Integrated sector totals had been adjusted to recognise growth beyond that suggested solely through population changes.
18. There is understood to be no legislative requirement for the Department to approve Area Plans. To-date, DE indicates that it has exercised a scrutiny and challenge role in relation to Area Plans. The current Area Planning process is expected to be reviewed following the establishment of the Education Authority.

### **Committee's Approach**

19. From 2012 until the present, schools, parents, school children and other stakeholders have contacted the Committee formally (and Members informally) expressing considerable concerns in respect of:
  - the methodological robustness of the calculation of surplus places;
  - the relevance of the Viability Audit/Area Profile information in determining the effectiveness or sustainability of schools;
  - the apparent failure to consistently and reasonably address school contextual issues including rurality and educational and socio-economic need;

- the unsatisfactory nature of consultations relating to Area Plans; and
- the application of and variation to arbitrary limits on school size.

20. Given the concerns that were raised and the complex nature of the above and in order to inform its understanding of Area Planning and the Viability Audits for schools, the Committee agreed at its meeting on 6 June 2012, to appoint a Special Adviser – Professor Tony Gallagher. The Special Adviser formally briefed the Committee on 6 September 2012; 10 April 2013; 22 January 2014 and 17 September 2015. The Special Adviser produced a series of briefing papers which are appended.
21. The Committee also agreed to undertake a series of informal evidence sessions with a wide-range of stakeholders. These were held on 26 September 2012; 19 June 2013 and 4 February 2015. Papers summarising the feedback from these sessions are also appended.
22. In order to inform its understanding of related practices in other jurisdictions, the Committee undertook a visit to shared campus schools in Edinburgh on 2 October 2013 and met informally with the chairperson and members of the Commission on the Delivery of Rural Education in Scotland. A report on the visit is available on the Committee's webpage.
23. The Committee also commissioned Assembly Research to produce relevant briefing papers. These are available on the Assembly's website.
24. The Committee undertook formal evidence sessions with: the Department of Education (6 September 2012; 10 April 2013 (with the Minister); 2 April 2014 and 8 October 2015); the ELBs and CCMS (7 November 2012 and 8 October 2014) and Professor Knox, Ulster University with representatives of the Centre for Shared Education at QUB (15 January 2014).
25. At its meeting on 13 May 2015, the Committee agreed a position paper – this paper – setting out its views and making recommendations in respect of the Area Planning process.

## **Acknowledgements**

26. The Committee wishes to record its thanks to all those who informed the Committee's deliberations on Area Planning including particularly its Special Adviser, Professor Tony Gallagher and stakeholders who attended its informal evidence-taking events.

# Area Planning – Progress to-date

## **Post-Primary School Area Plans**

27. On 5 July 2012, the ELBs published, for consultation, their draft plans for restructuring post-primary education in each of their areas. The consultation closed on 26 October 2012. The proposals covered Controlled, Maintained, Integrated, Irish Medium and Voluntary Grammar provision and were produced with the help of CCMS. CCMS appeared to have produced its plans essentially independently of the ELBs. Consequently the plans included limited examples of cross-sectoral co-operation.
28. There were around 50,000 responses to the related consultation. The responses to the BELB draft plan were largely positive (60-90% approval on most questions). The responses to the WELB plan were largely negative (generally 90% disapproval). The feedback on the other plans was somewhere in between these 2 extremes. Half of the total responses were in the NEELB area and half of the NEELB responses were for a single petition (concerning plans for Ballee Community High School, Cambridge House Grammar School, Slemish Integrated College and Cullybackey High School). 84% of the responses in the BELB area came from St Louise's Comprehensive College. 100% of the responses to the BELB consultation came from respondents based in the BELB area despite 41% of those pupils attending post-primary schools in the Belfast City Council area living in other district council areas. There were 7 petitions in total– these accounted for about half of all of the submissions.
29. The Minister received the revised post-primary plans in December 2012. These were published in February 2013. All of the ELBs proposed to varying degrees the development of local area solutions often where schools have enrolment or budget issues or where there is Formal Intervention etc.. The local area solution was described as a full review designed to establish the most appropriate level of provision - possibly involving a number of schools - in a defined geographical area. The ELBs, following consultation, were to produce a preferred local area proposal which is to be implemented before 2025.

30. The key findings of the post-primary Area Plans are summarised below. The designations of school types match those used in the Needs Model. However, it should be noted that the ELBs and CCMS, unlike the Department, include children with SEN in their calculations of surpluses. Thus, direct comparison between DE's figures and those used in the Area Plans is not possible.
31. BELB's post-primary Area Plan indicated that if the status quo was maintained, a present surplus of around 1400 post-primary places (around 400 in Controlled; 1,300 mostly in Catholic Maintained schools; and 100 in Integrated schools) will become a deficit of around 400 places (mostly in Controlled schools with other sectors roughly breaking even) by 2025.
32. NEELB's post-primary Area Plan indicated that if the status quo was maintained, a present surplus of around 3,100 post-primary places (approx. 2,500 in Controlled schools; 450 in Maintained and Catholic VG; and 180 in Integrated schools) will fall to a surplus of around 1,000 (1,350 surplus in Controlled schools; a deficit of 300 in Catholic Maintained & Voluntary Grammars; and a deficit of 50 in Integrated schools) by 2025. The draft plan indicated that perhaps 3000 pupils leave the NEELB area for post-primary education and that around 1500 went to the Magherafelt district council area for education.
33. SELB's post-primary Area Plan indicated that if the status quo was maintained, a present surplus of around 2,800 post-primary places (apparently largely in the Catholic Maintained and Controlled sectors with a current deficit in the Integrated sector) will become a deficit of around 4,300 by 2025.
34. SEELB's post-primary Area Plan indicated that if the status quo is maintained, a surplus of around 1,861 post-primary places (roughly apportioned as approx. 1,200 surplus in Controlled schools; approx. 650 surplus in Maintained and Catholic VG; and a deficit of 150 in Integrated schools) will become breakeven by 2025 (the Catholic Maintained & Voluntary Grammars will have 300 surplus places and there will be under-provision of around 400 places in the Integrated sector).
35. WELB's post-primary Area Plan indicated that if the status quo was maintained, a present surplus of 3,100 post-primary places (approx. 600 in Controlled schools; 2,600 in Maintained and Catholic VG; and a deficit of 145 in Integrated schools) will fall to a surplus of

2,200 (400 surplus in Controlled schools; a surplus of 2,000 in Catholic Maintained & Voluntary Grammars; and a deficit of 227 in Integrated schools) by 2025.

### **Primary School Area Plans**

36. On 19 March 2013, the ELBs published, for consultation, their draft plans for restructuring primary education in each of their areas. The ELBs' primary school Area Planning consultation concluded at the end of June 2013. The ELBs published the primary Area Plans in early July 2014 – roughly 1 year after the consultation closed.
  
37. There were around 7,800 independent responses to the consultation and a further 3,407 signatures to petitions. For BELB, responses were generally positive – between half and two thirds of the respondents generally approved of the draft primary school Area Plans for BELB with around one quarter of respondents being unsure as to whether proposals would provide sustainable schools with reasonable travelling distances etc. Over half of respondents felt that the draft plans would not support shared education or encourage cross-sectoral schooling. In NEELB, there were 2773 responses to the consultation - about half of the responses were made on-line. Around half of all responses came from the Newtownabbey and Antrim District Council areas. 198 worksheet responses were received from pupils. Around 900 school-designed template questionnaires were received. In SELB, there were 2,251 independent responses to the consultation – almost all of the responses were made on-line. There were 3 petitions garnering a further 1700 responses. In SEELB there were around 700 responses – most of them on-line. In WELB there were 2300 responses – 95% of which were made on-line. Levels of approval varied very considerably from ELB to ELB and from district council to district council.
  
38. The draft plans identified a large number of schools for which further consultation or local area solutions were required. The final plans identified a number of schools for which further approved action was to be undertaken. The Area Plans often didn't set out the approved action or the options which are to be explored.
  
39. Every primary school in Fermanagh which has low enrolment and a high level of vacancy appeared to be involved in a sharing arrangement. WELB appeared to have accepted this and was keeping the schools in question under review. One of the schools in Fermanagh -

St. Mary's Teemor is involved in sharing with a school in the Republic of Ireland - Fairgreen National School Belturbet County Cavan. WELB and SEELB both made reference to federative or possible federated arrangements involving a number of schools.

40. At least one of the final primary Area Plans indicated that the treatment of primary schools under Area Planning will depend among other things on some of the following factors:
- If a school has over 105 pupils (rural) or 140 pupils (urban) – it will usually be considered sustainable and no further action will be taken;
  - If a school has less than 105 pupils but more than 85 pupils with 4 teachers – the school will be subject to annual consideration of its sustainability though geographical isolation and community engagement factors will be considered;
  - If a school has less than 86 pupils and 3 teachers – consideration will be given to reorganisation including amalgamation or federation if it leads to a 4 teacher school with limited pupil travel time;
  - If a school has less than 86 pupils and 2 teachers – a review will be undertaken. The WELB plan said that the “baseline” case will be closure unless a viable amalgamation option can be devised; and
  - If a school has composite classes; a low number of teachers; varying patterns of enrolment these may be a driver for consideration of further action.
  - The NEELB plan referenced the Formal Intervention Process as a driver for further consideration of the viability of a school. However the NEELB plan also explicitly referenced ETI inspection since 2009 - particularly where schools get 2 “unsatisfactory” ratings in a row or where a school regresses – as a basis for further consideration of school viability.
41. At least one of the final primary Area Plans made explicit reference to Article 64 – the obligation to facilitate and encourage Integrated Education – and further work to include proposals to increase Integrated Education provision in subsequent iterations of the Area Plan.
42. At least one of the final primary Area Plans indicated that issues in respect of Irish Medium Education are to be taken forward within a Northern Ireland strategy for Irish Medium Edu-

cation which was to be formulated and that future Irish Medium provision would be discussed at the APSG.

43. The key findings of the primary Area Plans are summarised below. The designations of school types match those used in the Needs Model. However, it should be noted that the ELBs and CCMS, unlike the Department, include children with SEN in their calculations of surpluses. Thus, direct comparison between DE's figures and those used in the Area Plans is not possible.
44. BELB has 32,393 primary places – half of these are in the Maintained sector; 5% are Integrated, 43% are in the Controlled sector. BELB advised that there are currently 8,239 vacant places when supernumerary places are included. The surplus places are split roughly equally between Controlled and Maintained with a small number of vacancies (119 less 49 supernumerary) in the Integrated sector.
45. In general terms, primary provision in BELB may be characterised by a number of Controlled schools below the Bain Threshold; a number of Maintained schools above the threshold but with many excess places; 500+ surplus places in the IME sector (actual enrolment is about 1000); and limited over-subscribed provision in the Integrated sector. BELB identified a Maintenance backlog of £22m in its school estate. The Needs Model projects an overall increase in the school population by about 1000 pupils by 2018-19 which will reduce to current levels by 2025.
46. NEELB has 47,184 primary places – approximately 60% of these are in the Controlled sector; 30% are in the Maintained sector (includes 1% IME); 6% are Integrated. NEELB advises that there are currently 10,815 vacant places. The majority of the surplus places are in Controlled primaries in Antrim, Ballymena, Coleraine and Newtonabbey and in Catholic Maintained schools in Magherafelt and Moyle.
47. As with BELB, in general terms, primary provision in the NEELB area may be characterised by a number of Controlled schools below the Bain Threshold; and a number of Maintained schools above the threshold but with many excess places. Unlike BELB, a Maintenance backlog figure was not provided by NEELB. The Needs Model projects an overall increase in the school population by about 1000 pupils by 2018-19 which will reduce to current levels by 2025.

48. SELB has 48,421 primary places – approximately 40% of these are in the Controlled sector; 58% are in the Maintained sector; 3% are Integrated. SELB advises that there are currently around 10,000 vacant or surplus places. The distribution of surplus places is generally in proportion to the overall size of the sectors.
49. Unlike the other ELBs, the SELB area has a number of both Controlled and Maintained schools which are below the Bain Threshold. Very few school closures particularly in Dungannon & South Tyrone and Newry City had been proposed in the draft plan. Unlike the other ELBs, the Needs Model projects a steady decrease in surplus places in SELB to around 3000 by 2025.
50. SEELB has 43,027 primary places – approximately 60% of these are in the Controlled sector; 32% are in the Maintained sector; 7% are Integrated. SELB advises that there are currently around 8,558 vacant or surplus places. The distribution of surplus places is generally in proportion to the overall size of the 2 bigger sectors. There is a very low percentage of vacancies in the Integrated sector.
51. In the SEELB area, there are few schools below the Bain threshold but there many schools with a large number of surplus places. Like most of the other ELBs, the Needs Model projects an increase in pupil numbers until 2018-19 and then a reduction to present levels by 2025.
52. WELB has 39,741 primary places – approximately 68% of these are in the Maintained sector; 29% are in the Controlled sector; 3% are Integrated. WELB advises that there are currently around 12,197 vacant or surplus places. The distribution of surplus places is generally in proportion to the overall size of the 2 bigger sectors. There is a very low percentage of vacancies in the Integrated sector.
53. WELB has many more Maintained primary schools than Controlled schools – particularly in the Derry City Council area. There are many schools which are below the Bain Threshold. A relatively small number of closures or amalgamations were proposed in the draft plan. Like most of the other ELBs, the Needs Model projects an increase in pupil numbers until 2018-19 and then a reduction to present levels by 2025.

## **Special School Area Plans**

54. Area Plans for Special Schools were originally to be submitted to the Department in February 2013. As some of the draft plans referred to Special Units in mainstream schools and others included dedicated Special School facilities, the Minister indicated (February 2013) that this made it difficult to determine an overall regional picture of the highly specialised facilities which are needed to support vulnerable children. As the plans also pre-dated the finalisation of the Special Educational Needs Review, the Minister decided that a new co-ordinated regional assessment of future need for dedicated Special Schools was required. The Minister commissioned the development of a regional plan for these schools which was originally to be completed by September 2013.
55. The Department has indicated that the review was being undertaken by a small working group – including representatives of the ELBs, the Special Schools; the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Team in DE. The review's terms of reference include a strategic assessment of current Special Schools provision and the development of a regional plan. The review was to consider: the nature and type of SEN provision for children aged 3 to 19; the location of Special Schools; journey times; provision for Early Years in Special Schools; provision of outreach services; and the need for improved accommodation to match growing and differing needs.
56. Following concerns raised by Special Schools about delays to permanent appointments, the Committee recently sought an update on the group's progress. It is understood that the group has recently reported to the Minister.

# Area Planning – Findings and Recommendations

57. The Committee considered the formal and informal evidence that it has gathered since 2012 on Area Planning and the reports produced by its Special Adviser. The Committee's findings and recommendations are set out below.

## **The Need for Area Planning**

58. The Committee recognised the critical importance of education to pupils, parents, teachers, schools and wider society. The Committee accepted that the extensive costs associated with our highly sectoralised education system need to be judiciously managed. The Committee also accepted that demographic and other challenges will need to be appropriately planned for and met in order to deliver the best possible education for school children. The Committee agreed that planning on an area basis rather than on the basis of individual schools is a significant and necessary change management undertaking requiring resource, innovation and meaningful consultation with the stakeholders mentioned above. The Committee agreed that the process was impeded and greatly complicated by the ongoing and delayed re-organisation of the Education and Library Boards and their replacement by the Education Authority.
59. The Committee noted that despite some effort by the Department and its Arms Length Bodies and the generation of considerable angst in schools, Area Planning to-date appears to have had only a limited impact on the schools' estate. Members commented on the lengthy timescales and the lack of definitive resolution in many plans. Members also noted with concern delays in the Special Schools Area or Regional planning process and the reported adverse impact on permanent staffing appointments in Special Schools.
60. The Committee noted the Department's contention that primary and post-primary Area Planning was not designed to save money but was instead a sincere attempt to improve

educational provision. The Committee noted also that most stakeholders simply did not believe or accept the Department's assertions in this regard.

61. The Committee has previously been aware of a level of discord between the Department and its Arms Length Bodies; schools and parents etc.. However, Members were greatly taken aback by the consistently high degree of frustration; lack of confidence; dissatisfaction and open distrust of the Department, expressed by stakeholders in respect of Area Planning. The Committee felt that this was the consequence of the Department's failure to adequately resource the ALBs to undertake the Area Planning process and to ensure consistency of approach by the ELBs and CCMS in the development of Area Plans coupled with a widespread perception – which DE failed to dispel - that Area Planning was a vehicle for a long planned school closure programme.
62. The Committee found no evidence that the Department was indeed employing Area Planning in order to implement a previously determined school closure programme. That said, Members were astonished that neither the Department nor the ELBs/CCMS appeared to understand that ill-defined Area Plans developed iteratively over excessively long timescales and including references to changing, poorly explained sustainability measures would feed ill-informed media coverage and undermine school staff and parental confidence and thus weaken the sustainability of some schools. It is therefore hardly surprising that the perception, set out above, in respect of DE's attitude to school closures persists among stakeholders.
63. The Committee recognised the key role that the Education Authority will have going forward in tackling the inefficiencies and promoting a more consistent approach for Area Plans. That said and given the roles of other Arms Length sectoral organisations which have differing responsibilities in respect of educational planning, the Committee felt that the Department will continue to have a critical responsibility for the development of an overarching vision for and the delivery of Area Planning.
64. The Committee therefore agreed the following recommendation:

**Recommendation #1: The Committee recommends that the Department should adequately resource its Arms Length Bodies and provide with the Ed-**

**ucation Authority the necessary leadership, in order to ensure that Area Planning is undertaken in a transparent and consistent manner with clearly communicated sustainability criteria for schools and with Area Plans which are produced and updated within reasonable timescales.**

65. The Committee considered evidence relating to the Department's efforts to incentivise Area Planning agreement through the capital programme. Officials indicated, in general terms, that the Department had had limited success in this regard with consequent delays to the new school building programme.
66. The Committee felt that if the benefits of new school building options had been properly explained to stakeholders – particularly parents – this would certainly have encouraged resolution of Area Planning difficulties in many cases. Members felt that the Department and its ALBs had failed to engage properly and imaginatively with stakeholders in this regard.
67. The Committee therefore agreed the following recommendation:

**Recommendation #2: The Committee recommends that the Department and its Arms Length Bodies: make greater efforts to ensure close alignment between Area Plans and capital programmes and engage with school communities in order to explain the benefits associated with relevant capital projects and the associated synergies flowing from Area Planning resolution.**

68. Some Members of the Committee highlighted with concern what they viewed as the Department's failure to undertake any form of equality screening or impact assessment in respect of changes to priorities for capital expenditure. These Members strongly felt that this was entirely unfair and inappropriate as they believed that recent changes to capital priorities would inevitably disadvantage the Controlled sector.
69. Members generally agreed that going forward policy changes should take account of the changing dynamics of the education system and should ensure equitable access to resource and capital funding for schools.

## **Sustainability – Calculation of Surplus School Places**

70. The Committee considered the methodology for the calculation of surplus school places and was surprised that DE and the ELBs/CCMS employed different treatments for pupils with SEN and other supernumerary enrolments. The Committee found this difference in approach - which might amount to a Northern Ireland wide over-estimation of surplus places by around 10k - to be unhelpful and inexplicable.
71. The Committee noted suggestions that the calculation of surplus school places is sensitive to both demographic projections and key assumptions in the School Building Handbook. Members were alarmed by the argument that much publicised predictions of over-supply could in some cases be re-calculated as under-supply following relatively small changes to classroom occupancy assumptions. The Committee also struggled to understand the underlying logic which could apparently translate a small number of unfunded surplus places in a school into real additional costs either to the Aggregated Schools Budget or to the capital or maintenance budgets for the schools' estate. The Committee felt that if the latter was indeed the case, it was surprising that the Department appeared to have made no effort to encourage the active marketing of vacant school classrooms/buildings in order to stimulate greater community use or even generate limited incomes. The Committee noted that in other similar jurisdictions e.g. Scotland, this calculation of surplus places in schools was not used.
72. The Committee therefore felt that given the different treatments for enrolments; the sensitivity of assumptions; and the questionable relationship between low levels of over-supply and marginal costs associated with surplus places, the much quoted 85k or 74k surplus schools places figure did not stand up to challenge and did not usefully inform the management of the schools' estate. Consequently, the Committee agreed with stakeholders that measures of sustainability and planning for the supply of school places should be improved and should certainly not be based on classroom dimensions.
73. The Committee felt that although the Annual Area Profiles provide some useful information on the financial position of some schools, the information tended to over-emphasise easily measured indicators and may fail to recognise other more subtle educational value added measures which might also take better account of the socio-economic context in which

schools operate. The Committee noted that the Department was undertaking work with schools on the development of a dashboard of measures in order to better evaluate the value added by schools.

74. The Committee was also surprised by the reference in an Area Plan to the Formal Intervention Procedure (FIP) or the receipt of a number of “unsatisfactory” ratings from ETI as a measure of the sustainability of a school. The Committee previously agreed that inspection was a vital component in school improvement and that although the Every School a Good School policy envisages possible school closures following a series of “unsatisfactory” inspections and ineffective improvement support, this use of FIP could lead to an incorrect perception of the purpose of inspection and would thus undermine the school improvement process. The majority of Committee Members previously agreed that in order to combat erroneous perceptions of this kind a statutorily independent education inspectorate and improvement service was required. The Committee also previously unanimously agreed on the importance of professional independence for the education inspection and improvement service.
75. The Committee noted the assumptions in the Bain criteria which appeared to link educational attainment to school size. The Committee also noted contradictory evidence from some academics and from principals, teachers and parents from small schools who strongly argued that there was no correlation between school size and the provision of adequate access to the curriculum and who felt that a simple enrolment measure took no account of a growing level of sharing between small schools which is often on a cross-sectoral basis.
76. The Committee also noted the apparently arbitrary decision to designate all schools outside of the 2 largest urban conurbations in Northern Ireland as rural schools. This led to a different set of sustainability criteria being applied to urban schools in e.g. the City of Lisburn than those in similar circumstances in Belfast. The Committee has yet to receive an adequate explanation for this approach.
77. The Committee felt that in line with the Sustainable Schools Policy, the assessment of the sustainability of a school should be more complex than a simple comparison with an expected enrolment level including an apparently arbitrary designation of rurality. The Committee was also not convinced that smaller schools can’t – even when they engage in

sharing - provide appropriate value for money access to the curriculum, as appeared to be suggested by the Department.

78. The Committee therefore agreed the following recommendation:

**Recommendation #3: The Committee recommends that the Department should recognise the shortcomings of its current measure of surplus places in schools and accept that the application of the so-called Bain criteria does not provide a guarantee of excellent educational provision. The Committee further recommends that the Department should base its assessment of the sustainability of the schools' estate as a whole, and in respect of individual schools, on a dashboard of measures including financial viability indicators but which also reflect the context of the school and the quality of the educational provision as assessed by a professionally independent Northern Ireland Education Improvement Service.**

#### **Needs Model / Sectors**

79. The Committee considered the use of the Needs Model in Area Planning. The Committee noted the Model's use of fairly unsophisticated separate linear projections of school demand for each sector based on population estimates etc.. These, it was reported, could be amended by a limited inflexible range of inter-sectoral transfers. The Committee noted however that no examples had been provided of changes to Needs Model projections e.g. for the Integrated sector based on parental demand.

80. Participants at the Committee's informal stakeholder events commented that the Needs Model, with its inflexible linkage to religious designations was becoming less meaningful particularly in those parts of Northern Ireland where natural mixing in schools and newcomer numbers were increasing. The Committee noted recent Departmental policy developments in respect of Jointly Managed Church schools apparently reflecting demand from parents and schools and recognising greater fluidity in respect of inter-sectoral transfer and co-operation. The Committee agreed that changes to the Needs Model reflecting the reality of so-called supermixed schools and an increasingly diverse and motile school population were required.

81. The Committee felt that the application of separate projections of demand for each sector would inevitably tend to promote separate planning for each of those sectors. Thus as a consequence, all of the Area Plans were, in almost all cases, in fact 3 separate sectoral plans for the area in question. The Committee therefore believed that the Needs Model as currently formulated does nothing to support true cross-sectoral Area Planning.
82. The Committee felt that the above was compounded by the inexplicable decision to allow the Catholic Maintained and Catholic Voluntary Grammar sector to plan its development on a separate basis and to a separate timescale to the Controlled/non-Denominational Voluntary Grammar sector. This led to a perception of disadvantage for Controlled schools which was exacerbated by the absence, until recently, of a representative body for that sector.
83. The Committee also felt that the failure to include Further Education colleges in Area Planning was a significant missed opportunity to plan value for money post-16 provision.
84. The Committee therefore agreed the following recommendations:

**Recommendation #4: The Committee recommends that the Department should accept the shortcomings of the Needs Model and revise it so as to recognise the increasingly diverse school population and changes to traditional designations and so as to promote increased mixing in schools.**

**Recommendation #5: The Committee recommends that the Department should require its Arms Length Bodies to plan educational provision on a truly area basis to a single timescale including all sectors and Further Education colleges where possible and that cross-sectoral solutions should be given consideration as appropriate.**

85. Some Members also strongly felt that the Needs Model as currently configured had served to wrongly and severely restrict the growth of the Integrated Education sector. These Members contended that the larger sectors had failed to support or had sometimes even undermined constructive cross-sectoral solutions and had exploited the Needs Model and the Area Planning process to this end.

86. Other Members contended that obligations to promote different educational sectors were unfair and were wrongly exploited by those sectors to promote forms of education which were not actually popular with parents.
87. Still other Members contended that although the Area Planning process and the Needs Model had their shortcomings, it was not correct to assert that growth in Integrated Education had been wrongly restricted and that it was appropriate and in line with current legislation to promote some forms of education.

### **Innovative Solutions - Rural Areas**

88. As indicated above, the challenges presented by Area Planning in terms of educational improvement; demographic and social change are substantial. The Committee felt that this was often particularly the case in rural areas where schools play a key role in the identity and sustainability of small communities.
89. The Committee's consideration of Area Planning was greatly informed by the many eloquent and well-thought out oral and written submissions from rural schools and organisations. It was these consistently expressed views that convinced some Members that the Area Planning process had generally failed to recognise the unique character of educational challenges in rural communities. Although the Committee accepted that the focus of schools must always be on the educational experience of their pupils, Members also felt that consideration should be given to the central part that schools play in local communities. Some Members believed that the shortcomings of Area Planning in this regard were further evidenced by the ELBs'/CCMS' failure to support more than a limited number of innovative cross-sectoral solutions in rural areas.
90. Given the difficult nature of some Area Planning issues, the Committee was very surprised by the patchy nature of the support from the ELBs/CCMS for Shared Education including shared campuses, federative arrangements or other forms of collaboration including cross-border collaboration. The Committee noted that despite concerns regarding cultural or identity issues, there was nonetheless considerable support in school communities for more sharing and collaboration.

91. The Committee strongly felt that the Area Planning process had tended to promote an unhealthy level of competition between schools rather than sharing and co-operation. The Committee therefore felt that DE and the ALBs should do much more to facilitate co-operation between communities, parents, governors, and schools etc. through e.g. Area Learning Communities and should provide much clearer guidance on sharing and innovative solutions to Area Planning problems including other school management options.

92. The Committee therefore agreed the following recommendation:

**Recommendation #6: The Committee recommends that the Department and its Arms Length Bodies should work with schools, communities and Area Learning Communities to facilitate sharing, co-operation and innovative solutions to Area Planning problems particularly in rural areas so as to promote higher quality, better value for money educational provision.**

93. Some Members felt that the Department should do more to promote cross-border co-operation between schools so as to secure educational provision in remote areas of Northern Ireland and indeed in the Republic of Ireland. Other Members disagreed, arguing that differences in educational systems in the 2 jurisdictions generally precluded or would limit whole school sustained cross-border sharing.

### **Consultation**

94. The Committee noted, with some concern, consistent and significant dissatisfaction with the Area Planning consultation process. Many stakeholders argued that consultations were tokenistic and failed to meaningfully engage with parents, schools etc.. Many stakeholders contended that consultation responses had no or very limited impact on Area Planning outcomes. Stakeholders complained about failures to explain terminology and inconsistent approaches by the different ELBs.

95. The Committee recognised that the planning of school provision would always be contentious – reflecting the need to improve educational outcomes; the sincere concerns of parents and schools; and the pressures of reducing budgets. The Committee therefore

felt that it was perhaps not completely surprising that the consultation process proved to be controversial and unsatisfactory.

96. The Committee felt however that the Department and its ALBs have been unimaginative and ineffective in this policy area (and others) in respect of how consultation is undertaken or overseen. The Committee felt that the Department and its ALBs should consider how governments in other jurisdictions explain their policies and persuade stakeholders of their efficacy. The Committee recognised that that this may require supporting activities including wide-ranging policy development pre-consultations linked to community planning activities at local government level including e.g. community audits and a more formal parental consultation platform. The Committee recognised that this may require a different Departmental mindset in respect of stakeholder engagement.
97. The Committee therefore agreed the following recommendation:

**Recommendation #7: The Committee recommends that the Department and its Arms Length Bodies review their consultation practices and consider the use of other processes and supporting activities including policy development pre-consultations and linkages to community planning activities in order to actively explain policies and persuade stakeholders of their efficacy.**

Northern Ireland  
Assembly  
Committee for Education  
MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS  
WEDNESDAY 6 June 2012  
SENATE CHAMBER, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

**Present:**

Mervyn Storey MLA (Chairperson)  
Danny Kinahan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Michaela Boyle MLA  
Jonathan Craig MLA  
Jo-Anne Dobson MLA  
Phil Flanagan MLA  
Brenda Hale MLA  
Trevor Lunn MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Daithí McKay MLA  
Sean Rogers MLA

**In Attendance:**

Roisin Fleetham (Assembly Clerk)  
Sheila Mawhinney (Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Paula Best (Clerical Supervisor)  
Sharon Young (Clerical Officer)

**Apologies:** None

The meeting commenced at 10.03 am in closed session.

Appointment of a Specialist Advisor on Viability Audit/ Area Planning

The Committee discussed the outcome of the Sub-Committee meeting on the appointment of a special advisor on Viability Audit/ Area Planning.

*10.06 am Mr Jonathan Craig joined the meeting.*

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to accept the recommendations of the Sub-Committee to appoint the candidate with the highest score.

[EXTRACT]

Northern Ireland  
Assembly  
Committee for Education  
MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS  
WEDNESDAY 12 September 2012  
SENATE CHAMBER, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

**Present:**

Mervyn Storey MLA (Chairperson)  
Danny Kinahan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Michaela Boyle MLA  
Jonathan Craig MLA  
Jo-Anne Dobson MLA  
Chris Hazzard MLA  
Trevor Lunn MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Sean Rogers MLA  
Pat Sheehan MLA

**In Attendance:**

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)  
Sheila Mawhinney (Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Paula Best (Clerical Supervisor)  
Sharon Young (Clerical Officer)

**Apologies:**

Brenda Hale MLA

*The meeting commenced at 10.31am in public session.*

**2. Departmental briefing on Area Planning**

*Departmental officials joined the meeting at 10.56am*

**Mr Diarmuid McLean, Director of Investment and Infrastructure, and Mrs Lorraine Finlay, Head of Area Planning, briefed the Committee on the on-going consultation on the post-primary Area Planning process.**

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

The Committee expressed concerns relating to the limited time afforded to schools to respond to the consultation or to develop consistent responses involving other schools or sectors in their Education and Library Board area.

*Officials left the meeting at 12.18pm*

*Pat Sheehan left the meeting at 12.18pm*

*Michaela Boyle left the meeting at 12.18pm*

**Agreed:** The Committee unanimously agreed that the Chairperson should write to the Minister to seek an extension of the consultation period for the post-primary Area Planning process beyond 26 October 2012.

Some Members noted concerns in respect of an apparent timing mismatch between plans relating to the Controlled Sector and those relating to the Maintained Sector and Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools.

Some Members also sought clarity in respect of the number of surplus school places in the primary and post-primary sector.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking information on surplus places and on the timing of the consultation process and the next stages.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed that in order to complement its stakeholder event, it would invite the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards, together with representatives of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, to brief Members on the progress of the consultation.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Chief Executive of the Western Education and Library Board expressing its good wishes for his full recovery.

### **3. Briefing from the Special Advisor on the Viability Audit and Area Planning Process**

*Professor Tony Gallagher joined the meeting at 12.20pm*

*Pat Sheehan rejoined the meeting at 12.20pm*

Professor Tony Gallagher, Special Advisor to the Committee, briefed Members on his preliminary findings in his consideration of the Department's Viability Audit and Area Planning process.

Members noted the briefing.

***Professor Gallagher left the meeting at 1.00pm.***

***Sean Rogers left the meeting at 1.01pm.***

The Committee discussed the importance of considering feedback from schools in respect of the Viability Audit and Area Planning process.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that Professor Gallagher's research into the Viability Audit and Area Planning process should include feedback from a larger number of relevant schools.

**Agreed:** The Committee endorsed the attendee list for the stakeholder event on 26 September and agreed to advise Committee staff as soon as possible of other schools which should be invited to attend the event.

**Agreed:** The Committee endorsed suggested questions which will be considered by attendees of the stakeholder event on 26 September 2012.

**[EXTRACT]**

Northern Ireland  
Assembly  
Committee for Education  
MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS  
WEDNESDAY 7 NOVEMBER 2012  
THE SENATE CHAMBER

**Present:**

Mervyn Storey MLA (Chairperson)  
Danny Kinahan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Michaela Boyle MLA  
Jonathan Craig MLA  
Jo-Anne Dobson MLA  
Chris Hazzard MLA  
Trevor Lunn MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Sean Rogers MLA  
Pat Sheehan MLA

**In Attendance:**

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)  
Sheila Mawhinney (Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Paula Best (Clerical Supervisor)  
Sharon Young (Clerical Officer)  
Ursula Savage (Bursary Student)  
Caroline Perry (Research Officer) – *Item 5 only*

**Apologies:**

Brenda Hale MLA

*The meeting commenced in public session at 10.02am.*

**6. Briefing from the Committee's Special Adviser on the Viability Audits and Area-Based Planning Consultation.**

*Professor Gallagher joined the meeting at 10.40am*

**Professor Tony Gallagher, Special Advisor to the Committee, presented his Interim Report on the Department's use of Viability Audits and the related Area Planning process.**

***Chris Hazzard joined the meeting at 10.43am.***

***Michelle McIlveen joined the meeting at 10.46am.***

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

*The Chairperson declared an interest as a member of the Board of Governors of a controlled secondary school.*

*Professor Gallagher left the meeting at 11.25am.*

## **7. Briefing from the Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools on Viability Audits and the Area-Based Planning process.**

*Representatives joined the meeting at 11.26am.*

Mr Gavin Boyd, Acting Chief Executive, Belfast Education and Library Board; Mr Gregory Butler, Chief Executive, South-Eastern Education and Library Board; Mr Jim Clarke, Chief Executive, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools; Mr Mike Donaghy, Head of Development, Planning and Support Services, Southern Education and Library Board; Dr Clare Mangan, Acting Chief Executive, Western Education and Library Board; and Mr Shane McCurdy, Chief Executive, North-Eastern Education and Library Board; briefed the Committee on the Viability Audits and the Area Planning process.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

*Jonathan Craig left the meeting at 12.50pm.*

*Michaela Boyle left the meeting at 12.57pm.*

*Sean Rogers left the meeting at 1.01pm.*

The Committee noted responses to the consultation on the post-primary Area Plans from the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education; the Ulster Farmers Union; and Drumragh Integrated College.

*Representatives left the meeting at 1.18pm.*

*Pat Sheehan left the meeting at 1.18pm.*

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to defer consideration of a motion for plenary debate on the Viability Audits and the Area Planning process until after the Departmental briefing scheduled for 9 January 2013.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) seeking detailed information on the actual current and projected level of surplus places in primary and post-primary schools. The Committee also agreed to write to the ELBs and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools to determine if they require further assistance from the Department to improve the Area Planning consultation process.

*Pat Sheehan rejoined the meeting at 1.20pm.*

**[EXTRACT]**

Northern Ireland  
Assembly  
Committee for Education  
MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS  
TUESDAY 9 April 2013 and WEDNESDAY 10 April 2013  
ROOM 29 and the SENATE CHAMBER

**Present:**

Mervyn Storey MLA (Chairperson)  
Danny Kinahan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Michaela Boyle MLA  
Jonathan Craig MLA  
Jo-Anne Dobson MLA  
Brenda Hale MLA  
Chris Hazzard MLA  
Trevor Lunn MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Pat Sheehan MLA

**In Attendance:**

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)  
Sheila Mawhinney (Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Sharon McGurk (Clerical Supervisor)  
Sharon Young (Clerical Officer)  
Ursula Savage (Bursary Student)  
Caroline Perry (Research Officer) – Items 7 and 8 only  
Laura McCourt (Bursary Student) – Items 7 and 8 only

**Apologies:**

Sean Rogers MLA

*The meeting commenced in public session at 3.06 pm.*

**2. Briefing from the Committee's Special Advisor on Area Planning**

*The Special Advisor joined the meeting at 3.07 pm.*

The Committee received a briefing from Professor Tony Gallagher, Special Advisor, on primary school Viability Audit data and the progress to-date on Area Planning.

*Jonathan Craig joined the meeting at 3.13 pm.*

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that its Special Advisor should produce a paper on the post-primary school Viability Audit data.

**3. Ministerial briefing on Area Planning**

*The Minister and his officials joined the meeting at 3.29 pm.*

John O'Dowd, Minister of Education; John McGrath, Deputy Secretary; Diarmuid McLean, Director of Investment and Infrastructure; and Lorraine Finlay, Area Planning Policy Team, briefed the Committee on the Area Planning process.

*Jo-Anne Dobson joined the meeting at 3.30 pm.*

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to request further information on a Development Proposal by Orchard County Primary School.

*Brenda Hale left the meeting at 3.55 pm*

*Pat Sheehan left the meeting at 3.55 pm.*

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the interim reports prepared by its Special Advisor to the Minister for information.

*Jo-Anne Dobson left the meeting at 4.13 pm.*

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to request an update from the Department on the new school build project for Strabane Academy.

*Jo-Anne Dobson rejoined the meeting at 4.17 pm.*

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to request a Departmental update on the breakdown of surplus places in primary and post-primary schools.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to request a copy of the Department's report on the Certificate of Religious Education.

The Committee noted correspondence from the Governing Bodies Association on the lack of involvement of the voluntary grammar sector in the Area Planning Steering Group.

The Chairperson noted that the pupils at Arvalee Special School had been able return to the original school site pending the construction of a new build at the Lisanelly Shared Education campus. He commended the Minister on the timely and efficient way in which the impact of the fire damage to Arvalee School had been managed by the Department and the Executive.

*The Minister and his officials left the meeting at 4.31 pm.*

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to arrange an informal stakeholder briefing session on primary school Area Planning.

**Agreed:** The Committee further agreed that the Special Advisor should develop: a potential list of schools to be invited; and a short briefing document for participants including some guidance questions.

**[EXTRACT]**

Northern Ireland  
Assembly  
Committee for Education  
MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS  
WEDNESDAY 15 JANUARY 2014  
SENATE CHAMBER

**Present:**

Mervyn Storey MLA (Chairperson)  
Danny Kinahan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Jo-Anne Dobson MLA  
Chris Hazzard MLA  
Trevor Lunn MLA  
Maeve McLaughlin MLA  
Stephen Moutray MLA  
Robin Newton MLA  
Seán Rogers MLA  
Pat Sheehan MLA

**In Attendance:**

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)  
Karen Jardine (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Sharon McGurk (Clerical Supervisor)  
Sharon Young (Clerical Officer)

**Apologies:**

Jonathan Craig MLA

*The meeting commenced in closed session at 9.35am.*

**6. Area Based Planning - Non-Departmental Briefing**

*The following witnesses joined the meeting at 10.31am:*

Professor Colin Knox, University of Ulster; Mark Baker, Sharing Education Programme, Queen's University, Belfast; and Alistair Stewart, Sharing Education Programme, Queen's University, Belfast.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

*Stephen Moutray left the meeting at 10.44am.*

*Jo-Anne Dobson joined the meeting at 10.55am.*

*Jo-Anne Dobson left the meeting at 11.28am*

*The witnesses left the meeting at 11.36am.*

Members noted that the Committee is due to receive a briefing from its Special Adviser on Area Planning at its meeting on 22 January 2014 along with a briefing on the PEE shared education project.

The Committee noted that the Department had requested that the briefing on the feedback from the primary school Area Planning consultation – the consultation concluded in June 2013 be delayed until April 2014.

**[EXTRACT]**

Northern Ireland  
Assembly  
Committee for Education  
MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS  
WEDNESDAY 22 JANUARY 2014  
SENATE CHAMBER

**Present:**

Mervyn Storey MLA (Chairperson)  
Danny Kinahan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Jonathan Craig MLA  
Jo-Anne Dobson MLA  
Chris Hazzard MLA  
Maeve McLaughlin MLA  
Stephen Moutray MLA  
Robin Newton MLA  
Seán Rogers MLA  
Pat Sheehan MLA

**In Attendance:**

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)  
Karen Jardine (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Sharon McGurk (Clerical Supervisor)  
Sharon Young (Clerical Officer)

**Apologies:**

Trevor Lunn MLA

*The meeting commenced in public session at 10.02am.*

**5. Area Planning - Special Adviser Briefing**

*Professor Tony Gallagher joined the meeting at 10.08am.*

The briefing was recorded by Hansard.

*Jonathan Craig left the meeting at 10.18am.*

*Pat Sheehan left the meeting at 10.24am.*

*Chris Hazzard joined the meeting at 10.31am.*

*Professor Gallagher left the meeting at 10.54am.*

**[EXTRACT]**

Northern Ireland  
Assembly  
Committee for Education  
MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS  
WEDNESDAY 2 APRIL 2014  
SENATE CHAMBER, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

**Present:**

Mervyn Storey MLA (Chairperson)  
Danny Kinahan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Jonathan Craig MLA  
Jo-Anne Dobson MLA  
Chris Hazzard MLA  
Trevor Lunn MLA  
Stephen Moutray MLA  
Robin Newton MLA  
Seán Rogers MLA  
Pat Sheehan MLA

**In Attendance:**

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)  
Karen Jardine (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Sharon Young (Clerical Officer)

**Apologies:**

Maeve McLaughlin MLA

*The meeting commenced in public session at 10.05am*

**5. Area Planning- Primary School Consultation Departmental Briefing**

Members noted a briefing paper from the Department which had been tabled along with additional papers provided by the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education.

*The following officials joined the meeting at 10.10am*

Diarmuid McLean, Director, Area Planning, Department of Education; Lorraine Finlay, Head of Area Planning Policy Team, Department of Education; and Gavin Boyd, Interim Chief Executive Southern Education and Library Board.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session and was recorded by Hansard.

*10.19am Jonathan Craig joined the meeting.*

*10.46am Jo-Anne Dobson joined the meeting.*

*11.11am Jonathan Craig left the meeting.*

*11.27am Chris Hazzard left the meeting.*

*11.37am The officials left the meeting.*

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to postpone a briefing with its Special Adviser given the unexpected delay to the publication of the revised Area Plans for Primary Schools. The Committee also agreed to forward to Professor Gallagher recent correspondence from the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) regarding the financial viability of schools.

*11.37am Jo-Anne Dobson left the meeting.*

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to postpone its planned final stakeholder event on Area Planning given the unexpected delay to the publication of the revised Area Plans for Primary Schools.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write each of the ELBs to seek information as to how the needs of the Controlled Sector are determined in their areas and in particular whether a Controlled Sector sub-group which includes locally elected representatives is in operation.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request sight of the Special Schools Area Planning report which is to be produced by the Chief Executive of the Belfast Education and Library Board.

**[EXTRACT]**

Northern Ireland  
Assembly  
Committee for Education  
MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS  
WEDNESDAY 17 SEPTEMBER 2014  
SENATE CHAMBER, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

**Present:**

Danny Kinahan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Jonathan Craig MLA  
Chris Hazzard MLA  
Trevor Lunn MLA  
Maeve McLaughlin MLA  
Stephen Moutray MLA  
Robin Newton MLA  
Sandra Overend MLA  
Seán Rogers MLA

**In Attendance:**

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)  
Paula Best (Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Jonathan Watson (Clerical Supervisor)  
Alicia Muldoon (Clerical Officer)

**Apologies:**

Mervyn Storey MLA (Chairperson)  
Pat Sheehan MLA

*The meeting commenced in private session at 10.00 am.*

**5. Primary School Area Plans – Special Advisor**

*The Special Advisor joined the meeting at 10.22 am.*

Professor Tony Gallagher briefed the Committee on his interim findings in respect of Primary School Area Plans.

*10.25am Stephen Moutray rejoined the meeting.*

*The Special Advisor left the meeting at 10.54am.*

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Special Advisor seeking additional information on, the RTU federated schools model pilot study and studies that show the impact of school closures in other jurisdictions and on communities.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask that during their briefing on Primary Schools Area Plans they make specific reference to:

- costs associated with maintaining a schools estate which is to large;
- transport costs associated with delivering Shared Education;

- what DE are doing to encourage the sharing of best practice in regard to Area Plans and Shared Education between the five Education and Library Boards;
- any promotion DE are doing to encourage schools to benchmark their level of sharing;
- how DE calculate the unfilled places register and any updates to this register.

**[EXTRACT]**

Northern Ireland  
Assembly  
Committee for Education  
MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS  
WEDNESDAY 8 OCTOBER 2014  
SENATE CHAMBER, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

**Present:**

Michelle McIlveen MLA (Chairperson)  
Danny Kinahan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Jonathan Craig MLA  
Chris Hazzard MLA  
Trevor Lunn MLA  
Nelson McCausland MLA  
Maeve McLaughlin MLA  
Robin Newton MLA  
Sandra Overend MLA  
Seán Rogers MLA  
Pat Sheehan MLA

**In Attendance:**

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)  
Paula Best (Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Jonathan Watson (Clerical Supervisor)  
Alicia Muldoon (Clerical Officer)

**Apologies:**

None

*The meeting commenced in public session at 10.02am.*

**5. Primary School Area Planning - Joint briefing from the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)**

*Witnesses joined the meeting at 10.08am.*

Malachy Crudden, Senior Education Advisor, CCMS; Ray Gilbert, Senior Education Officer, North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB); Rosemary Watterson, Chief Administrative Officer, Western Education and Library Board (WELB); Gregory Butler, Chief Executive, South-Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB); and Mike Donaghy, Head of Development, Planning and Support Services, Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) briefed the Committee on Primary School Area Planning.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

*10.28am Pat Sheehan left the meeting.*

*10.37am Chris Hazzard joined the meeting.*

11.13am Nelson McCausland left the meeting.

12.04pm Jonathan Craig left the meeting.

Witnesses left the meeting at 12.17pm.

12.19pm Danny Kinahan left the meeting.

12.19pm Chris Hazzard left the meeting.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the ELBs and CCMS asking that they set out how they facilitate the engagement of parents and the wider community in the Area Planning development process.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to write to the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) requesting an oral briefing on Primary School Area Plans in the BELB area and the Special School Area Planning process in Northern Ireland when information on the latter becomes available.

## 6. Primary School Area Planning – Departmental Briefing

*Departmental witnesses joined the meeting at 12.20pm.*

Jacqui Durkin, Director of Area Planning; Lorraine Finlay, Head of Area Planning Policy Team; and Dorina Edgar, Area Planning Policy Team briefed the Committee on Primary School Area Planning.

12.24pm Danny Kinahan re-joined the meeting.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

*Officials left the meeting at 12.56pm.*

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity:

- on the timescale and the nature of the regional strategy for Irish Medium Education;
- on the impact closure and amalgamation has had on the level of school financial deficit in the last 5 years;
- clarity on the funds generated by the sale of school property following closure and amalgamation in the last 5 years;
- clarity on the role of CCMS and trustees in respect of the transformation of Maintained schools to Integrated status; and
- as previously requested, on the Needs Model and the planning of Integrated provision.

**[EXTRACT]**

Northern Ireland  
Assembly  
Committee for Education  
MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS  
WEDNESDAY 22 APRIL 2015  
SENATE CHAMBER, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

**Present:**

Michelle McIlveen MLA (Chairperson)  
Danny Kinahan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Jonathan Craig MLA  
Trevor Lunn MLA  
Maeve McLaughlin MLA  
Robin Newton MLA  
Sandra Overend MLA  
Seán Rogers MLA  
Pat Sheehan MLA

**In Attendance:**

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)  
Paula Best (Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Kevin Marks (Clerical Supervisor)  
Alicia Muldoon (Clerical Officer)

**Apologies:**

Chris Hazzard MLA

*The meeting commenced in private session at 10.03am.*

**1. Area Planning – draft position paper**

The Committee noted and discussed changes to the draft position paper on Area Planning.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to re-consider the amended paper at next week's meeting.

[EXTRACT]

Northern Ireland  
Assembly  
Committee for Education  
MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS  
WEDNESDAY 29 APRIL 2015  
SENATE CHAMBER, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

**Present:**

Michelle McIlveen MLA (Chairperson)  
Trevor Lunn MLA  
Nelson McCausland MLA  
Maeve McLaughlin MLA  
Sandra Overend MLA  
Seán Rogers MLA  
Pat Sheehan MLA

**In Attendance:**

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)  
Paula Best (Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Kevin Marks (Clerical Supervisor)  
Alicia Muldoon (Clerical Officer)

**Apologies:**

Danny Kinahan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Jonathan Craig MLA  
Chris Hazzard MLA  
Robin Newton MLA

*The meeting commenced in public session at 10.07am.*

*The meeting moved into private session at 10.10am.*

**5. Area Planning – position paper**

The Committee noted and discussed changes to its position paper on Area Planning.

**Agreed:** The Committee read and agreed the Introduction to the position paper.

**Agreed:** The Committee read and agreed the Progress To-Date section of the position paper.

The Committee considered the Findings and Recommendations section of the position paper.

**Agreed:** The Committee read and agreed paragraphs 57 to 64 which deal with the need for Area Planning.

**Agreed:** The Committee read and agreed paragraphs 65 to 67 which deal with the capital programme. The Committee also agreed a revised recommendation and also agreed, subject to confirmation by correspondence, additional wording on equality issues.

**Agreed:** The Committee read and agreed paragraphs 68 to 76 which deal with the calculation of surplus places.

**Agreed:** The Committee read and agreed paragraphs 77 to 85 which deal with the Needs Model.

**Agreed:** The Committee read and agreed paragraphs 86 to 90 which deal with rural issues. The Committee also agreed subject to confirmation by correspondence, additional wording on the role of rural schools.

**Agreed:** The Committee read and agreed paragraphs 91 to 94 which deal with consultation issues.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to include the cover page, remit of the Committee and summary of recommendations as amended.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to include papers from the Special Adviser; relevant extracts from minutes of proceedings and notes from the stakeholder events as appendices to the position paper.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed, subject to the approval of amendments, to put down the following motion:

*“That this Assembly notes the position paper produced by the Committee for Education on Area Planning and calls on the Minister of Education to implement the recommendations contained therein.”*

[EXTRACT]

Northern Ireland  
Assembly  
Committee for Education  
MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS  
WEDNESDAY 13 MAY 2015  
SENATE CHAMBER, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

**Present:**

Peter Weir MLA (Chairperson)  
Jonathan Craig MLA  
Chris Hazzard MLA  
Trevor Lunn MLA  
Nelson McCausland MLA  
Maeve McLaughlin MLA  
Robin Newton MLA  
Sandra Overend MLA  
Seán Rogers MLA

**In Attendance:**

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)  
Paula Best (Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Kevin Marks (Clerical Supervisor)  
Alicia Muldoon (Clerical Officer)

**Apologies:**

Danny Kinahan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

*The meeting commenced in public session at 10.02am.*

*The meeting moved into private session at 10.31am.*

**7. Area Planning – position paper**

The Committee noted and discussed changes to its position paper on Area Planning.

*10.46am Seán Rogers joined the meeting.*

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to formally rescind its previous decisions in respect of Recommendations 3 and 5 and to formally endorse revised and additional text including revised wording for Recommendations 3 and 5.

The Committee noted that it had previously agreed, subject to the agreement of changes to the position paper, to put down a motion for plenary debate in respect of Area Planning.

[EXTRACT]

## **Review of the Area Planning process**

Tony Gallagher  
February 3, 2015

### Introduction

This review of the viability audit and area planning process for schools is being carried out for the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee. The terms of reference for the review included a consideration of:

- The terms of reference for the viability audit and the criteria used to assess whether schools were failing;
- Whether the circumstances of rural schools had been taken into account;
- The extent to which other data had been used to inform the area planning process;
- How the views of the range of sectors had been taken into account;
- The potential for integrating the Department's area planning and shared education policies;
- The potential for cross-border collaboration in the area planning process;
- And to consider the communication between the Department, Boards of Governors and parents.

### Overview paper

The area planning process continues and formal recommendations arising from it are now being brought forward as development proposals to amalgamate or close schools. At this point in the process the Education Committee requested some comment on five different aspects of the process:

- the impact of Area Planning to date;
- the validity of the surplus school vacancy calculation methodology;
- the Annual Area Profile information;
- the Needs Model (including as appropriate the implications of the Drumragh judgement);
- possible enhancements to the consultation and communication process;
- the facilitation of alternative cross-sectoral or cross-border solutions.

This paper offers high level comment on each of these issues.

In addition, the Education Committee facilitated a stakeholder consultation meeting in Parliament Buildings on 4 February, 2015. The broad themes that emerged in that discussion will also be mentioned in this paper.

### The impact of Area Planning to date

Over the past five years approval has been given for the closure of 37 schools, although to date six of these schools have not yet actually closed. Over the same period approval has been given for 20 proposals for the amalgamation of 46 schools; of these new schools two are planned to open in September 2015, while for another five there is no planned date for opening. A total of seventeen schools are involved in these planned mergers which have not yet been completed<sup>1</sup>. Only a fraction of these are a direct consequence of the Area Planning process.

The Department of Education publishes a list of development proposals, a short description of the reasons for the development proposal and a copy of submission upon which Ministerial decisions are made where this is available<sup>2</sup>. Once again not all these development proposals are based on proposals that emerged from the Area Planning process. In order to assess the impact of the process to date we compared the list of development proposals on the Department website with the area based plans published by the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) and the consultation documents produced by the ELBs. In this way we identified proposals for closure of amalgamation that had emerged from the Area Planning process and which had resulted in a Ministerial decision. Tables 1 to 3 below summarise the situation for school recommended for closure or amalgamation separately.

Table 1 shows the Development Proposals which had arisen from Area Planning recommendations at various stages of consideration in 2014<sup>3</sup>. A total of 57 separate Development proposals were active, but all of the proposals for closure or amalgamation (apart from proposals to open new Nursery Schools) arose from Area Planning proposals. In addition there was one proposal to open a new Irish Medium post primary school in Dungiven.

Tables 2 and 3 consider cases where the Development Proposal process has been completed and a Ministerial decision has been announced: not all the cases in Table 1 will have reached that stage yet.

Table 2 shows that in virtually all cases the Area Planning recommendation to close a school has been taken forward to Development Proposal stage where the same recommendation was made and confirmed by the Minister. In one case (St Macartan's Primary School) the Area Planning recommendation was not to close, but closure was the recommendation and decision taken forward through a Development Proposal. In one other case (St Mary's Brollagh) the recommendation for closure from the Area Planning process and the Development Proposal was overturned by the Minister. Six of the schools in Tables 1 or 2 as recommended for closure appear on the Department of Education list of actual closures over the past five years and only one of these schools has closed at this point.

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<sup>1</sup> Lists provided to the Education Committee by the Department of Education

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/schools-and-infrastructure-2/area-planning/14-schools\\_estate\\_devprop\\_pg/dp\\_decisions\\_2014.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/schools-and-infrastructure-2/area-planning/14-schools_estate_devprop_pg/dp_decisions_2014.htm) [accessed 31 January, 2015]

<sup>3</sup> The link to the excel spreadsheet containing all the Development Proposals can be found at: [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/schools-and-infrastructure-2/area-planning/14-schools\\_estate\\_devprop\\_pg/dp\\_decisions\\_2014.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/schools-and-infrastructure-2/area-planning/14-schools_estate_devprop_pg/dp_decisions_2014.htm)

Table 3 shows the pattern of outcomes where amalgamation was the recommendation. In all these cases which have come through to Ministerial decision, the recommendation to amalgamate from the Area planning process and Development Proposals have been confirmed by the Minister. In the case of the proposed amalgamation of St Michael's Grammar school, and St Mary's and St Paul's Junior High Schools, the Development Proposal was not available on the Department of Education website, although it is understood that amalgamation was the recommendation. Five of proposals for amalgamation on Tables 1 or 3 appeared on the Department of Education list of actual amalgamations over the past five years.

The Area planning process is continuing although the pace of change is necessarily slow. There was a commitment that any recommendations for closure or amalgamation from Area Planning would be subject to consultation before final decisions, and these would be further tested through Development Proposals. This process has been followed.

#### The validity of the surplus school vacancy calculation methodology

The claim that Northern Ireland schools had 85,000 empty desks, equating to 150 entirely empty schools, provided, and still provides, an important motivation for the Area Planning process. How is this datapoint calculated and how accurate is it? There are three reasons which suggest the claim on empty desks may not be as robust as the headline figures suggest. The first if these arise from the fact that Area Planning is based on projections of pupil numbers to 2025, not current figures; second, projections always involve some element of speculation as to future patterns; and third, the method for calculating the capacity of schools may not be as robust as it appears, as is discussed further below.

First, in previous reports to the Education Committee it was pointed out that the headline figure of 85,000 empty desks was something of a misnomer. From Table 4 we can see that, by the time area planning data on the schools were published, the claimed surplus of places over pupils had declined to approximately 67,000 desks. The Area Planning process, however, is based on the projected need in 2025. When the projections were made it turned out that in 2025 the surplus of places over pupils had declined to 42,000. Furthermore, on the 2025 projections there was actually a shortfall of places in post primary schools of 1,543.

Second, the projected shortfall for primary school places in 2025 remained high, at 43,583. However, whereas 2025 projections for post primary pupils had the advantage of being based on seven years of actual enrolments in primary schools, projections for primary school places are based on assumptions about likely population trends and these assumptions must always be somewhat speculative. In addition, projections cannot deal with unexpected rises or falls in population: in recent years, for example, we have seen a significant growth of children without English as their first language in Northern Irish schools as a consequence of economic migration. It is unclear whether this will rise or fall in future.

The third factor relates to the method for calculating the number of 'desks' in schools. In order to identify the approved enrolment the Department and the Education and Library boards use a

calculation which includes the total floor-space of the school, the maximum number of pupils in a classroom and the minimum space available to each pupil. The core of the calculation lies in the recommended size of classrooms and the maximum number of pupils in a classroom of that size. Teaching space that falls below the recommended size is aggregated in order to make the calculation. For post primary schools the calculation is more complex given the particular conditions for specialist teaching space, such as laboratories or technical areas, and the specific needs of different subject areas.

Under old building regulations the 'standard' classroom contained 50 square metres and could hold no more than 29 pupils, thus setting a minimum space allocation for each pupil of 1.72 square metres. When teaching space that was less than 50 square metres was aggregated, the estimated number of pupils that could be taught was calculated by dividing the total aggregated space by 1.72. The implication is that once the calculation has arrived at a maximum figure this becomes the approved enrolment level of a school which would, literally, have every desk occupied if its actual enrolment was equal to its approved enrolment - the claim that a shortfall in actual pupil enrolment over approved enrolment is equivalent to 'empty desks' only makes sense if the previous assumption is valid. But there are a number of reasons to question this:

- The number of pupils a school is permitted to admit is limited by the approved enrolment number, but a number of categories of pupils do not contribute to the maximum and can be admitted regardless<sup>4</sup>: these include pupils with a statement of special educational needs; pupils who are subject to a school attendance order; where a direction has been made under Article 42 of the Education Order (Northern Ireland) 1996 to admit a child to a specified school; in compliance with the ruling of an Appeal Tribunal; or in compliance with a direction of the Exceptional Circumstances Body) for pupils in Years 8-12). The point is that if a school can take additional pupils from any or all of these categories, then its approved enrolment is not the actual physical capacity of the school, but rather an official designation of the capacity of the school.
- Table 1 above shows the Development Proposals in 2014 for closure or amalgamation of schools. The data in Table 1 were drawn from a larger Department of Education list of 57 Development Proposals that were active in 2014. Of that total, 21 were proposals to increase the enrolment of schools and two were proposals to decrease the enrolment of schools. If schools are in a position to apply for an increase in their enrolment, it suggests that the approved enrolment is not a statement of actual physical capacity.
- The third factor which suggests that the approved enrolment is not a measure of actual physical capacity is that a significant number of schools already enrol numbers of pupils above this approved level. Based on 2013/14 data, of the 210 post primary schools, 95 schools have more pupils enrolled than their approved enrolment, and this total over-enrolment comprises 3,776 pupils. Also based on 2013/14 data, of the 826 primary schools for which data were available (data were not available for 14 Prep Departments of grammar

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<sup>4</sup> See Circular 2014/01

[http://www.deni.gov.uk/circular\\_number\\_201401\\_\\_\\_8211\\_\\_admissions\\_and\\_enrolment\\_numbers\\_\\_\\_8211\\_\\_temporary\\_variation\\_requests\\_pdf\\_395kb.pdf](http://www.deni.gov.uk/circular_number_201401___8211__admissions_and_enrolment_numbers___8211__temporary_variation_requests_pdf_395kb.pdf)

schools), a total of 190 schools have more pupils enrolled than their approved enrolment, and this comprises 4,456 pupils.

As a final note, the current building handbooks for schools recommend that the 'standard' classroom now should be no less than 60 square metres, but with the same maximum number of pupils<sup>5</sup>. The rationale for the change was to reflect the needs of 21st century schools<sup>6</sup> and implies that the minimum space required by pupils is now larger than in the past. It is a hypothetical exercise, but it is possible to re-calculate the number of 'desk-spaces' based on the new higher minimum space only to discover that the current glut of 'empty desks' is replaced by an under-supply of places and the need for more 'desk-spaces'. The point is not that the current method for calculating approved enrolments is necessarily inaccurate, but rather that it is predicated on a number of assumptions, small changes to which can lead to very different estimates of the level of surplus capacity in the system. Given this variability, it may be inappropriate to cite a headline figure as if it gives us an exact indication of the surplus capacity of school: it certainly does not provide an accurate indication of the number of empty desks.

The main conclusion is that the method for calculating surplus places in schools may be broadly valid, but it produces a general estimate only. Second, the outcome figure will be subject to significant change if different assumptions are made for elements of the calculation. Third, the outcome figure is clearly not a measure of the actual number of empty desks in schools, so perhaps should not be presented as such.

#### The annual area profile information

This aspect of the process was commented on in previous papers prepared for the Committee. As previously noted, the selection of data for the Area Planning process was 'focused on providing a factual picture, at a point in time, of school performance, school enrolments and school finances based on quantifiable and robust data available within the Northern Ireland education system.' In practical terms this meant that the criteria used were quantifiable and verifiable, and consistently available across all five Education and Library Boards. This approach may be open to the criticism that we over-privilege indicators which can be readily measured, rather than seeking ways to measure that which we deem to be most important, while the use of a snap-shot in time, rather than a focus on processes of change over time, runs the risk that a focus on a different 'snap-shot' might have produced different results.

The stated intention was that these quantifiable data would be supplemented by the expertise and experience within the ELBs and CCMS when specific instances were being considered. In practice the rhetoric surrounding a lot of the Area Planning discussions focused on school size as the key factor, with a constant reiteration of the claim that schools beneath a certain size were educationally inadequate. The criteria for 'adequate' size were drawn from the Bain Report (2006) which had highlighted the limited curriculum offering available in small schools. The Bain Report (2006) also

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.deni.gov.uk/bab\\_-\\_section\\_3a\\_-\\_ps\\_building\\_handbook\\_-\\_final\\_web\\_version\\_-\\_16611.pdf](http://www.deni.gov.uk/bab_-_section_3a_-_ps_building_handbook_-_final_web_version_-_16611.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/print/index/media-centre/news-departments/news-de/news-de-april-2009/news-de-230409-primary-schools-building.htm>

highlighted the potential for school collaboration as a way of providing access for all pupils to the full range of curriculum options, although this mechanism appears not to have been considered within Area Planning as a way of addressing curriculum choice. Furthermore, and has been pointed out in previous analysis of the Area Planning data, there is little or no correlation between school size and performance levels, suggesting a problem with a core assumption of the Area Planning process. In some respects the lack of any correlation between school size and performance is not surprising: current international evidence suggests that the key factor in school improvement lies in the quality of teachers<sup>7</sup>.

#### The Needs Model (including as appropriate the implications of the Drumragh judgement)

The needs model used in Area Planning sought to make 2025 projections for pupil demand and, on that basis, calculate the number of school places, and hence schools, that would be required in areas across Northern Ireland. The data on current pupil numbers and school places were calculated for the three separate sectors of Protestant/Controlled/Voluntary, Catholic/Maintained/Voluntary and Integrated schools and 2025 projections were assumed to proceed in a linear fashion for all the sectors. Projections can be based on more sophisticated formulae and seek to take account of specific factors which seem likely to influence, positively or negatively, particular sector projections. Inevitably, however, the identification and quantification of such factors involves a level of speculation and an inevitable level of error. Presumably it was considered appropriate to use linear projections within the Area Planning process as, at least, all sectors were being treated the same.

The difficulty with this is that Article 64 of the 1989 Education Reform Order places a duty on the Department of Education to 'encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education, that is to say the education together at school of Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils.' One Integrated school was denied an increase in its approved enrolment on the basis that all future capital development in the area would take place in a shared campus and, as the Integrated school was not located on the shared campus, it would not, therefore, be allowed to expand. The Integrated school challenged this decision as contrary to Article 64. The Department of Education argued that the Article 64 duty was not an obligation to support integrated schools per se, but the Judge dismissed this argument. Furthermore, the Judge went on to rule that while the Needs Model was an appropriate analytic tool for area planning purposes:

'... the inflexibility of the projections used will have the effect of making it difficult to accommodate the Article 64 duty in future day to day decisions. The Department needs to be alive to the Article 64 duty at all levels, including the strategic level.'<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Hargreaves, A (2012) *The Global Fourth Way: the quest for educational excellence*. US: Corwin Press; Sahlberg, P (2012) *Finnish Lessons: what can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* New York: Teachers' College Press; Mehta, J (2013) *The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations, and the Troubled Quest to Remake American Schooling*. USA: OUP

<sup>8</sup> Drumragh Integrated College's Application [2014] NIQB 69 [http://www.courtsni.gov.uk/en-GB/Judicial%20Decisions/PublishedByYear/Documents/2014/\[2014\]%20NIQB%2069/j\\_j\\_TRE9202Final.htm](http://www.courtsni.gov.uk/en-GB/Judicial%20Decisions/PublishedByYear/Documents/2014/[2014]%20NIQB%2069/j_j_TRE9202Final.htm)

It is clear, therefore, that the Area Planning process ought to have assumed a higher rate of growth in the Integrated sector, as compared with the Protestant/Controlled/Voluntary or Catholic/Maintained/Voluntary sectors. Rather than re-run the entire process it may be possible to fulfil the judgement by providing special consideration to proposals for expansion of the Integrated sector in future, although what level of differential expansion would be sufficient to meet the judgement remains unclear. Similarly, if the 2025 projections were re-run, it is also unclear what level of differential growth in the Integrated sector would be deemed to be adequate to meet the terms of the judgement: it may be sufficient that it is higher, in comparison with the other two sectors, however minimal this differential is set.

#### Possible enhancements to the consultation and communication process

Tables 2 and 3 above illustrated some of the Development Proposals for school closures and amalgamations that had emerged from the Area Planning process. Tables 5 and 6 show the same proposals, but on these tables we have included the pattern of responses to the consultation process on the recommendations for the future of the schools. In addition, we have included information on the pattern of response to public consultation on the recommendations arising from the Area Planning process and the Development Proposal stage. Our assessment of the result of the consultation process is based on the pattern of results as published in official sources and is offered as a general outcome. The data on these two Tables suggest that the public consultation appeared to have limited impact on the eventual outcome.

From Table 6 we can see that the majority of recommendations for school amalgamations were supported, but even in those cases where there was opposition, or an apparent lack of consensus, the recommendation for amalgamation was approved by the Minister. The pattern appears even more starkly on Table 5 which considers cases where the recommendation was to close a school. In all but one case the result of the consultation on Area Planning recommendations was to oppose closure of the school. When the result of the consultation on the Development Proposal recommendation is considered, every one of outcomes was to oppose closure. However, in all but one case, the Ministerial decision was to follow the recommendation of Area Planning and the Development Proposal to close the schools.

If the outcome of consultation at each stage of the process sits in such stark contrast to the recommendation at the next stage, and to the final decision, some might wonder if there is any point in engaging in a consultation process at all. The fact that one school did manage to reverse a recommendation to close may suggest otherwise, but there may have been specific factors working in this particular school's favour. It is possible that the schools recommended for closure or amalgamation in the initial wave of recommendations arising from the Area Planning process may well have been those identified by the data as being in the most challenging circumstances. As such, it could be argued that these schools were most likely to undergo change as a consequence of this process. However, and leaving aside the suggestions above on the efficacy of the data used to target these schools in the first place, it should perhaps give officials and legislator pause for consideration that, if these schools were in such a difficult position and facing significant challenges in providing an adequate educational experience for their pupils, why is it that they appeared to attract the affection and support of so many of those pupils' parents?

### The facilitation of alternative cross-sectoral or cross-border solutions

In the report on the primary Area Planning report provided to the Committee in September, 2014, in relation to shared education options it was stated that:

'Some of the reports also added an interest in exploring cross-sectoral solutions through shared education. The Western ELB quoted the Minister of Education as stating that shared education is 'one of the most important and sensitive challenges facing civic society.' Despite this only two reports included any significant discussion of shared education as a policy option, two did not include a single proposal for shared education options and one included a single proposal. NEELB cited with work of the PIEE project on shared education and included two proposals in this area. The WELB cited the work of the Fermanagh Trust on shared education and virtually every primary school in Fermanagh was involved in a shared education proposal of some kind. In the rest of the WELB there was not a single proposal for a shared education solution. One report cited the definition for shared education recommended by the Ministerial Advisory Group, at the heart of which was the notion that shared education had to involve at least two schools from different sectors, but later went on to suggest that the ELB would support all examples of shared education, including shared education within a single school.'

In a similar vein, while the ELB reports indicated the exploration of cross-border options as a criterion, there was little or no exploration of such options and no recommendations of this kind.

At an early stage of the Area Planning process for post primary schools there was some consideration of the option of joint-governance arrangements between controlled and maintained schools, although these later were modified into looser forms of cooperation. There have been no formal proposals for shared education options emerging from the process.

In addition, although there some instances where cross-border options were considered, so far a recommendation for the consideration of this as an option has only emerged for one school. This was the school that had been recommended for closure by Area Planning and in a Development Proposal, but had these recommendations were over-turned by the Minister.

### Stakeholder consultation event

The Education Committee ran a stakeholder consultation event in Parliament Buildings on 4 February, 2015, and 71 people accepted the invitation to attend: this included people from the Education and Library Boards, the sectoral interest bodies, the teachers unions, and primary secondary and grammar schools. Over the course of the evening a wider range of issues were discussed, but the main themes to emerge were as follows:

- There was a concern that area planning was having an unfair and negative impact on small rural primary schools, and that many were under pressure to close. This was linked to a view

that there was insufficient recognition of the role rural schools played in their local community.

- Some suggested that area planning had shone a light on the duplication of services and the economic benefits of rationalisation.
- There was a general criticism of the consultation process and this involved a number of elements: many took the view that key decisions were pre-determined, that contrary positions were not listened to, and that parents and teachers should be more directly involved at all stages of the process. The comments on the evening highlighted a lack of trust in the integrity of the process. Linked to this was a view that the sectoral interests dominated the process and pursued their own priorities.
- There was a widespread view that there had been no mechanism in area planning to facilitate the exploration of innovative options. Some suggested that there had been interesting conversations on options towards the start of the process, but that these were neither encouraged nor followed up.
- There was general criticism of the needs model as being too rigid and narrowly defined, and it was pointed out that changes to building regulations might lead to very different conclusions from the headline claims about 'empty desks'. It was also felt that more use should have been made of a wider set of educational indicators in order to frame considerations. Some argued that some framework is needed to facilitate planning decisions, but it needs to be more fine-tuned and reflect, to a greater extent, the variety of contexts within which schools operate.

The meeting ended on the theme that proposals for school closures often raised emotions and usually generate local opposition

### Conclusion

This paper set out to consider the following:

- the impact of Area Planning to date;
- the validity of the surplus school vacancy calculation methodology;
- the Annual Area Profile information;
- the Needs Model (including as appropriate the implications of the Drumragh judgement);
- possible enhancements to the consultation and communication process;
- the facilitation of alternative cross-sectoral or cross-border solutions.

The main conclusions are that:

- The process is proceeding, albeit slowly, but some cases have completed the process from Area Planning, through consultation, through Development Proposals, through consultation and, finally, Ministerial decision.
- There are some significant issues with the methodology for calculating surplus places and, more particularly, the way the outcome of the calculation has been used to justify the rationalisation of schools.

- The Annual Area Profile information is narrowly drawn and appears to focus on what can be measured, as opposed to factors that are known to be most closely linked to school improvement; furthermore, an analysis of the data appears to call into question some of the fundamental assumptions upon which the Area Planning process is based.
- The Needs Model has been judged to be too rigidly applied and, in consequence, to make it difficult for the Department to fulfil its obligations under Article 64 of the 1989 Education Reform Order. That said, it remains unclear how much of an adjustment to the process would be required to meet this legal obligation.
- The consultation process appears to have had limited impact on official recommendations or final decisions.
- There has been very limited exploration of, or recommendation for, cross-sectoral shared education options, or cross-border options

Table 1: Proposals for closure, amalgamation or new schools from Area Planning recommendations

Schools	Area Planning recommendation	Education and Library Board
Coleraine Academical Institution & Coleraine High School	Amalgamate	NEELB
Kilcoan Primary School, Islandmagee Mullaghdubh Primary School, Islandmagee	Amalgamate	NEELB
Ballee Community High School	Close	NEELB
Monkstown Community School & Newtownabbey Community High School	Amalgamate	NEELB
Glenravel Primary School St Mary's Primary School	Amalgamate	NEELB
Down High School Prep Department	Close	SEELB
Clintyclay Primary School, Dungannon	Close	SELB
St Mary's Primary School, Glasdrumman Moneydarragh Primary School, Newry St Joseph's Primary School, Ballymartin	Amalgamate	SELB
St Brigid's High School, Armagh	Close	SELB
St Michael's Grammar School St Mary's Junior High School St Paul's Junior High School Lurgan	Amalgamate	SELB
New Irish Medium Post Primary School, Dungiven	Open Irish Medium Post-Primary School	WELB
Collegiate Grammar School, Enniskillen Portora Royal School, Enniskillen	Amalgamate	WELB
Envagh Primary School, Omagh	Close	WELB
St Francis of Assisi Primary School, Castlederg	Close	WELB
Craigbrack Primary School Listress Primary School Mullabuoy Primary School	Amalgamate	WELB
St Mary's High School, Brollagh	Close	WELB
St Macartan's Primary School, Dromore	Close	WELB
Immaculate Conception College, Derry	Close	WELB

Table 2: Schools where closure has been recommended from the Area Planning process

School	Area Planning recommendation	Development Proposal recommendation	Ministerial decision
Clintyclay PS	Close	Close	Close
Envagh PS	Close	Close	Close
St Francis of Assisi PS	Close	Close	Close
Down High Prep	Close	Close	Close
St Mary's Brollagh	Close	Close	Retain
St Macartan's PS	Retain	Close	Close
Immaculate Conception College	Close	Close	Close
Ballee Community College	Close	Close	Close

Table 3: Schools where amalgamation has been recommended from the Area Planning process

Schools	Area Planning recommendation	Development proposal recommendation	Ministerial decision
Collegiate Grammar/Portora Royal	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Amalgamate
Coleraine Academical Institution/Coleraine High	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Amalgamate
Kilcoan Primary/Mullaghdubh Primary	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Amalgamation approved in 2004
Moneydarragh Primary/St Joseph's Primary/St Mary's Primary	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Amalgamate
Craigbrack Primary/Listress Primary/Mullabuoy Primary	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Amalgamate
Monkstown Community School/Newtownabbey Community High	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Amalgamate
St Michael's Grammar/St Mary's Junior High/St Paul's Junior High	Amalgamate	Development proposal unavailable	Amalgamate
Glenravel Primary/St Mary's Primary	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Amalgamate

Table 4: Enrolments, capacity and surplus/shortfall of primary and post primary schools in 2011/12(actual) and 2025 (projected)

	Year	Pupils	Capacity	Over(Under)supply
Post primary	2011	146,303	158,426	12,123
	2025	159,969	158,426	-1,543
Primary	2011	158,284	212,846	54,822
	2025	169,261	212,846	43,583

Table 5: Schools where closure has been recommended from the Area Planning process

School	Area Planning recommendation	Area Planning consultation outcome	Development Proposal recommendation	Development Proposal consultation outcome	Ministerial decision
Clintyclay PS	Close	Retain	Close	Transform	Close
Envagh PS	Close	Retain	Close	Retain	Close
St Francis of Assisi PS	Close	Retain	Close	Retain	Close
Down High Prep	Close	Retain	Close	Retain	Close
St Mary's Brollagh	Close	Retain	Close	Retain	Retain
St Macartan's PS	Retain	Retain	Close	Retain	Close
Immaculate Conception College	Close	Close	Close	Retain	Close
Ballee Community College	Close	Retain	Close	Retain	Close

Table 6: Schools where amalgamation has been recommended from the Area Planning process

Schools	Area Planning recommendation	Area Planning consultation outcome	Development proposal recommendation	Development Proposal consultation outcome	Ministerial decision
Collegiate Grammar/Portora Royal	Amalgamate	Retain as separate schools	Amalgamate	No consensus	Amalgamate
Coleraine Academical Institution/Coleraine High	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Amalgamate
Kilcoan Primary/Mullaghdubh Primary	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Amalgamation approved in 2004
Moneydarragh Primary/St Joseph's Primary/St Mary's Primary	Amalgamate	No consensus	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Amalgamate
Craigbrack Primary/Listress Primary/Mullabuoy Primary	Amalgamate	No consensus	Amalgamate	No consensus	Amalgamate
Monkstown Community School/Newtownabbey Community High	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Amalgamate
St Michael's Grammar/St Mary's Junior High/St Paul's Junior High	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Development proposal unavailable	Unknown	Amalgamate
Glenravel Primary/St Mary's Primary	Amalgamate	No consensus	Amalgamate	Amalgamate	Amalgamate



## **Review of the Area Planning process**

### **Introduction**

This review of the viability audit and area planning process for schools is being carried out for the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee. The terms of reference for the review included a consideration of:

- The terms of reference for the viability audit and the criteria used to assess whether schools were failing;
- Whether the circumstances of rural schools had been taken into account;
- The extent to which other data had been used to inform the area planning process;
- How the views of the range of sectors had been taken into account;
- The potential for integrating the Department's area planning and shared education policies;
- The potential for cross-border collaboration in the area planning process;
- And to consider the communication between the Department, Boards of Governors and parents.

### **Primary schools**

This paper offers a commentary on the area planning reports from primary schools published by each of the Education and Library Boards (ELB) in June 2014. The format of the reports are broadly similar for each ELB, although there are some differences amongst them. All provide an overview on the policy context for the area planning process, a statistical picture of the schools in the ELB and detail on the issues considered for sets of schools within the ELB.

The Sustainable Schools' Policy provides the main overarching policy framework and most of the reports also identify the specific objectives for primary school area planning:

- To ensure a network of sustainable primary schools, within reasonable travelling distance for pupils, which is capable of delivering effectively the Northern Ireland Curriculum
- identify and meet the needs of all children in the area
- enhance the quality of provision and raise standards
- reduce the number of surplus places
- reduce duplication of provision
- identify realistic, innovative and creative solutions to address need, including opportunities for shared schooling on a cross sectoral basis
- maximise the use and sharing of the existing schools' estate
- identify potential for co-location of mainstream and special schools
- explore opportunities for cross border planning

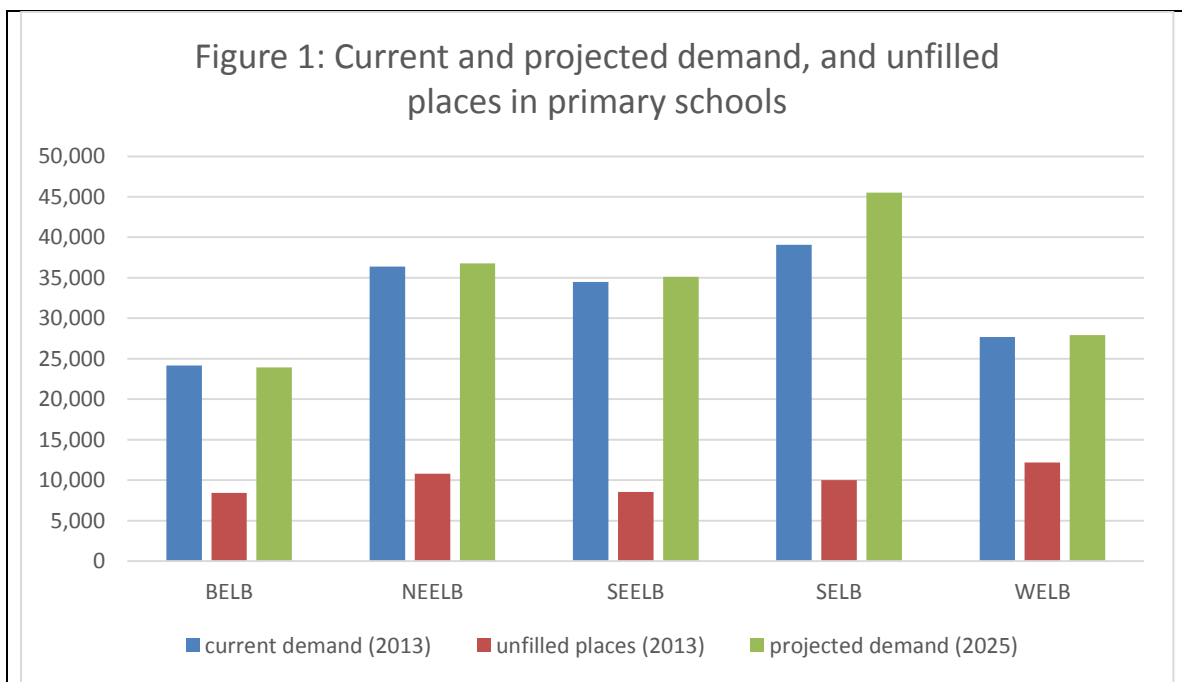
Following from this most of the reports identify some general principles that informed the area planning process. This includes the contention that there are too many small schools, while stating that not all small schools will close as a consequence of area planning; that the process as a whole is

complex and will take time; and that even if the process leads to a recommendation that a school should be closed, amalgamated or expanded, this will need to be subject to a development proposal.

Some of the reports also added an interest in exploring cross-sectoral solutions through shared education. The Western ELB quoted the Minister of Education as stating that shared education is ‘one of the most important and sensitive challenges facing civic society.’ Despite this only two reports included any significant discussion or shared education as a policy option, two did not include a single proposal for shared education options and one included a single proposal. NEELB cited with work of the PIEE project on shared education and included two proposals in this area. The WELB cited the work of the Fermanagh Trust on shared education and virtually every primary school in Fermanagh was involved in a shared education proposal of some kind. In the rest of the WELB there was not a single proposal for a shared education solution. One report cited the definition for shared education recommended by the Ministerial Advisory Group, at the heart of which was the notion that shared education had to involve at least two schools from different sectors, but later went on to suggest that the ELB would support all examples of shared education, including shared education within a single school.

The analysis for area planning was based on projected pupil numbers, but as with the post primary area planning process, the projections were carried out separately for each of the sectors (controlled, maintained, integrated, Irish-medium). The area planning process was carried out by the management authorities, that is the ELBs and CCMS, and the reports varied in the extent to which they described an engagement process with other sectoral interests.

Figure 1 shows the number of pupils in primary schools in 2013, the current number of unfilled places in primary schools and the projected demand for places in 2025 in each of the ELB areas. In all but one ELB the projected level of demand in 2025 is broadly in line with current provision and, as such, will not remove existing unfilled places.



The reports provide information on decisions for closure, amalgamation or expansion already agreed with managing authorities and outlines processes under consideration for future action. The reports also indicate the outcomes of consultations on draft area planning reports and proposals previously published.

This paper will not consider the detail of this exercise. It should be noted, however, that the main driver of the entire process is based on the size of schools. The rationale for this is put most clearly in the WELB report which states:

*Primary schools with fewer than seven classes often encounter problems. The smaller the school, the more acute these problems can become in providing a broad and balanced curriculum. Despite the best efforts of the teachers involved, there is often less scope for pupils to benefit from meeting a reasonable number of other children, and there are fewer opportunities for providing a full programme of curricular and extra-curricular sports and activities.*

The previous paper to the Committee which analysed the viability audit data for primary schools showed that seven per cent of primary schools were under stress for attainment reasons, one per cent were under stress and in formal intervention, and eight per cent were in stress due to financial deficits. By contrast, 38 per cent of primary schools were deemed to be under stress because their enrolments were below the minimum thresholds set by the Department of Education. The analysis in the reports is based on the assumption that an enrolment below these minimum threshold represents a deficit and they are incapable of delivering an adequate curriculum. However, the viability audit data do not seem to support this assertion as there is no correlation between enrolment and attainment stress, and enrolment is not a factor in whether schools are in formal intervention. There is a relationship between enrolment and financial stress, but the pattern is highly variable.

In other words, the primary driver for the area planning process is to reduce the number of small schools on the assumption that this will lead to stronger schools and enhanced pupil outcomes, but the causal relationship between these factors is not demonstrated by the data upon which area planning is based.

Tony Gallagher  
September 10, 2014

## **Review of the Viability Audit process: analysis of post-primary school data**

### **Introduction**

This review of the viability audit and area planning process for schools is being carried out for the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee. The terms of reference for the review included a consideration of:

- The terms of reference for the viability audit and the criteria used to assess whether schools were failing;
- Whether the circumstances of rural schools had been taken into account;
- The extent to which other data had been used to inform the area planning process;
- How the views of the range of sectors had been taken into account;
- The potential for integrating the Department's area planning and shared education policies;
- The potential for cross-border collaboration in the area planning process;
- And to consider the communication between the Department, Boards of Governors and parents.

### **The viability audit data: post-primary schools**

This paper provides an analysis of the post-primary school data provided in the viability audit report published in February 2012 and complements a paper already prepared with an analysis of primary school data. The Viability Audit has been led by the Education and Library Boards, working in close conjunction with CCMS. The Area Planning process was led by the Department of Education, working with the Education and Library Boards and CCMS.

### **Data**

The ELB Viability Audit reports included the following data for each post-primary school:

- School reference number, which identifies the Education and Library Board in which the school is located
- School type:
  - Controlled
  - Maintained
  - Other maintained
  - Voluntary grammar
  - Controlled grammar
  - Controlled integrated
  - Grant maintained integrated
- Attainment criteria:
  - Less than 40% of pupils achieving 5, A\*- C GCSE (3 out of 4 years) 2006/07 – 2009/10
  - Less than 25% of pupils achieving 5, A\*- C GCSE including English and Maths (in the years) 2008/09 - 2009/10
  - grammar schools only:

- Less than 90% of pupils achieving 7, A\*- C GCSE (3 out of the 4 years) 2006/07 – 2009/10
  - Less than 85% of pupils achieving 7, A\*- C GCSE including English and Maths (in the 2 years) 2008/09 - 2009/10
- Intervention measure: whether or not the school is in formal intervention
- Entitlement framework
  - Number of KS4 targets met 2011/12
  - Number of post 16 targets met 2011/12
- Enrolment trends
  - Enrolment change 2009/10 to 2011/12
  - whether Year 8-12 enrolment is equal to or greater than 500
  - whether post 16 enrolment is equal to or greater than 100
- Financial health (note, that financial data were not made available by the Department of Education for Grant maintained integrated or Voluntary grammar schools)
  - Projected Financial Position from 3 year school plan based on ASB Planning Figure, % surplus/(deficit)
  - Projected Financial Position from 3 year school plan based on ASB Planning Figure, actual surplus/(deficit)
  - Level of financial stress:
    - Level 1 deficit is 50% or greater
    - Level 2 deficit is 25% or greater and less than 50%
    - Level 3 deficit is greater than 5% or £75,000 and less than 25%
    - Level 4 within LMS limits

In addition, it was possible to supplement these with additional data from the Department of Education statistics website and other sources, to include:

- Gender profile of the school
- Location of school (address, district council area, parliamentary constituency)
- Number and proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals
- Number and proportion of pupils on the special needs register levels 1 to 5
- Proportion of 11+ A grade pupils in grammar intakes 2006/7 (grammar schools only)
- updated attainment data

### **Profile of post-primary schools**

Tables 1 to 5 show the number and percentage of schools and pupils across Northern Ireland in 2011/12 and categorised in a variety of ways. Table 1 categorises schools on the basis of their Education and Library Boards. The SEELB has the smallest number of schools (37) and pupils (20,592), while the SELB has the largest number of schools (52) and pupils (32,857). Table 2 categorises the data on the basis of school type and shows that two-thirds of schools are secondary schools, a little under a third are grammar schools and there are four junior high (11-14 yrs) schools in the Craigavon two-tier system. A little under three-in-five pupils are in secondary schools, a little over two-in-three are in grammar schools and just one per cent are in junior high schools.

Tables 3 and 4 show information on the management and sectoral type of the schools, Table 3 shows the schools and pupils categorised in terms of the full range of management types. Table 1A

in the appendix shows the data on schools by management type across constituencies). These schools are differentiated by the structure of their Boards of Governors and this reflects aspects of their history and ownership. The majority of pupils are found in either the controlled or maintained schools, or both types of voluntary grammar schools. Table 4 summarises these data on sectoral types: the Catholic managed group of schools includes the maintained and voluntary-Catholic schools; although not managed by Catholic Church authorities, we have also included the Irish Medium school within this category; the integrated category includes the controlled integrated and grant maintained integrated schools; the other managed schools include the controlled and other voluntary schools. We can see from Table 4 that 47 per cent of pupils are in Catholic managed schools, 45 per cent are in other managed schools and eight per cent are in integrated post primary schools.

Table 1: Number and percentage of schools and pupils by education and library board area (2011/12)

	Number of schools	Number of pupils	Percentage of schools	Percentage of pupils
Belfast	35	29,557	16.2	20.9
North Eastern	49	32,060	22.7	22.7
South Eastern	37	20,592	17.1	14.6
Southern	52	32,857	24.1	23.3
Western	43	26,218	19.9	18.6
Total	216	141,284	100.0	100.0

Table 2: Number and percentage of schools and pupils by school type (2011/12)

type	Number of schools	Number of pupils	Percentage of schools	Percentage of pupils
Grammar	67	59,074	31.0	41.8
Junior High	4	1,918	1.9	1.4
Secondary	145	80,292	67.1	56.8
Total	216	141,284	100.0	100.0

Table 3: Number and percentage of schools and pupils by school management type (2011/12)

	Number of schools	Number of pupils	Percentage of schools	Percentage of pupils
Controlled	73	43,709	33.8	30.9
Controlled integrated	5	2,555	2.3	1.8
Grant Maintained Integrated	15	8,983	6.9	6.4
Irish Medium	1	550	0.5	0.4
RC maintained	71	40,021	32.9	28.3
Voluntary - Other managed	22	19,184	10.2	13.6
Voluntary - Catholic managed	29	26,282	13.4	18.6
Total	216	141,284	100.0	100.0

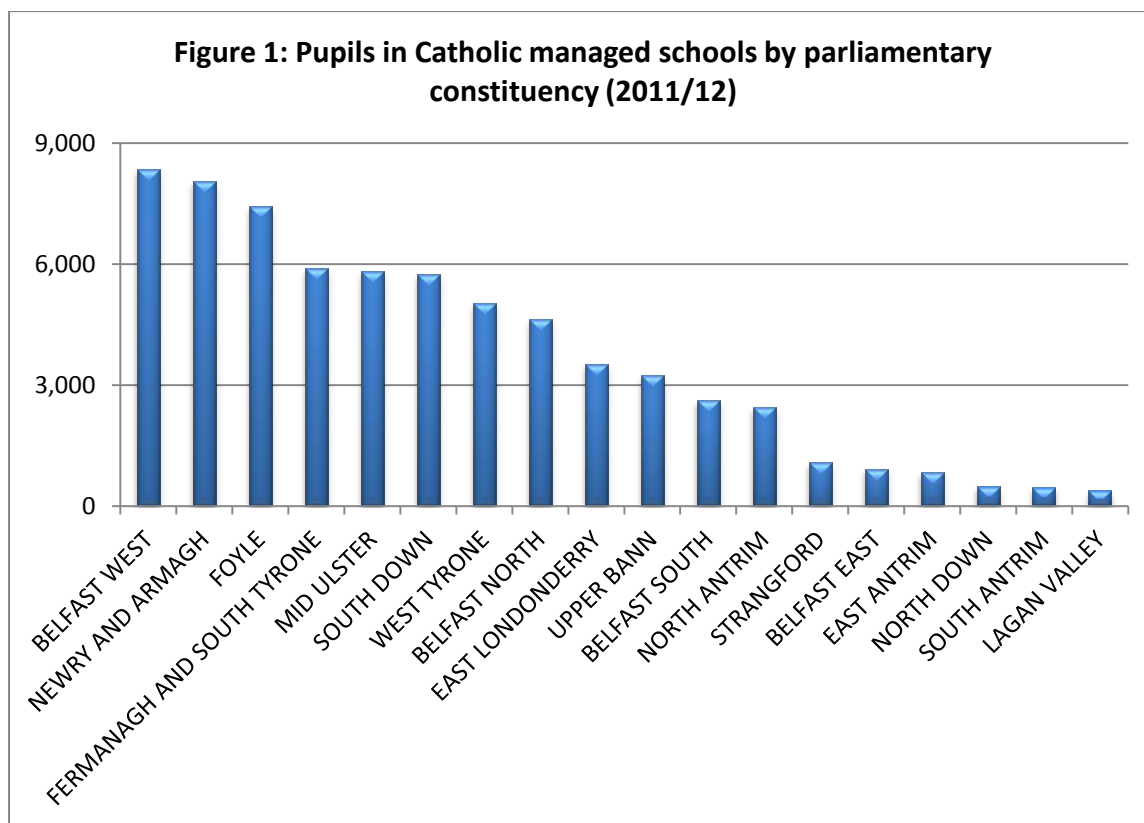
Table 4: Number and percentage of schools and pupils by sectoral type (2011/12)

	Number of schools	Number of pupils	Percentage of schools	Percentage of pupils
Catholic managed	101	66,853	46.8	47.3
Integrated	20	11,538	9.3	8.2
Other managed	95	62,893	44.0	44.5
Total	216	141,284	100.0	100.0

Table 5 shows the number and percentage of schools and pupils across parliamentary constituencies. The smallest number of schools and pupils can be found in South Antrim; the largest number of schools is in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, but the largest number of pupils is in Newry and Armagh. No constituency has less than six post primary schools or less than 4,000 pupils

Table 5: Number and percentage of schools and pupils by parliamentary constituency (2011/12)

	Number of schools	Number of pupils	Percentage of schools	Percentage of pupils
BELFAST EAST	9	6,246	4.2	4.4
BELFAST NORTH	13	9,895	6.0	7.0
BELFAST SOUTH	11	9,557	5.1	6.8
BELFAST WEST	10	8,337	4.6	5.9
EAST ANTRIM	9	6,456	4.2	4.6
EAST LONDONDERRY	14	7,523	6.5	5.3
FERMANAGH AND SOUTH TYRONE	22	10,118	10.2	7.2
FOYLE	12	9,950	5.6	7.0
LAGAN VALLEY	8	4,882	3.7	3.5
MID ULSTER	12	8,470	5.6	6.0
NEWRY AND ARMAGH	16	10,383	7.4	7.3
NORTH ANTRIM	14	9,338	6.5	6.6
NORTH DOWN	6	4,386	2.8	3.1
SOUTH ANTRIM	6	4,360	2.8	3.1
SOUTH DOWN	15	8,091	6.9	5.7
STRANGFORD	11	5,774	5.1	4.1
UPPER BANN	16	9,606	7.4	6.8
WEST TYRONE	12	7,912	5.6	5.6
Total	216	141,284	100.0	100.0



Figures 1 to 3 show the number of pupils by parliamentary constituency for each of the sectoral groups identified in Table 4, with all three using the same scale for comparative purposes. Figure 1 shows the number of pupils per constituency in Catholic managed schools, Figure 2 shows the number of pupils in integrated schools and Figure 3 shows the number of pupils in other managed schools. The range in the distribution is particularly marked for pupils in Catholic managed schools, with a minimum of 389 in Lagan Valley and a maximum of 8,337 in West Belfast. The median figure for Figure 1 is around 3,400, mid-way between the numbers of East Londonderry and Upper Bann. Given the smaller size of the sector, the range for pupils in integrated schools is much narrower, with a minimum of 454 in East Londonderry and a maximum of 1,497 in Strangford; the median here is about 820, mid-way between Lagan Valley and Foyle. Figure 3 shows that the range for the other managed sector is narrower in comparison with the Catholic managed sector, with a minimum of 1,655 in South Down and a maximum of 6,230 in South Belfast; the median is 3,500, mid-way between North Down and East Londonderry.

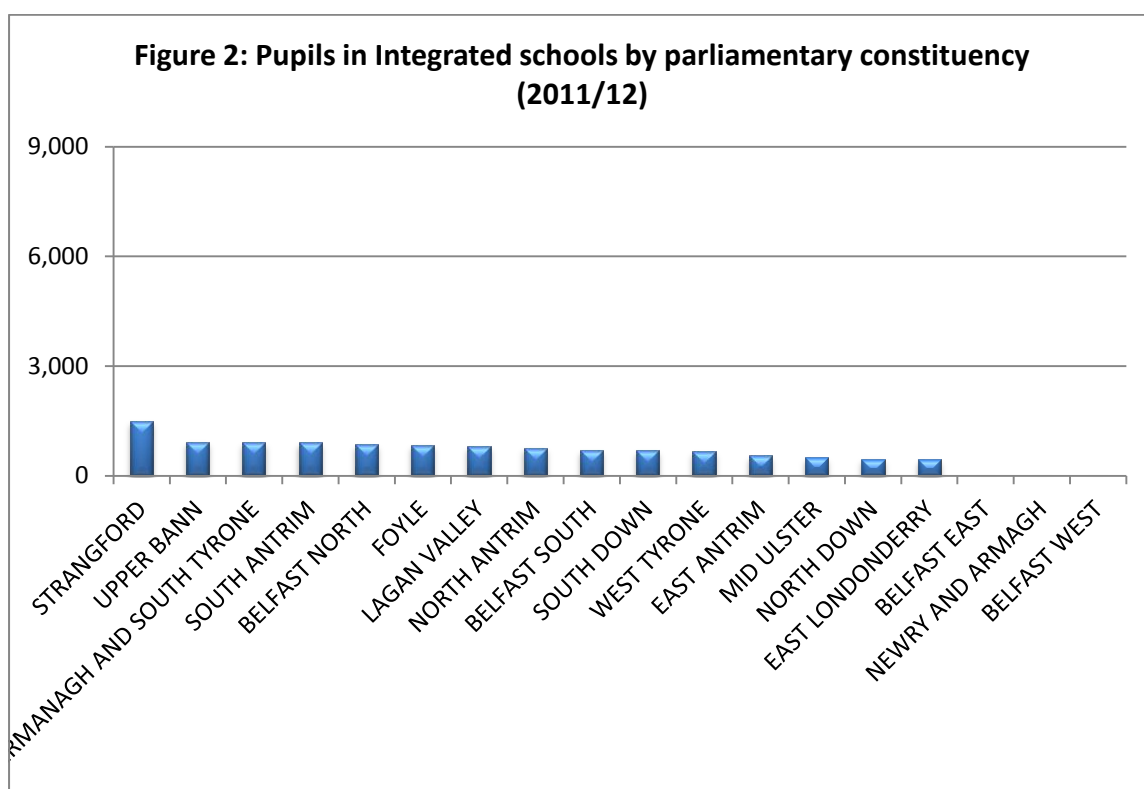


Table 6 supplements the pupil data in Figures 1 to 3 by showing the number of schools in each of the main sectors by parliamentary constituency. This table shows that there is at least one Catholic managed school in each constituency, at least two other managed school in each constituency apart from West Belfast, and at least one integrated school in all but three constituencies, although there are no more than 2 integrated schools in any constituency.

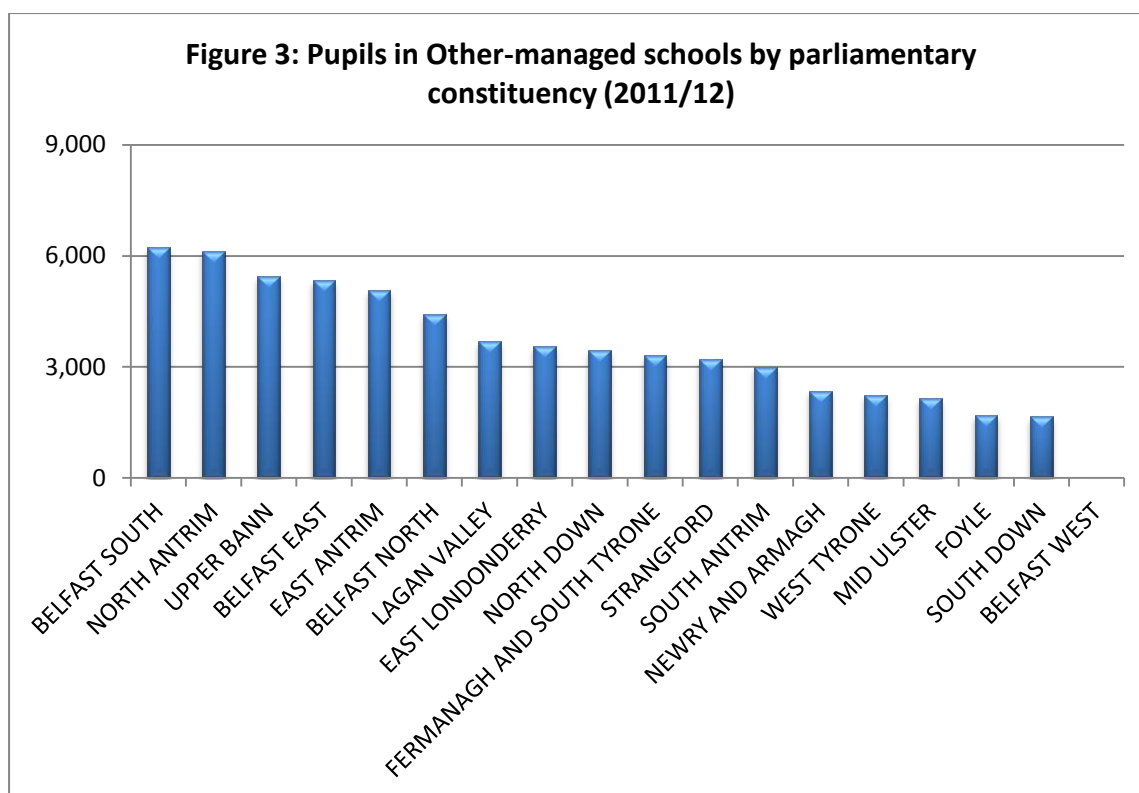


Table 6: Number of schools by sectoral type by parliamentary constituency (2011/12)

Parliamentary constituency	Catholic managed schools	Integrated schools	Other-managed schools	All schools
FERMANAGH AND SOUTH TYRONE	12	2	8	22
UPPER BANN	6	2	8	16
NEWRY AND ARMAGH	10	0	6	16
SOUTH DOWN	10	2	3	15
NORTH ANTRIM	4	1	9	14
EAST LONDONDERRY	7	1	6	14
BELFAST NORTH	7	1	5	13
FOYLE	9	1	2	12
WEST TYRONE	7	1	4	12
MID ULSTER	8	1	3	12
STRANGFORD	3	2	6	11
BELFAST SOUTH	3	1	7	11
BELFAST WEST	10	0	0	10
EAST ANTRIM	1	1	7	9
BELFAST EAST	1	0	8	9
LAGAN VALLEY	1	1	6	8
SOUTH ANTRIM	1	2	3	6
NORTH DOWN	1	1	4	6

Figure 4 illustrates the number of school types per constituency. Since the junior high schools operate as part of the Craigavon system of delayed selection these schools are only found in two constituencies, Newry and Armagh, and Upper Bann. Every constituency contains grammar and secondary schools, although the relative numbers vary: in six constituencies twice as many pupils are in secondary schools as compared with grammar schools (West Belfast, Mid Ulster, Strangford, West Tyrone, Lagan Valley, and Newry and Armagh); in two constituencies there are about as many pupils in each of the types (East Londonderry and North Down); and in two constituencies there are more than twice as many pupils in grammar schools as compared with secondary schools (East Belfast and South Belfast).

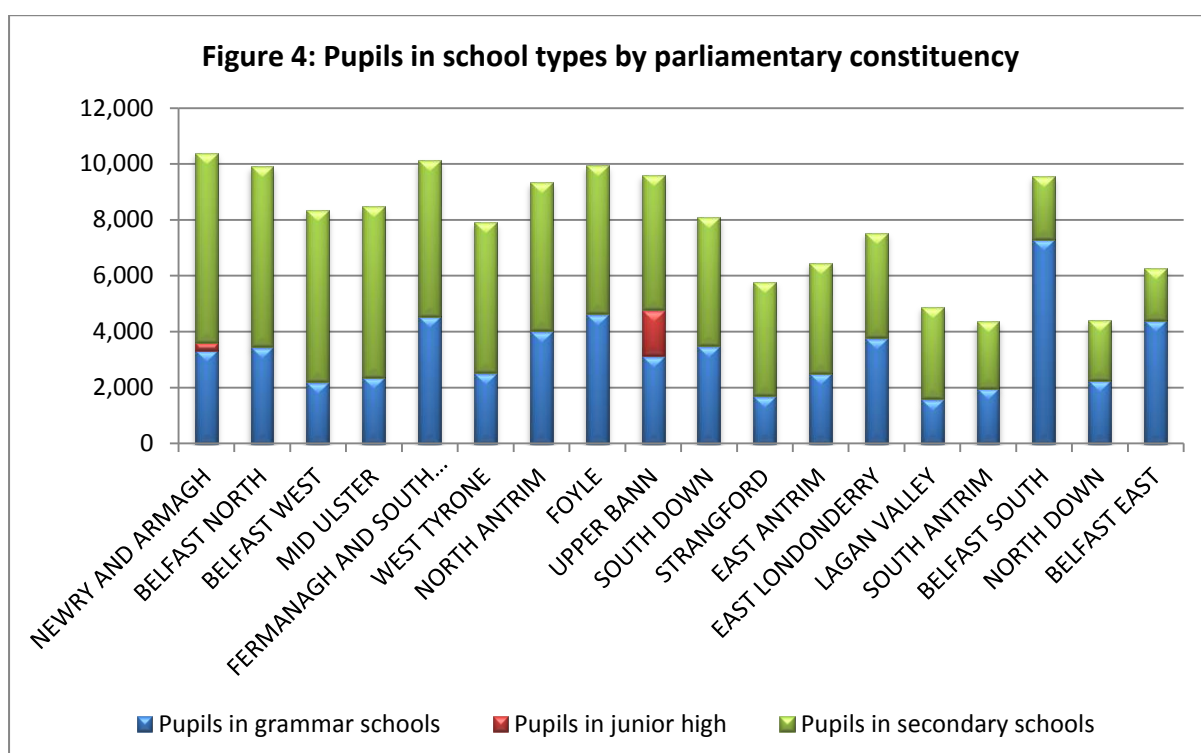


Table 7: Number of approved places and unfilled places by school type (2011/12)

	Approved roll	Unfilled places	% unfilled
grammar	61,610	751	1.2
junior high	2,410	571	23.7
secondary	95,773	18,145	18.9
All schools	159,793	19,467	12.2

Over the past decade post primary schools have been facing falling rolls and while this pattern has started to change for the primary schools, it will be some years before the post primary schools start to see their numbers increasing. Past evidence has suggested that falling rolls have had more impact on secondary schools as grammar schools continue to take pupils up to their approved limit. Tables 7 and 8 show the data for approved numbers and unfilled places by school type (Table 7) and management type (Table 8). Table 7 would appear to confirm the pattern alluded to above in that

there are few unfilled places in grammar schools. By contrast almost a quarter of places in the junior high schools remain unfilled and almost one-in-five places in secondary schools remain unfilled.

Table 8 confirms this pattern with a more disaggregated categorisation of the data. The two types of voluntary grammar schools have few unfilled places, whereas the maintained schools have one-in-five places unfilled. This is higher than the figure for controlled schools (16 per cent), but this group contains controlled grammar schools which had a rate of unfilled places which is similar to their voluntary counterparts. Thereafter a little over one-in-ten places in controlled integrated schools are unfilled, as are a little under one-in-ten in the Irish Medium school and one-in-twenty in the grant maintained integrated schools.

Table 8: Number of approved places and unfilled places by management type (2011/12)

	Approved roll	Unfilled places	% unfilled
Controlled	51,719	8,045	15.6
Controlled Integrated	2,885	354	12.3
Grant Maintained Integrated	9,205	473	5.1
Irish Medium	585	55	9.4
Maintained	48,298	9,928	20.6
Voluntary grammar - other	20,330	353	1.7
Voluntary grammar - Catholic	26,771	259	1.0
All schools	159,793	19,467	12.2

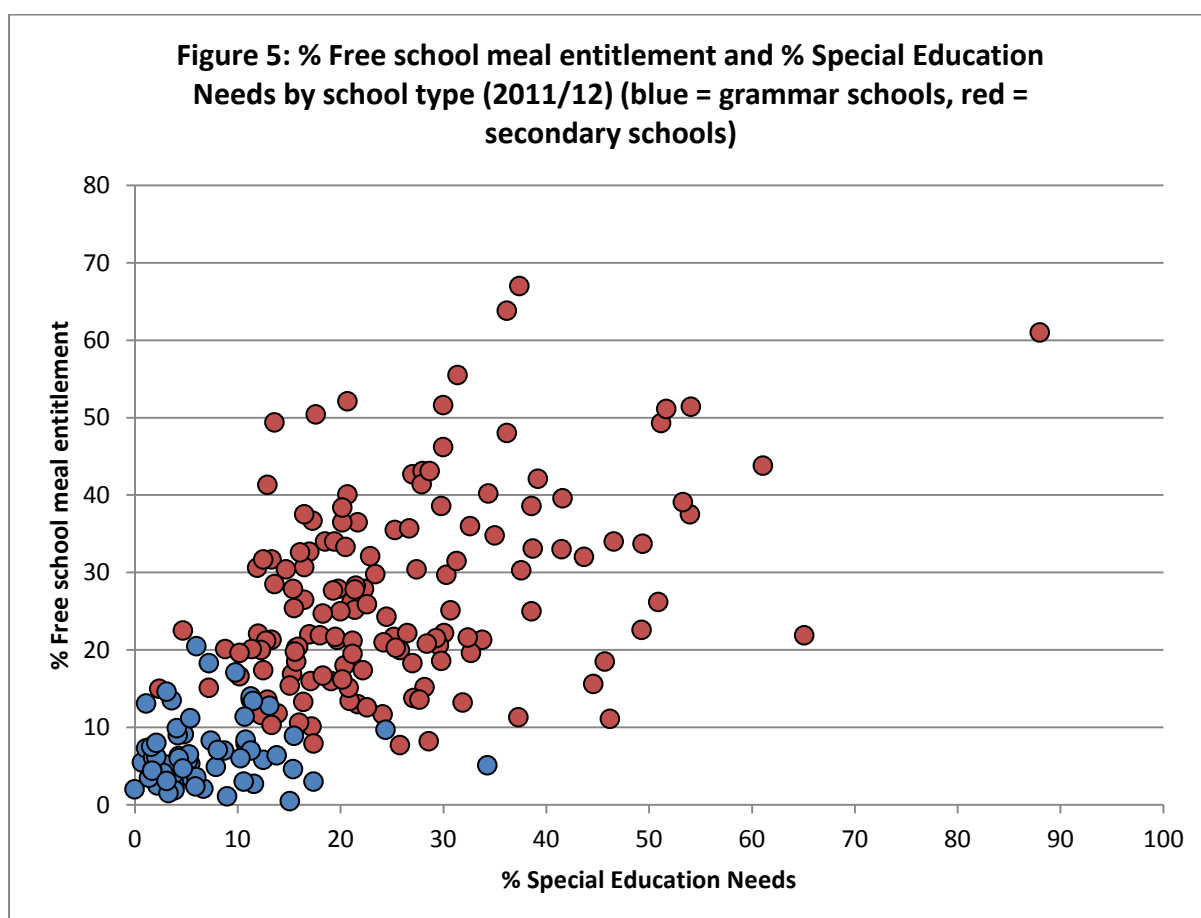


Figure 5 shows the pattern of disadvantage across the school types by plotting the proportion of pupils on the special education needs register in each school against the proportion entitled to free school meals. Figure 5 also shows these data separately for grammar and secondary schools. The figure illustrates the cumulative effect of social disadvantage as there is a correlation between the proportion entitled to free school meals and the proportion on the special needs register. In addition, Figure 5 shows how the level of disadvantage is found to a greater significant extent in secondary schools, as compared with grammar schools.

### Performance patterns

In this section of the paper we examine some of the performance patterns in the viability audit data; later we will examine some of the factors which might help explain these patterns. As noted above the viability audit reports contained four measures of attainment for post-primary schools based on the proportion of Year 12 pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C; the proportion achieving five or more GCSEs including English and Maths; the proportion achieving seven GCSEs at grades A\*-C; and the proportion achieving seven or more GCSEs including English and Maths. In the viability audit reports the attainment measure based on seven or more GCSEs is applied only to the grammar schools, although we have access to 2010/11 data on this measure for secondary schools which we include in our analysis below.

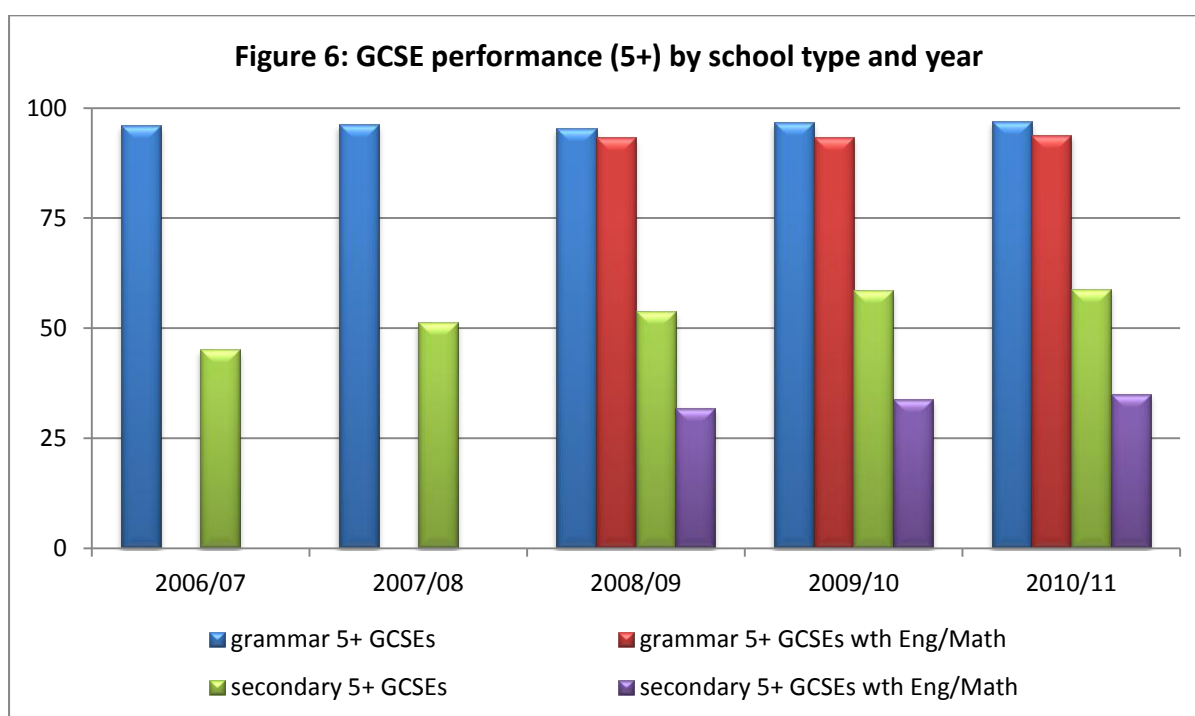


Figure 6 shows the pattern of attainment for grammar and secondary schools for pupils achieving five or more GCSEs, grades A\*-C, overall and including English and Maths. A number of themes are clear from these data:

- first, a ceiling effect is clear for grammar schools as virtually all Year 12 pupils achieve five or more GCSEs overall, or including English and Maths;
- second, the attainment level in secondary schools is rising for both measures;
- third, when we compare attainment at five or more GCSEs overall and including English and Maths, there is no difference between these measures for grammar schools, but there is a marked difference between the measures for secondary schools. The most likely explanation is that secondary schools have encouraged pupils to take a more diverse range of GCSE subjects, probably as a consequence of the use of five or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C as the main performance indicator until recent years.

From Tables 9 and 10 we see these data disaggregated by sector. Catholic managed grammar schools achieve slightly higher scores on these measures, but the difference is small as a consequence of the already identified ceiling effect. Perhaps more interesting, the highest rate of improvement on the five or more GCSEs criterion is among maintained secondary schools, then integrated schools and then controlled schools (Table 9). It is also noteworthy that the rate of improvement is higher for this measure as compared with the proportion of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs, A\*-C, including English and Maths (Table 10), although here again the highest rate of improvement can be found among maintained schools, although the differences across the sectors are small.

Table 9: Proportion of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs, grades A\*-C, by school type and year

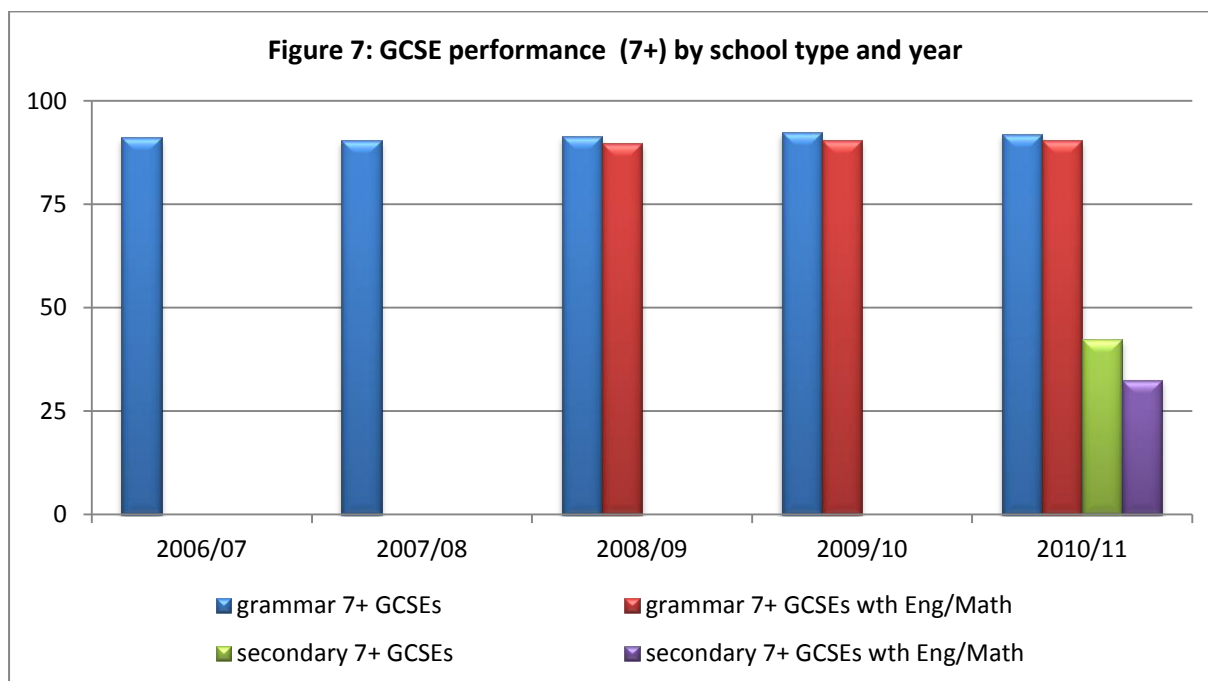
		2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Grammar	Catholic managed	97	96	98	98	98
	Controlled/Voluntary	96	96	94	96	97
	All grammar	96	96	95	97	97
Secondary	Maintained	48	54	57	63	64
	Controlled	40	46	49	52	50
	Integrated	50	53	55	59	62
	All secondary	45	51	54	59	59

Table 10: Proportion of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs, grades A\*-C, including English and Maths, by school type and year

5+ GCSEs, grades A*-C, including Maths & English		2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Grammar	Catholic managed	94	94	94
	Controlled/Voluntary	93	93	94
	All grammar	93	93	94
Secondary	Maintained	33	35	38
	Controlled	34	38	38
	Integrated	30	31	30
	All secondary	32	34	35

Figure 7 shows the patterns for the proportion of pupils achieving seven or more GCSEs, grades A\*-C, overall and including English and Maths. As noted above, attainment data for secondary schools were not published on this measure, but were otherwise available for 2010/11 and so these are

included on the figure. The most notable feature of Figure 7 lie in the high performance of the grammar schools, with more than nine-in-ten pupils achieving seven or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C, regardless of whether this is for GCSEs overall or including English and Maths. By contrast a little over two-in-five secondary pupils achieve seven or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C, and just over one-in-three achieve this including English and Maths.



The detailed picture of performance on these measures by school type and sector can be seen on Tables 11 and 12. These Tables show a fairly stable pattern of performance among the grammar schools, with Catholic managed grammar schools achieving slightly higher on these measures; maintained secondary schools achieve slightly higher on these measures, with integrated schools next, followed by controlled schools.

Table 11: Proportion of pupils achieving seven or more GCSEs, grades A\*-C, by school type and year

7+ GCSEs, grades A*-C		2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Grammar	Catholic managed	92	91	94	94	94
	Controlled/Voluntary	90	90	90	91	91
	All grammar	91	90	91	92	92
Secondary	Maintained	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	47
	Controlled	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	36
	Integrated	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	44
	All secondary	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	42

Table 12: Proportion of pupils achieving seven or more GCSEs, grades A\*-C, including English and Maths, by school type and year

7+ GCSEs, grades A*-C, including Maths & English		2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Grammar	Catholic managed	92	92	92
	Controlled/Voluntary	88	89	90
	All grammar	90	91	90
Secondary	Maintained	n/a	n/a	35
	Controlled	n/a	n/a	28
	Integrated	n/a	n/a	34
	All secondary	n/a	n/a	33

Although the use of a threshold measure (five or more, or seven or more GCSEs) to assess performance is of long-standing in Northern Ireland. It is worth noting that a threshold measure carries the risk of a perverse incentive to schools as it may encourage some schools to focus particular attention on pupils who are predicted to achieve just below this level in order to maximise the performance score, and potentially to give relatively less attention to pupils predicted to achieve much less than the threshold. An alternative way of measuring performance that does not contain this risk would be to assign a points value to GCSE grades and use the total points for the best eight GCSEs as the measure of performance. This would allow for more variability in the data, and hence more granular analysis, and would ensure that the schools had an incentive to focus on the performance of all pupils.

### Stress indicators

The viability audit analysis carried out by the ELBs had identified a series of stress indicators which were to be used, in conjunction with other information, to identify schools potentially at risk. In this section of the paper we will look at the schools identified as being at risk using these various measures and test some of the assumed relationships between the various sources of stress. The three main areas of stress as identified by the viability audit process were based on low attainment, low enrolment and financial deficits. The specific stress criteria were mentioned above, but it might be helpful to repeat them here:

Attainment stress indicators:

There were two attainment stress indicators for secondary schools:

- less than 40% of pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs, grades A\*-C, in three of the four years between 2006/07 and 2009/10
- less than 25% of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs, grades A\*-C, including English and Maths, in both 2008/09 or 2009/10

There were two attainment stress indicators for grammar schools:

- less than 90% of pupils achieving seven or more GCSEs, grades A\*-C, in three of the four years between 2006/07 and 2009/10

- less than 85% of pupils achieving seven or more GCSEs, grades A\*-C, including English and Maths, in both 2008/09 or 2009/10

There were two enrolment stress indicators applied to all post-primary schools:

- whether Year 8-12 enrolment is at least 500 pupils
- whether post 16 enrolment is at least 100 pupil

The financial stress indicator was based on whether the projected financial position of the school, from the three year school plan, placed the school in deficit: any school with a projected deficit of 5% or more of budget, or at £75,000 or more, was deemed to be under financial stress.

Table 13 shows the number and percentage of schools under stress on each of these measures. The first two measures relate to secondary schools only and show that approximately one-in-eight failed to meet the five or more GCSEs overall measure, while one-in-seven failed to meet the five or more GCSEs with English and Maths measure. The next two attainment measures only apply to grammar schools and shows that almost a third of the schools failed to meet the seven or more GCSEs measure, while a little over one-in-ten failed to meet the seven or more GCSEs with English and Maths measure. On the enrolment measures over two-in-five failed to have a minimum of 500 pupils in their Years 8-12 groups, while almost three-in-ten failed to have a minimum of 100 pupils in their post-16 years. Over a third of schools were facing financial stress on this indicator.

Note that on Table 13 two of the 6 schools deemed to be facing financial stress were two of the four junior high schools: since these schools only take pupils up age Year 10 they are not included in the base for any of the other stress indicators. This also explains why the total number of schools facing financial stress on Table 14 is 74.

Table 13: Number and percentage of schools not meeting the stress indicators on the basis of attainment, enrolment and financial indicators

	Number of schools under stress	% of schools under stress
5+ GCSEs, A*-C	29	13.3
5+ GCSEs, A*-C with Eng/Math	33	15.1
7+ GCSEs, A*-C	22	31.9
7+ GCSEs, A*-C with Eng/Math	8	11.6
Year 8-12 roll more than 500	94	44.3
Post-16 roll more than 100	48	28.4
Financial stress	76	34.9

Table 14 shows the number of schools meeting the stress indicators within each of the school and sectoral types, while Table 15 shows the proportions within each category which are meeting the stress criteria. Thus, for example, from Table 14 we can see that 12 maintained secondary schools did not meet the attainment criterion for the proportion of their pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C, and from Table 15 we can see that this represents 22.2% of these schools.

Table 14: Number of schools not meeting the stress indicators, by school type, on the basis of attainment, enrolment and financial indicators

	Catholic grammar	Controlled/Voluntary grammar	Maintained secondary	Controlled secondary	Integrated
5+ GCSEs, A*-C			12	16	1
5+ GCSEs, A*-C with Eng/Math			13	18	2
7+ GCSEs, A*-C	8	14	-	-	-
7+ GCSEs, A*-C with Eng/Math	3	5	-	-	-
Year 8-12 roll more than 500	6	6	42	28	12
Post-16 roll more than 100	0	0	20	19	9
Financial stress	1	8	38	24	3

Table 15 shows quite a varied pattern across school and sectoral types in the extent to which schools are failing to meet these indicators used in the viability audit process to identify schools under stress. On the attainment measures for secondary schools, maintained and controlled schools are doing poorly, in comparison with integrated schools, while on the attainment measures for grammar schools the Catholic managed schools are doing a little better in comparison with controlled/voluntary grammar schools.

On the enrolment measures, secondary schools generally are in a weaker position, as compared with grammar schools; however, while maintained secondary schools are more likely to have Year 8-12 enrolments which do not meet the viability criterion, as compared with controlled or integrated schools, these are also more likely to have post-16 enrolments which do meet the viability criterion. In regard to financial stress, controlled/voluntary grammar schools are more likely to be facing deficits, in comparison with Catholic grammar schools, but maintained secondary schools are more likely to be facing deficits, in comparison with controlled or integrated schools.

Table 15: Percentage of schools not meeting the stress indicators, by school type, on the basis of attainment, enrolment and financial indicators

	Catholic grammar	Controlled/Voluntary grammar	Maintained secondary	Controlled secondary	Integrated
5+ GCSEs, A*-C			22.2	22.2	5.0
5+ GCSEs, A*-C with Eng/Math			24.1	25.0	10.0
7+ GCSEs, A*-C	27.6	35.9			
7+ GCSEs, A*-C with Eng/Math	10.3	12.8			
Year 8-12 roll more than 500	20.7	15.8	79.2	38.9	60.0
Post-16 roll more than 100	0.0	0.0	38.5	55.9	56.3
Financial stress	3.4	20.5	71.7	33.3	15.0

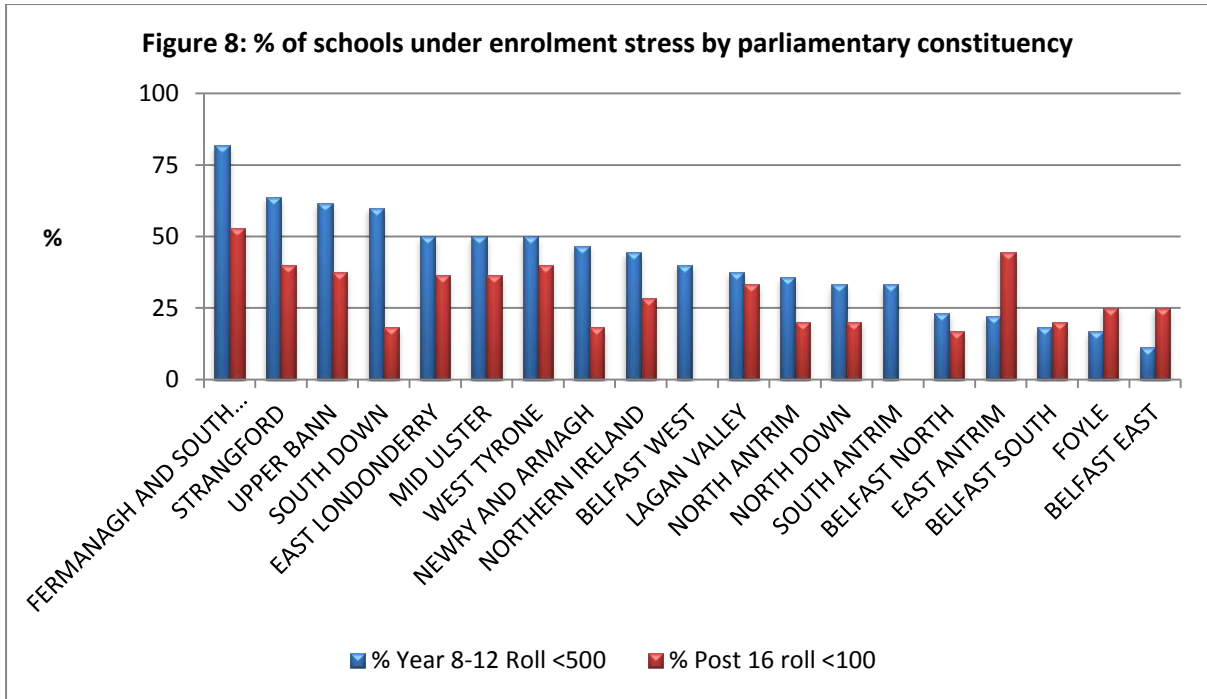


Figure 8 shows the distribution of schools facing both of the two forms of enrolment stress across parliamentary constituencies and highlights the extent to which schools with smaller enrolments tend to be outside the main urban areas or in more rural constituencies.

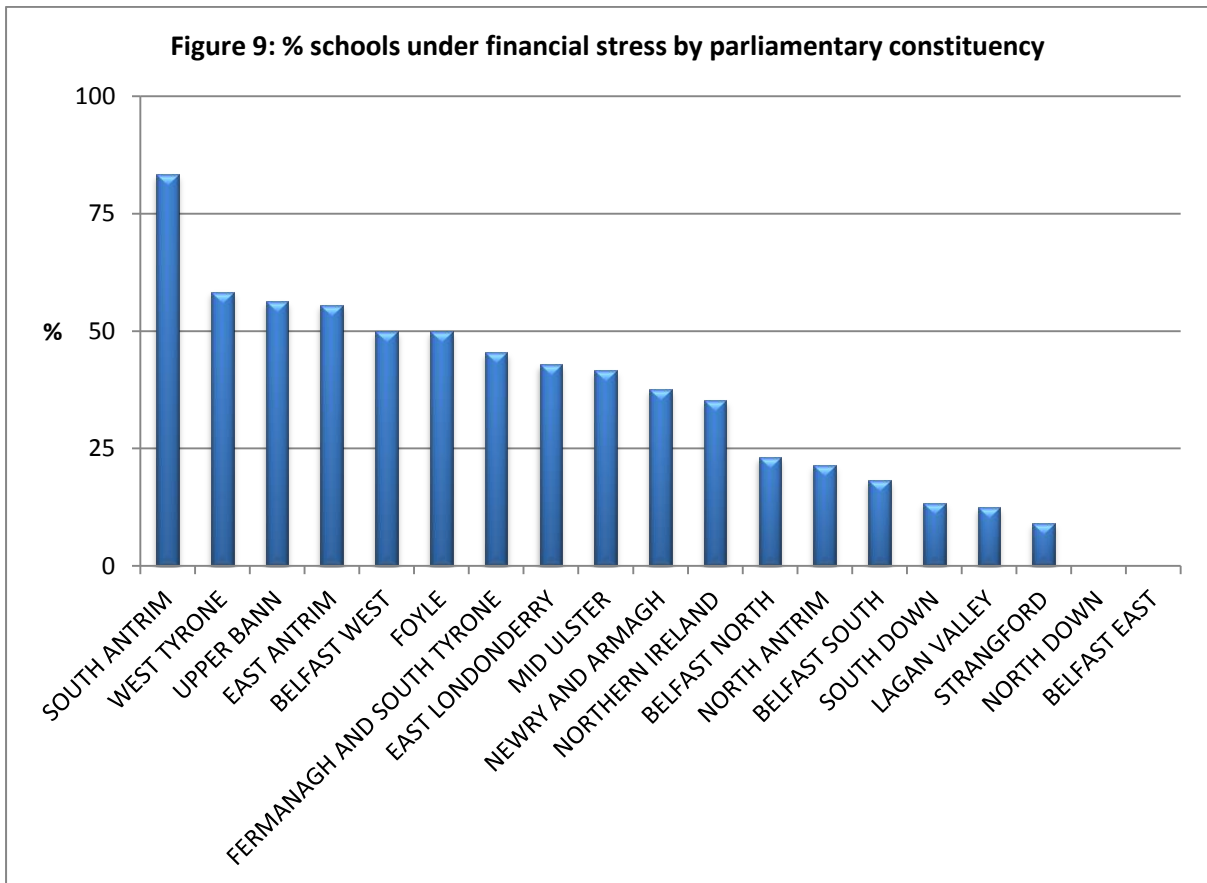
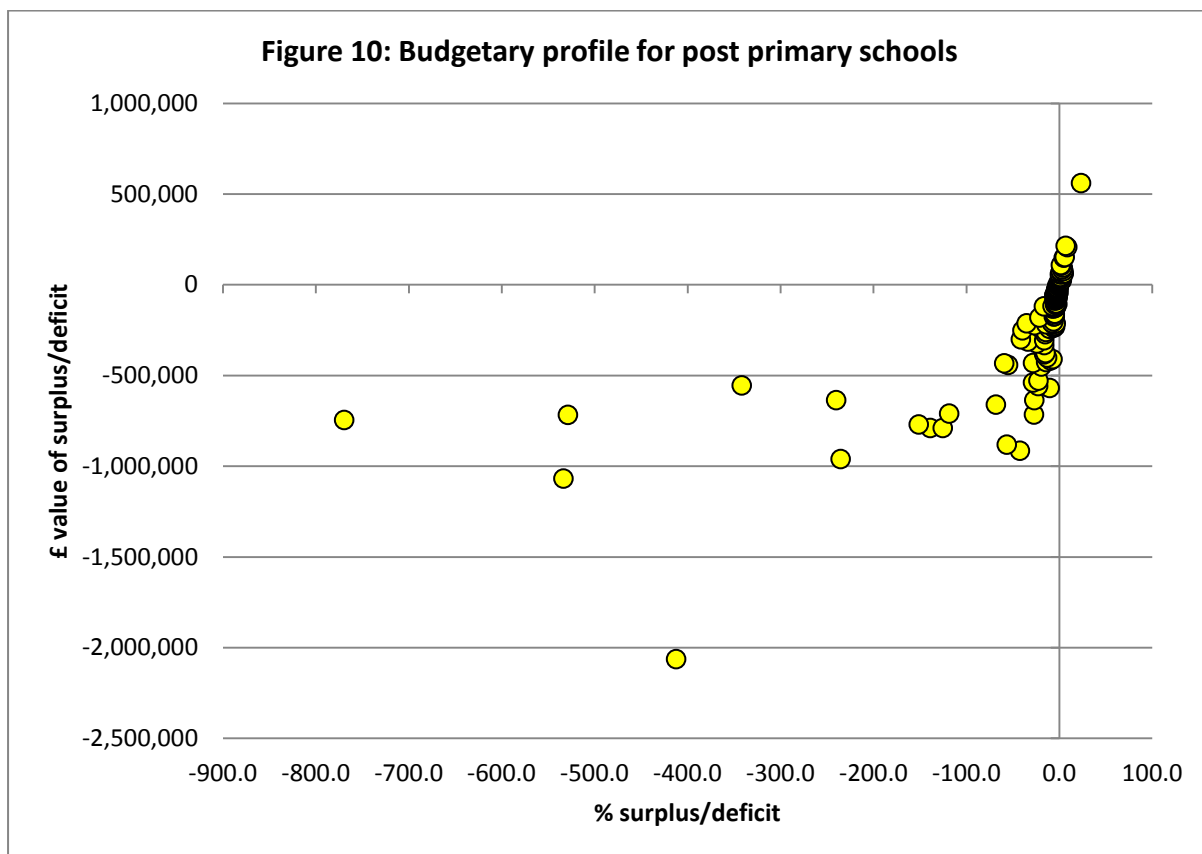


Figure 9 shows the distribution of schools facing financial stress across parliamentary constituencies and the most striking feature of this graph lies in the extent of variation. Figure 10 shows the pattern of deficits for individual schools by plotting the percentage surplus/deficit against the monetary value of the surplus/deficit and shows the highly skewed nature of the distribution. Note that Figure 10 does not contain any datapoints for voluntary grammar schools or grant maintained integrated schools (a total of 63 schools): the Department of Education indicated whether these schools were facing financial stress or not, but other than this, no financial data for these schools were reported in the viability audit reports.

Figure 10 provides a striking picture of the variability in position of the schools: most schools operate within fairly common parameters, but a small number of schools have very skewed positions in comparison with the rest. Thus, for example, 20 schools have very large deficits: the school facing a budget deficit of £2 million is a secondary school in Belfast; one other secondary school in the north west has a budget deficit of over £1 million, while another 18 schools have budget deficits between £500k and £1 million. Eleven schools are projected to have budget deficits which are greater than their actual annual budget: all these are secondary schools, six are maintained and five are controlled schools. The overall financial picture is that 122 schools are projected to be in a deficit position, with their total deficit estimated to reach £30 million. By contrast, 31 schools have projected surpluses, with this estimated to reach £2.4 million.



## Comparing stress factors and outcomes

Using these data it is possible to test the relationship between school size and stress factors. This is important because a key part of the area planning strategy is based on the goal of consolidating schools into larger units on the basis that they will be better placed to deliver an appropriate range of curriculum and the entitlement framework. When this analysis is carried out the following patterns emerge:

- More small secondary schools (with Year 8-12 enrolment less than 500) do not achieve the criterion based on the proportion of pupils passing five or more good GCSEs in comparison with large schools, but the difference just fails to be statistically significant ( $p=0.041$ , adjusted residuals =  $\pm 1.9$ ).
- The same pattern is found for secondary schools when we look at the proportion of pupils who do not achieve 5 or more good GCSEs including English and Maths ( $p=0.128$ ), that is there are more small schools failing to meet this criterion than larger schools, but the difference is not statistically significant.
- The attainment criteria for grammar schools relate to the proportion of pupils failing to achieve seven or more good GCSEs, and the proportion failing to achieve seven or more good GCSEs including English and Maths. There are no statistical differences between small and large schools (with Year 8-12 more or less than 500) on both these criteria ( $p=0.392$  and  $0.560$  respectively).
- The size of the Year 8 to 12 cohort is also not related to whether schools are in financial stress or not, for both grammar and secondary schools (overall  $p=0.218$ ).
- The other enrolment stress is based on a school having a post-16 enrolment which was less than 100 pupils, though as we have noted above, no grammar school falls into this category. Among secondary schools there is, once again, a tendency for small schools on this criterion to be more likely to suffer financial stress, but the difference fails to meet statistical significance ( $p=0.066$ , adjusted residuals =  $\pm 1.7$ ).
- Schools with small Year 8 to 12 cohorts are no more likely to be in formal intervention than larger schools ( $p=0.243$ ).
- In relation to Key Stage 4 Entitlement Framework targets, grammar schools are most likely to have achieved two of these targets, while secondary schools are most likely to have achieved all three targets.
- When the achievement of Entitlement Framework targets is compared to Year 8 to 12 enrolment overall, smaller schools are statistically more likely to have achieved three targets ( $p=0.021$ ), but this is probably explained by the grammar/secondary difference above, since secondary schools are more likely to have smaller Year 8 to 12 cohorts.
- When we look at the link between the size of the post-16 cohort in a school and the number of post-16 Entitlement Framework targets achieved, smaller schools (with post-16 cohorts less than 100 pupils) are more likely to have achieved none or one target, while larger schools are more likely to have achieved three targets ( $p=0.000$ ), but as before, this seems to be linked to the different distribution of grammar and secondary schools on these measures.

Overall this analysis points to a very weak relationship between school size, using the criteria defined in the viability audit process, and school outcomes, whether this is measured using attainment outcomes, financial outcomes, whether a school is in formal intervention or not, or Entitlement Framework outcomes.

## Conclusions

The following main themes emerge from this paper and analysis:

- There are post primary schools and pupils in every constituency in Northern Ireland although the distribution among the different management sectors varies by constituency.
- Although it is the smallest sector, there is at least one integrated school in all but three constituencies.
- There are grammar and secondary schools in every constituency, but only two constituencies have junior high (11-14 years) schools, reflecting the geographical specificity of the Craigavon two-tier system.
- The level of unfilled places varies across the sectors and school types: there are virtually no unfilled places in grammar schools, but almost one-in-five places in secondary and one-in-four places in junior high schools are unfilled.
- The highest level of unfilled places is found in maintained and controlled secondary schools.
- The level of unfilled places in controlled integrated schools is higher in comparison with grant maintained integrated schools: both types have fewer unfilled places than secondary schools, but more unfilled places than grammar schools.
- The level of free school meal entitlement is much higher in secondary than grammar schools, as is the proportion of pupils on the special needs register: both these measures of disadvantage are correlated.
- Performance levels are higher in grammar schools in comparison with secondary schools, although Catholic managed schools tend to achieve higher performance levels than other school types.
- The level of stress in post primary schools, based on the criteria set in the area planning analysis papers, varies widely: across all stress categories at least one-in-ten schools fail to meet the criteria and on some measures the proportion failing to meet the criterion is over two-in-five.
- The proportion of schools under stress varies by school type and management type:
  - Among grammar schools, Catholic schools are less likely to suffer financial stress, are slightly less likely to suffer attainment stress, but a little more likely to suffer enrolment stress.
  - Among secondary schools maintained and controlled are more likely to be suffering attainment stress than integrated schools; Maintained schools are much more likely to be suffering financial stress than the other two types; the pattern of enrolment stress varies by measure:
    - For pupils in years 8-12, more maintained and integrated schools are under stress than controlled schools;
    - But for post-16 enrolment, more maintained schools are under stress.

- The proportion of schools facing financial stress vary widely across constituencies
- Although there is a pattern on some stress measures that smaller schools are more likely to be under stress than larger schools, this typically does not reach statistical significance, suggesting there is little, if any relationship between stress and school size.

Tony Gallagher  
January 16, 2014

## Appendix

Table A1: Number of schools by management type and parliamentary constituency

	Controlled	Controlled Integrated	Grant Maintained Integrated	Irish Medium	Catholic Maintained	Other voluntary grammar	Catholic managed voluntary grammar	All schools
BELFAST EAST	5	0	0	0	0	3	1	9
BELFAST NORTH	4	0	1	0	5	1	2	13
BELFAST SOUTH	3	0	1	0	1	4	2	11
BELFAST WEST	0	0	0	1	7	0	2	10
EAST ANTRIM	5	0	1	0	1	2	0	9
EAST LONDONDERRY	5	0	1	0	5	1	2	14
FERMANAGH AND SOUTH TYRONE	6	0	2	0	9	2	3	22
FOYLE	1	0	1	0	6	1	3	12
LAGAN VALLEY	4	1	0	0	1	2	0	8
MID ULSTER	2	0	1	0	6	1	2	12
NEWRY AND ARMAGH	5	0	0	0	7	1	3	16
NORTH ANTRIM	7	0	1	0	3	2	1	14
NORTH DOWN	2	1	0	0	1	2	0	6
SOUTH ANTRIM	3	2	0	0	1	0	0	6
SOUTH DOWN	3	0	2	0	6	0	4	15
STRANGFORD	6	0	2	0	2	0	1	11
UPPER BANN	8	1	1	0	5	0	1	16
WEST TYRONE	4	0	1	0	5	0	2	12
Total	73	5	15	1	71	22	29	216

## **Review of the Viability Audit process: analysis of primary school data**

### **Introduction**

This review of the viability audit and area planning process for schools is being carried out for the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee. The terms of reference for the review included a consideration of:

- The terms of reference for the viability audit and the criteria used to assess whether schools were failing;
- Whether the circumstances of rural schools had been taken into account;
- The extent to which other data had been used to inform the area planning process;
- How the views of the range of sectors had been taken into account;
- The potential for integrating the Department's area planning and shared education policies;
- The potential for cross-border collaboration in the area planning process;
- And to consider the communication between the Department, Boards of Governors and parents.

### **The viability audit data: primary schools**

This paper provides an analysis of the primary school data provided in the viability audit report published in February 2012. The Viability Audit has been led by the Education and Library Boards, working in close conjunction with CCMS. The Area Planning process was led by the Department of Education, working with the Education and Library Boards and CCMS. Draft area planning reports, and revised reports following consultation, have been published for post primary schools; draft area planning reports for primary schools have been published and are not out for consultation. It should be noted that the draft area plan reports for primary schools used updated data available to the ELBs so some of the patterns will differ slightly from those reported in the analysis below.

### **Data**

The ELB Viability Audit reports included the following data for each primary school (note that no data were provided by the Department of Education for prep departments in voluntary grammar schools):

- School reference number, which identifies:
  - The Education and Library Board in which the school is located
  - School management type
    - Controlled
    - Maintained
    - Other maintained (all but four of these are Irish Medium schools)
    - Voluntary (prep departments in grammar schools)
    - Integrated controlled

- Integrated grant maintained (GM)
- Attainment measure: whether or not the school has been in the lower quartile of the FSM band in 3 of the last 4 years in both English and maths
- Intervention measure: whether or not the school is in formal intervention
- Enrolment number
  - Enrolment numbers for 2009/10
  - Enrolment numbers for 2010/11
  - Enrolment number for 2011/12
  - % change between 2009/10 and 2011/12
  - Whether the school is designated a rural or urban school
  - Whether or not the school meets the minimum defined enrolment threshold (greater than 105 for rural schools; greater than 140 for urban schools)
- Financial health (note, that financial data were not made available by the Department of Education for Integrated Grant Maintained or Voluntary schools)
  - Projected financial position by 2013/14: % surplus/deficit
  - Projected financial position by 2013/14: total surplus/deficit
  - Level of financial stress
    - level 1 deficit is 50% or greater
    - level 2 deficit is 25% or higher and less than 50%
    - level 3 deficit is greater than 5% and less than 25%
    - level 4 within LMS limits

In addition, it was possible to supplement these with additional data from the Department of Education statistics website, to include:

- Gender profile of the school
- Location of school (address, district council area, parliamentary constituency)
- Number and proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals
- Number and proportion of pupils on the special needs register levels 1 to 5

### **Profile of primary schools**

Table 1 shows the number and percentage of primary schools by management type. Maintained Catholic and Controlled schools form the two main categories, comprising over 91% of all primary schools in Northern Ireland. Almost all primary schools are co-educational, with only ten (1.2%) all-girls and seven (0.8%) all-boys schools.

Table 2 shows the distribution of primary schools across the five Education and Library Board (ELB) areas, and also includes the total number of pupils in these schools and the average enrolment per school. Belfast ELB has the smallest number of primary schools, but the largest average enrolment per school. The largest number of schools is located in the Southern ELB which also has the largest total enrolment. The Western ELB has the smallest average enrolment per school.

Table 1: Number and percentage of schools by management type (2011/12)

<b>Management type</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Controlled	381	44.6%
Voluntary	12	1.4%
Maintained Catholic	392	45.9%
Maintained Other	27	3.2%
Integrated Controlled	19	2.2%
Integrated Grant Maintained (GM)	23	2.7%
ALL SCHOOLS	854	100.0%

Table 2: Number and percentage of schools, and total and average enrolment, by Education and Library Board area (2011/12) (enrolment data excludes eight prep departments in voluntary grammar schools)

<b>Education and Library Board Area</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Total number of pupils</b>	<b>Mean enrolment per school</b>
Belfast	88	10.3%	21,716	268
North Eastern	209	24.5%	35,124	168
South Eastern	152	17.8%	32,601	214
Southern	222	26.0%	37,069	168
Western	183	21.4%	27,025	148
ALL SCHOOLS	854	100.0%	153,535	181

Tables 3(a) and 3(b) show the number and percentage of primary schools by management type and across all 18 constituency areas. Although there are broadly equal numbers of Controlled and Maintained Catholic primary schools, and they can be found in every constituency area, Figure 1 shows that they are differentially distributed across constituencies.

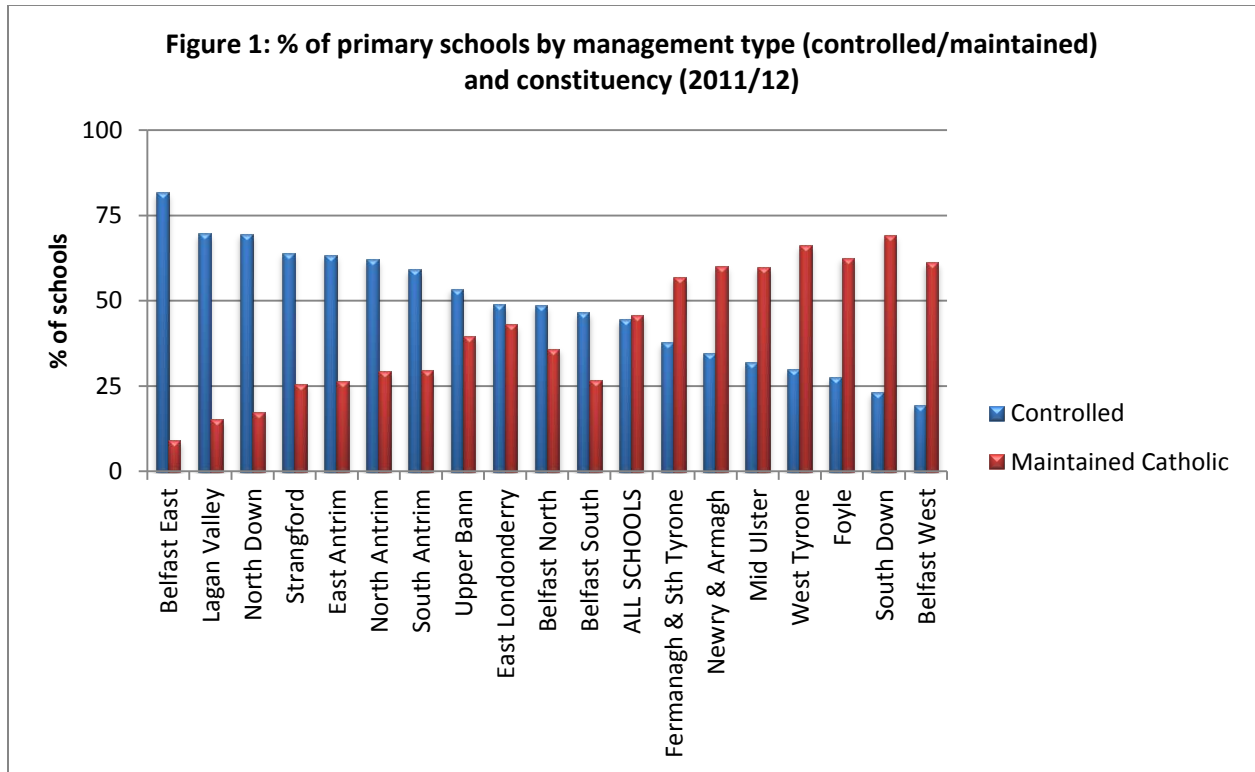


Table 3(a) Number of primary schools by management type and constituency (2011/12)

	Controlled	Voluntary	Maintained Catholic	Maintained other	Integrated Controlled	Integrated GM	Total
<b>Belfast East</b>	18	2	2	0	0	0	22
<b>Belfast North</b>	19	1	14	2	2	1	39
<b>Belfast South</b>	14	4	8	1	1	2	30
<b>Belfast West</b>	6	0	19	6	0	0	31
<b>East Antrim</b>	24	0	10	1	1	2	38
<b>East Londonderry</b>	25	0	22	1	1	2	51
<b>Fermanagh &amp; South Tyrone</b>	28	0	42	2	0	2	74
<b>Foyle</b>	11	0	25	2	1	1	40
<b>Lagan Valley</b>	23	2	5	0	1	2	33
<b>Mid Ulster</b>	23	0	43	4	0	2	72
<b>Newry &amp; Armagh</b>	26	1	45	2	0	1	75
<b>North Antrim</b>	36	1	17	1	2	1	58
<b>North Down</b>	16	1	4	0	2	0	23
<b>South Antrim</b>	26	0	13	1	3	1	44
<b>South Down</b>	15	0	45	1	3	1	65
<b>Strangford</b>	25	0	10	0	2	2	39
<b>Upper Bann</b>	23	0	17	1	0	2	43
<b>West Tyrone</b>	23	0	51	2	0	1	77
<b>ALL SCHOOLS</b>	381	12	392	27	19	23	854

Table 3(b) Percentage of primary schools by management type and constituency (2011/12)

	Controlled	Voluntary	Maintained Catholic	Maintained other	Integrated Controlled	Integrated GM	Total
<b>Belfast East</b>	81.8	9.1	9.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
<b>Belfast North</b>	48.7	2.6	35.9	5.1	5.1	2.6	100.0
<b>Belfast South</b>	46.7	13.3	26.7	3.3	3.3	6.7	100.0
<b>Belfast West</b>	19.4	0.0	61.3	19.4	0.0	0.0	100.0
<b>East Antrim</b>	63.2	0.0	26.3	2.6	2.6	5.3	100.0
<b>East Londonderry</b>	49.0	0.0	43.1	2.0	2.0	3.9	100.0
<b>Fermanagh &amp; South Tyrone</b>	37.8	0.0	56.8	2.7	0.0	2.7	100.0
<b>Foyle</b>	27.5	0.0	62.5	5.0	2.5	2.5	100.0
<b>Lagan Valley</b>	69.7	6.1	15.2	0.0	3.0	6.1	100.0
<b>Mid Ulster</b>	31.9	0.0	59.7	5.6	0.0	2.8	100.0
<b>Newry &amp; Armagh</b>	34.7	1.3	60.0	2.7	0.0	1.3	100.0
<b>North Antrim</b>	62.1	1.7	29.3	1.7	3.4	1.7	100.0
<b>North Down</b>	69.6	4.3	17.4	0.0	8.7	0.0	100.0
<b>South Antrim</b>	59.1	0.0	29.5	2.3	6.8	2.3	100.0
<b>South Down</b>	23.1	0.0	69.2	1.5	4.6	1.5	100.0
<b>Strangford</b>	64.1	0.0	25.6	0.0	5.1	5.1	100.0
<b>Upper Bann</b>	53.5	0.0	39.5	2.3	0.0	4.7	100.0
<b>West Tyrone</b>	29.9	0.0	66.2	2.6	0.0	1.3	100.0
<b>ALL SCHOOLS</b>	44.6	1.4	45.9	3.2	2.2	2.7	100.0

### Social patterns in primary schools

Table 4, and figures 2 and 3, show the key social patterns related to disadvantage in primary schools of different management types (profiles by parliamentary constituencies are provided in annex 1). In both cases we use resistant measures of average and spread due to the skewed nature of the distributions. The median (or 50<sup>th</sup> percentile) represents the mid-point in a distribution such that half the schools have a level above this figure and half have a level below this figure. In order to correct for extreme outliers, range is normally measured by the difference between the 75<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> percentiles: the greater this difference, the higher the level of inequality in the distribution.

Table 4: Entitlement to free school meals and special education needs by management type (median %)

Management type	% entitled to free school meals (median)	% on stages 1-5 special needs register (median)
Controlled	19.8	20.2
Voluntary	2.2	12.4
Maintained Catholic	24.8	19.7
Maintained other	38.7	22.3
Integrated Controlled	24.6	22.8
Integrated GM	17.5	23.1

Figure 2 shows the profile of free school meal entitlement across the primary schools. The highest level of entitlement is found in the Maintained Other schools, followed by Maintained Catholic and Controlled Integrated schools. The lowest level of free school meal entitlement is found in the Voluntary schools.

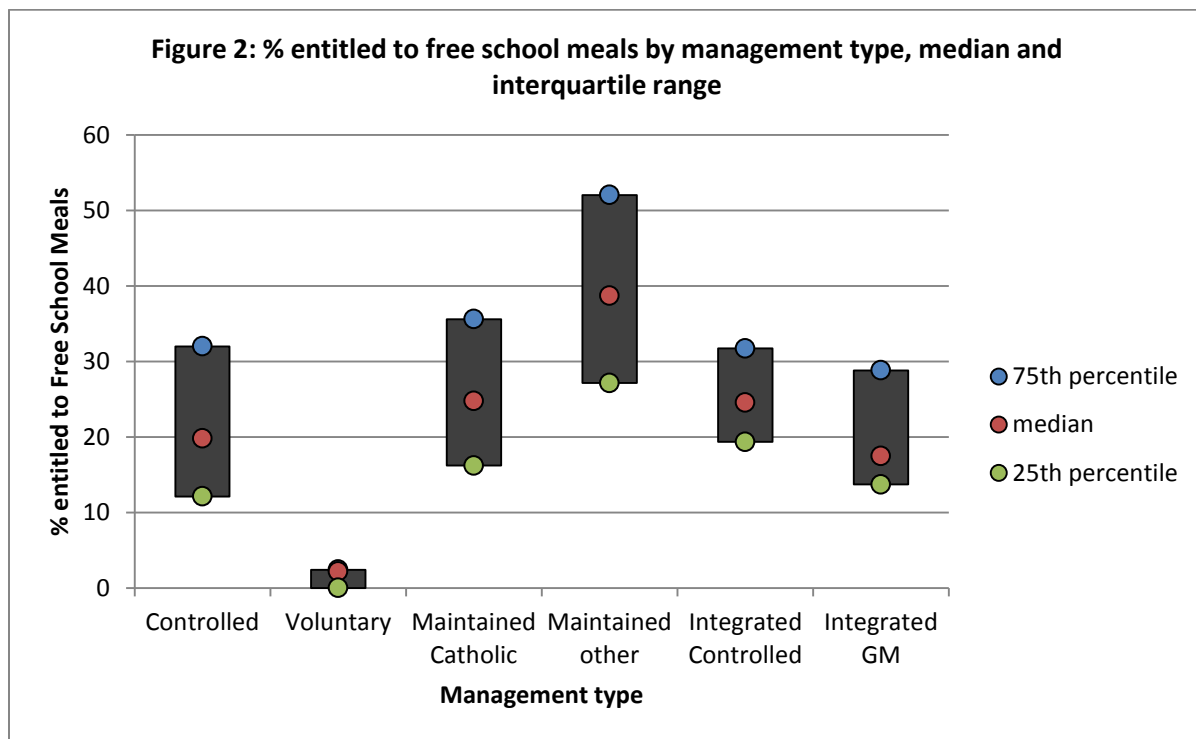
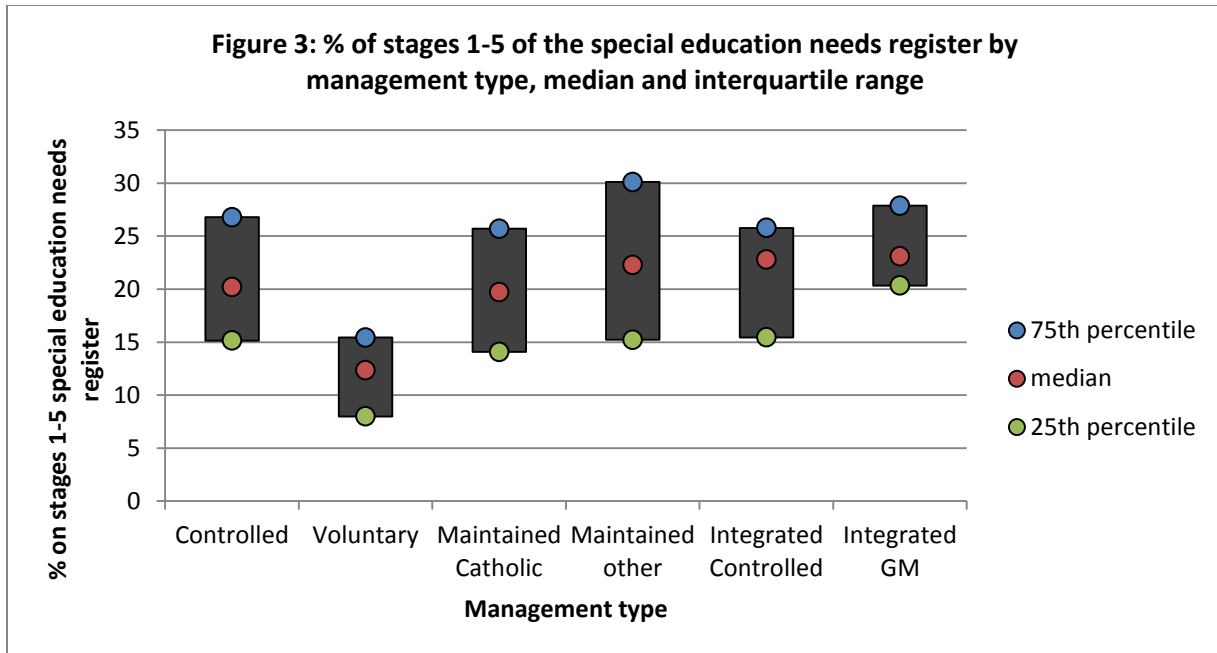


Figure 3 shows the profile of special education needs, based on the percentage of pupils on stages 1 to 5 of the special needs register. The average level of special needs entitlement is broadly similar for most of the school types, although somewhat higher for the two categories of Integrated schools and Maintained Other schools. The level of special needs is significantly lower for the Voluntary schools. The range of special needs entitlement is widest in Maintained Other schools.



### Viability audit stress levels: attainment and quality measures

As noted above, in the viability audit process the measure of attainment stress was based on whether a school had been in the lower performance quartile of its free school meal entitlement group for three of the last four years: if a school did meet this condition then it was deemed to be under-performing in comparison to schools of a broadly similar type. We can see from table 5 that 59 (7%) of schools were deemed to be under-performing using this measure and thus under attainment stress. There does not appear to be any relationship between school size and attainment stress: the median enrolment of all primary schools is 143, but the median size of schools under attainment stress is 156. Table 6 shows that ten schools (1.2%) were in formal intervention as a consequence of concerns on their educational quality.

Table 5: Schools under attainment stress (in the lower quartile of FSME group in three of the last four years) (data missing for 10 schools)

	Number	Percentage
<b>Under stress</b>	59	7.0%
<b>Not under stress</b>	785	93.0%
<b>ALL SCHOOLS</b>	844	100.0%

Table 6: Schools under quality stress (schools in formal intervention or not) (data missing for nine schools)

	Number	Percentage
<b>Under stress</b>	10	1.2%
<b>Not under stress</b>	835	98.8%
<b>ALL SCHOOLS</b>	845	100.0%

Table 7 shows the relationship between attainment stress and management type. There is a statistically significant relationship between these variables ( $p=0.003$ ): Controlled primary schools are significantly more likely to be categorised as under attainment stress (standardised adjusted residual = 4.2) while Maintained Catholic schools are significantly less likely to be so classified (standardised adjusted residual = -3.4).

Table 7: Attainment stress by management type, number and percentage of schools)

	<b>Under stress</b>	<b>Not under stress</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Controlled</b>	42 (71%)	339 (43%)	381 (45%)
<b>Voluntary</b>	0 (0%)	4 (1%)	4 (1%)
<b>Maintained Catholic</b>	15 (25%)	377 (48%)	392 (46%)
<b>Maintained Other</b>	1 (2%)	24 (3%)	25 (3%)
<b>Integrated Controlled</b>	1 (2%)	18 (2%)	19 (2%)
<b>Integrated GM</b>	0 (0%)	23 (3%)	23 (3%)
<b>ALL SCHOOLS</b>	59 (100%)	785 (100%)	844 (100%)

As noted above, there are only ten primary schools in formal intervention: six of these are Controlled schools, two are Maintained Catholic schools and two are Maintained Other schools, representing 2%, 1% and 8% of each category respectively. Although there is no statistically significant relationship between school management type and whether or not a school is in formal intervention, the proportion of Maintained Other schools which are in formal intervention is markedly higher than for all other categories of schools.

Of the ten schools in formal intervention all but one have enrolment levels below 100 pupils: the highest and lowest enrolments respectively are 207 and 46 pupils, with the median enrolment at 78 pupils. By contrast, for all primary schools the median enrolment is 143 pupils.

#### **Viability audit stress levels: enrolment measures**

Largely on the basis of recommendations in the Bain Report (2006) the Department has set minimum enrolment thresholds below which it is believed schools will find difficulty in providing an appropriate educational environment and experience. Rural primary schools are expected to have more than 105 pupils, while urban primary schools are expected to have more than 140 pupils. The designation of schools as either rural or urban is controversial: urban schools are defined as those within the urban areas of Belfast or Derry/Londonderry and all others are designated as rural schools. We have noted, in interviews with education stakeholders, a widespread view that this approach understates the number of schools in urban contexts by treating the many primary schools in towns as if they were rural schools.

Tables 8(a) and 8(b) show the number and percentage of schools, by management type, that are above or below the minimum enrolment threshold set by the Department of Education. Overall three-in-five schools are above the threshold, but this pattern does vary across the school types: Maintained Other schools are significantly more likely to have enrolments that are below the threshold level, while Integrated GM and Voluntary schools are significantly more likely to have enrolments which are above the threshold level.

Table 8(a): Number of schools above and below the enrolment threshold by management type

	<b>Below enrolment threshold (n)</b>	<b>Above enrolment threshold (n)</b>	<b>All schools</b>
<b>Controlled</b>	147	234	381
<b>Voluntary</b>	1	11	12
<b>Maintained Catholic</b>	150	242	392
<b>Maintained Other</b>	19	8	27
<b>Integrated Controlled</b>	7	12	19
<b>Integrated GM</b>	0	23	23
<b>ALL SCHOOLS</b>	324	530	854

Table 8(a): Percentage of schools above and below the enrolment threshold by management type

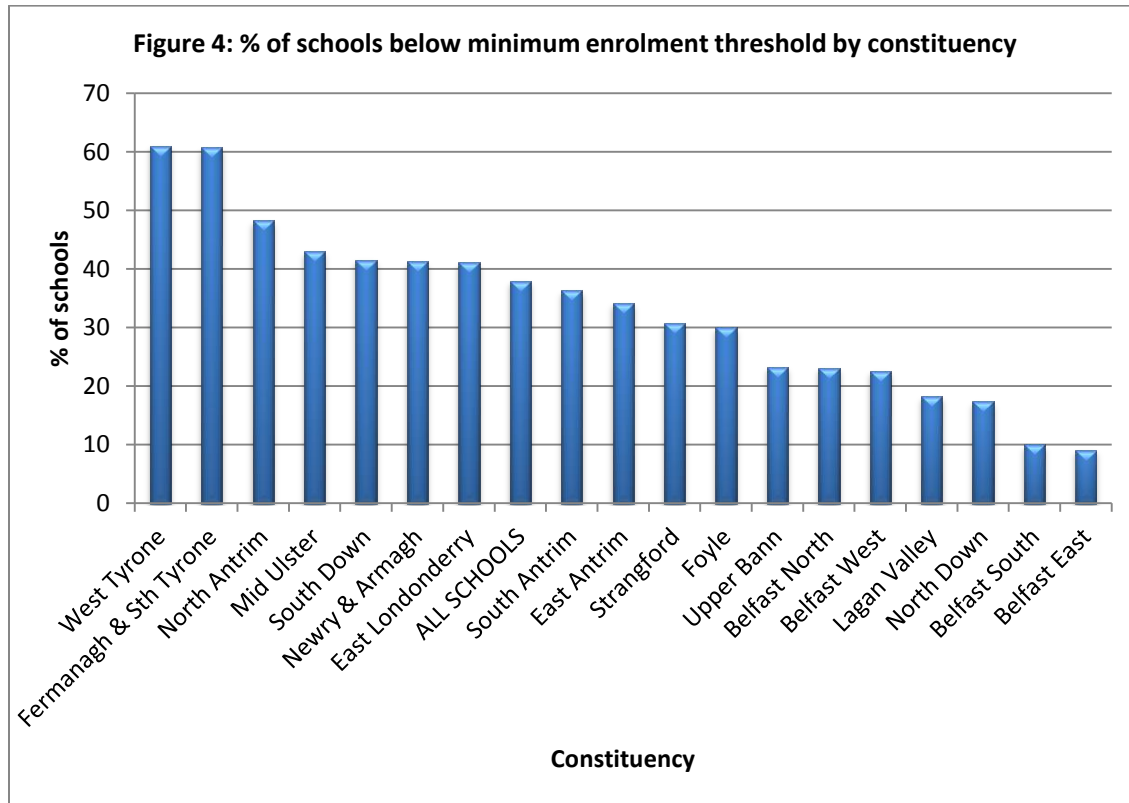
	<b>Below enrolment threshold (%)</b>	<b>Above enrolment threshold (%)</b>	<b>All schools</b>
<b>Controlled</b>	38.6	61.4	100.0
<b>Voluntary</b>	8.3	91.7	100.0
<b>Maintained Catholic</b>	38.3	61.7	100.0
<b>Maintained Other</b>	70.4	29.6	100.0
<b>Integrated Controlled</b>	36.8	63.2	100.0
<b>Integrated GM</b>	0.0	100.0	100.0
<b>ALL SCHOOLS</b>	37.9	62.1	100.0

The Viability Audit reports also provide data on the change in enrolment levels of schools between 2009/10 and 2011/12. Over these three years the average change in enrolment levels was an increase of 1.4%. For schools below the minimum threshold in 2011/12 there was no change in enrolment levels, whereas for those over the minimum threshold in 2011/12 enrolment had increased by 2.3%, but this difference was not statistically significant.

Of the 735 primary schools designated as rural, 41% are below the minimum enrolment threshold, which is significantly more than for urban schools where 23% are below the minimum enrolment threshold. Despite this, there are fewer rural than urban schools facing attainment stress (6.8% versus

8.1% respectively) or in formal intervention (1.1% versus 1.8% respectively), although in both cases there is no statistical relationship between rural/urban designation and stress levels.

Figure 4 shows the location of primary schools below the minimum threshold enrolment by constituency. A little under two-in-five schools overall are below the enrolment threshold, but this varies considerably, with mainly rural constituencies having a higher proportion of schools beneath the enrolment threshold.



### Viability audit stress levels: financial health

The Viability audit reports provide data on the projected level of surplus or deficit for all schools in three years, expressed both as a monetary amount and as a percentage of the school budget. Schools are placed into one of four categories:

- schools where the projected deficit is within LMS limits (this category includes all schools with surpluses in their projected budget);
- schools where the projected deficit is greater than 5% and less than 25% of the budget;
- schools where the projected deficit is greater than 25% and less than 50% of the budget; and

- schools where the projected deficit is greater than 50% of the budget

It is conceivable that schools which maintain large surpluses may not be making the most effective use of their available resources, but this issue is not discussed in the reports.

The number of schools and the median value of the surplus/deficit is shown on the tables 9 and 10: Table 9 shows the number of schools in each of the financial stress categories and the median level of the actual value of the surplus/deficit, while Table 10 shows the % projected surplus/deficit. Note that the Department of Education did not provide the ELBs with any financial data on voluntary or grant maintained integrated primary or prep schools. The Department did indicate that all these schools had financial projects that were within LMS limits, but as the specific level of surplus/deficit was not provided these schools are not included in the tables and analysis below.

Table 9: Number of schools and median surplus/deficit (£) by financial stress categories

	number of schools	median deficit/surplus (%)
deficit greater than 50%	11	-£160,175
deficit between 25% and 50%	7	-£43,476
deficit between 5% and 25%	46	-£38,574
deficit within LMS limits (or in surplus)	752	£3,356

Table 10: Number of schools and median surplus/deficit (as % of projected budget) by financial stress categories

	number of schools	median deficit/surplus (£)
deficit greater than 50%	11	-94.0%
deficit between 25% and 50%	7	-31.0%
deficit between 5% and 25%	46	-9.1%
deficit within LMS limits (or in surplus)	752	0.7%

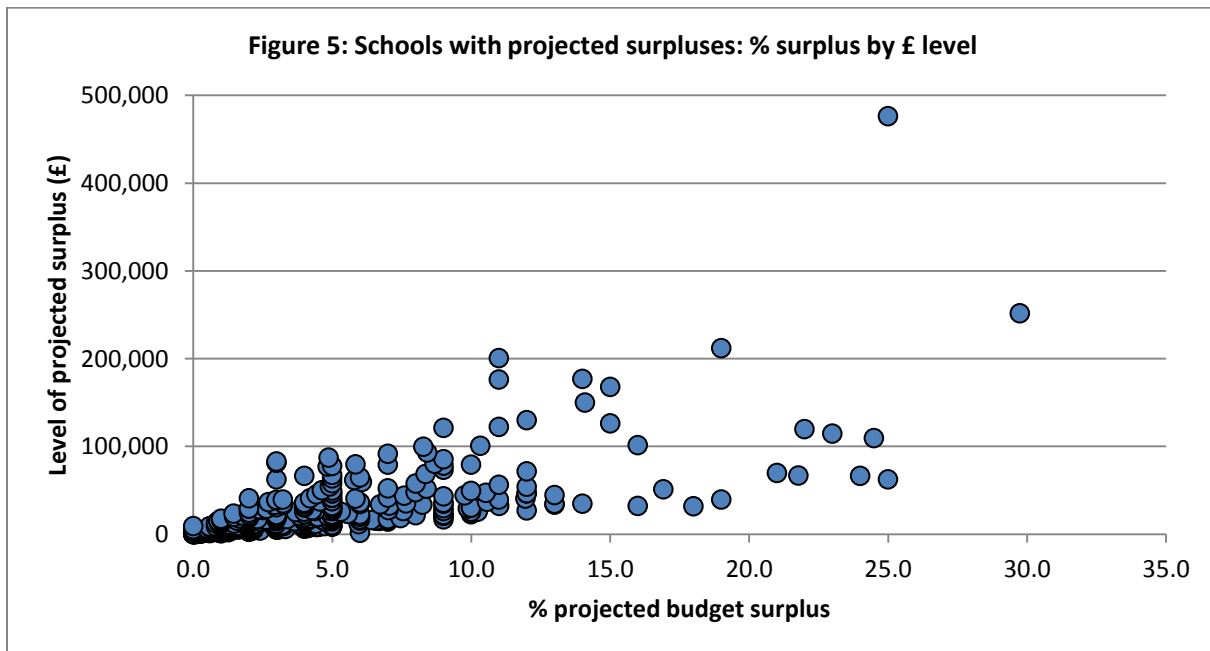
The median is used here as a non-resistant measure of average since the pattern of individual data-points is skewed with a small number of extreme cases. Thus, for example, one school has a projected deficit of over 6,000% of its projected budget; another has a projected deficit of 2,400% of budget; one has a projected deficit of over 500% of projected budget; and one has a projected deficit of 170% of budget. All the other schools have projected deficits of less than 100%, and all but seven have projected deficits of less than 40%. The distribution of deficit/surplus for actual amounts does not have such radical outliers, but is sufficiently skewed as to warrant the use of non-resistant measures of average: three schools have deficits greater than £200k and a further eleven have deficits between £100k and £200k. At the other end of the scale one school has a projected surplus of over £400k, three have projected deficits over £200k and 13 schools have projected surpluses between £100k and £200k.

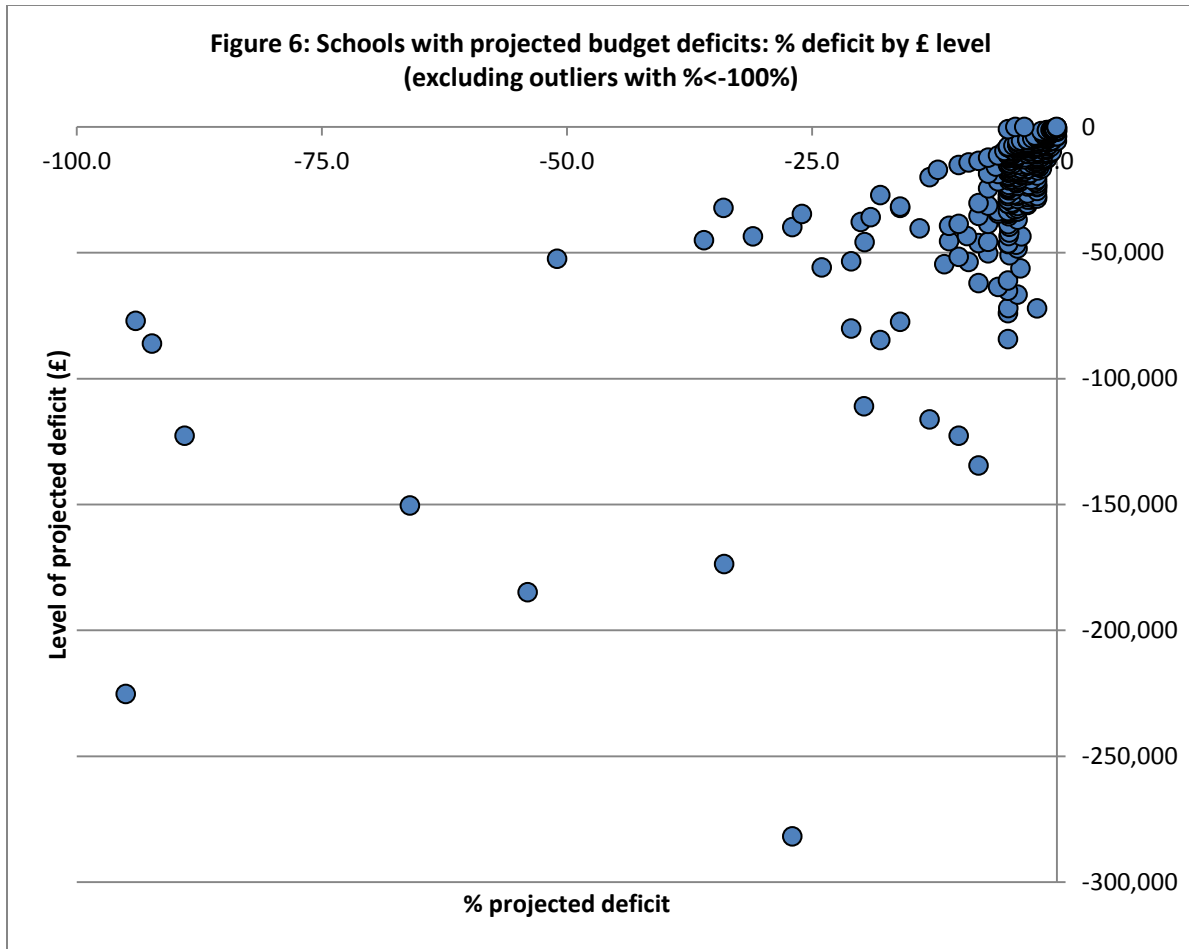
Financial data were available for 815 schools. Of these schools 380 (47%) had projected deficits, with the total projected deficit estimated at £9,266,078. The remaining 435 (53%) schools all had projected surpluses, with the total surplus estimated at £11,270,494. Overall 64 schools (8%) are identified as

being under financial stress, but as we can see from Tables 9 and 10, most of these are in the category where the deficit is between 5% and 25% of the projected budget.

Figure 5 shows the distribution of schools with projected surpluses and plots the % projected surplus against the actual £ value of the projected surplus. Most have projected surpluses up to 5%, but there are quite a few schools with higher levels of projected surpluses, including one school with a projected surplus of almost 30% of its budget.

Figure 6 shows the pattern for schools with projected budget deficits. For ease of interpretation the four schools with projected deficits greater than 170% of their budgets have not been included on the graph. Otherwise Figure 6 plots the projected % deficit against the actual £ value of the deficit. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the graph is that the relatively small number of schools with large projected % deficits varies considerably in terms of the monetary value of those deficits.



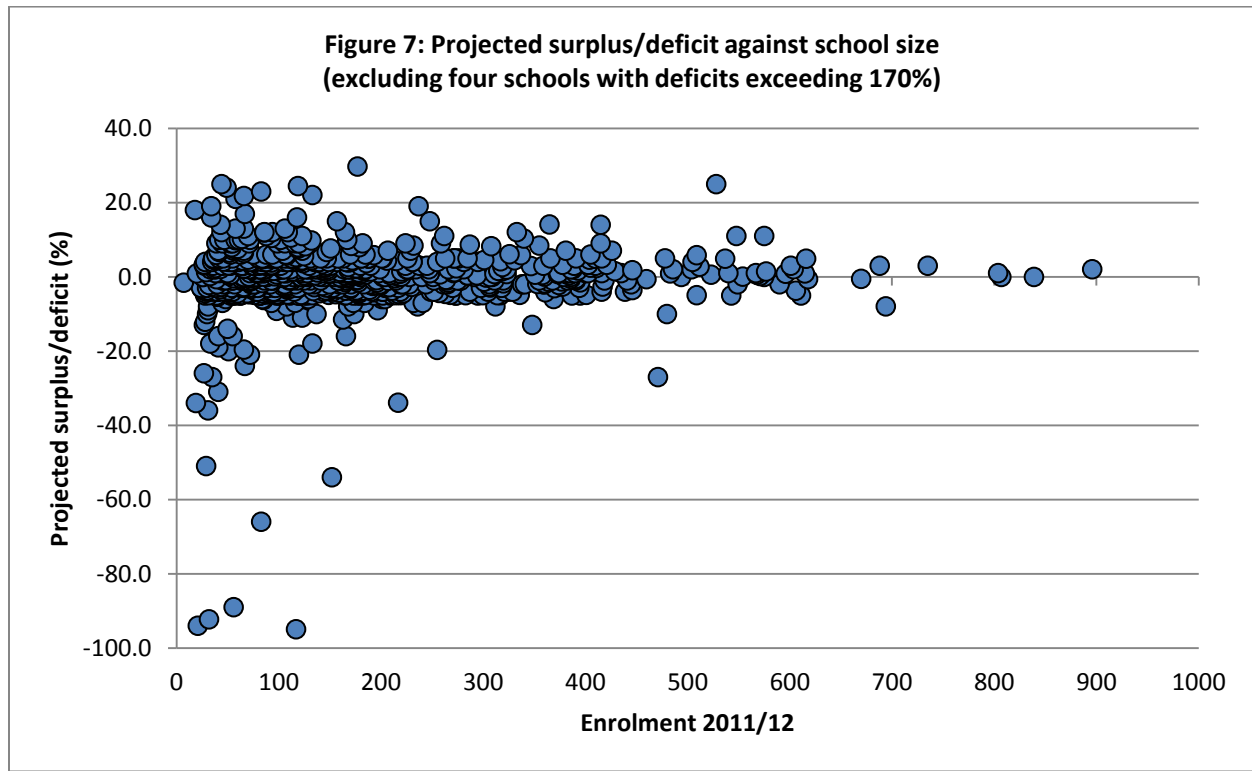


A series of non-parametric tests were used to compare the distribution of surplus/deficit between schools that were under stress and those that were not. In each case there was no significant difference in the distributions, that is, there was no evidence that higher deficits were to be found among schools with low attainment or which were in formal intervention (in each case a Mann-Whitney test was used).

A Kruskal-Wallis test comparing the distribution of surplus/deficit for schools of different management types also showed no evidence of significant differences across the types. However, a Mann-Whitney test to compare the distribution of projected % surplus/deficit between urban and rural schools showed that the former had significantly higher surpluses (the median surplus for urban schools was 2% while for rural schools the median position was a balanced projected budget).

A comparison of the projected surplus/deficit for schools above and below the minimum enrolment threshold suggested that there was no significant difference in the distributions. However, the three schools with projected deficits that exceeded 500% all had fewer than 20 pupils, while the school with a projected deficit of 170% had just under 100 pupils. Thereafter the four schools with projected deficits between 40% and 100% all had fewer than 90 pupils. As can be seen on Figure 7, schools with projected deficits are more likely to be small schools, but there are clearly also quite a few schools with low

enrolments which have projected surpluses, so the data may mainly be highlighting greater financial volatility among small schools.



Overall pattern

Table 11 summarises the pattern of stress factors across schools. The most common stress factor, affecting almost two-in-five schools, arises from schools with enrolments below the minimum viability level set by the Department. Thereafter less than a tenth of schools are affected by financial or attainment stress, while only one-in-a-hundred are in formal intervention.

Table 11: Number and proportion of schools facing different forms of stress

	Yes: n (%)	No: n (%)	All: n (%)	Missing: n
Attainment stress	59 (7%)	785 (93%)	844 (100%)	10
Intervention stress	10 (1%)	835 (99%)	845 (100%)	9
Financial stress	64 (8%)	752 (92%)	816 (100%)	38
Enrolment stress	324 (38%)	530 (62%)	854 (100%)	0

Table 12 shows the number and percentage of schools by the number of different stress factors they are affected by: over half of all schools are not affected by any stress factors and two-in-five are affected by only one stress factor. Beyond this only 7% are affected by two stress factors and only 1% are affected by three stress factors. None are affected by all four stress factors. Figure 8 shows the number of schools affected by one or more stress factors by constituency and highlights the wide variety across Northern

Ireland: the largest number of schools under stress are found in largely rural constituencies and reflects the dominant impact of enrolment levels affecting schools under stress.

Table 12: Number and percentage of schools by the number of stress factors faced

	0	1	2	3	4	All
Number	431	320	57	6	0	814
Percentage	53%	39%	7%	1%	0%	100%

Missing data for 40 schools

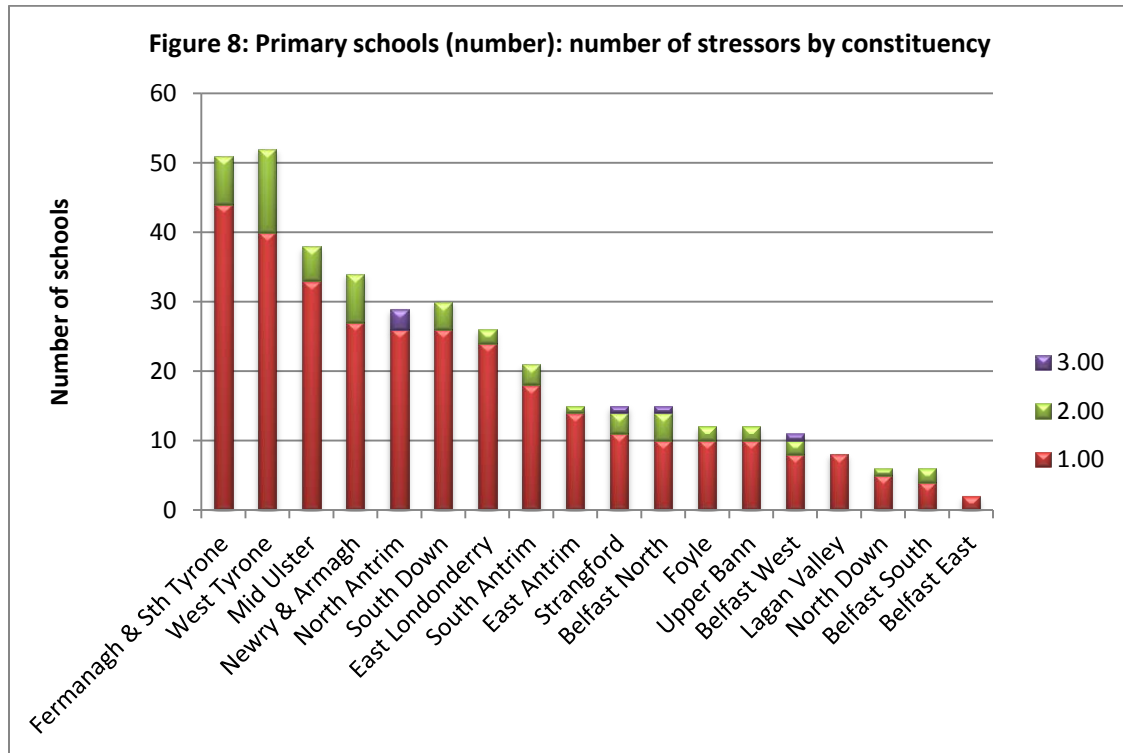


Table 13 shows the pattern of stress factors by school management type. We can see on the table that Controlled schools were significantly more likely to be affected by attainment stress, as compared with Maintained Catholic schools; Maintained Other schools were significantly more likely to be affected by intervention stress, as compared with Controlled schools; Maintained Other schools were more likely than all others to be affected by financial stress; and Maintained Other schools were significantly more likely to be affected by enrolment stress, as compared with Voluntary or Integrated GM schools.

Table 13: Percentage of schools facing different forms of stress by management type

	% facing attainment stress	% facing intervention stress	% facing financial stress	% facing enrolment stress
Controlled	11% *	2% *	6%	39%
Voluntary	0%	0%		8% *
Maintained Catholic	4% *	1%	8%	38%
Maintained Other	4%	8% *	19% *	70% *
Integrated Controlled	5%	0%	11%	37%
Integrated GM	0%	0%		0% *
All schools	7%	1%	8%	38%
Number of schools	844	845	816	854

\*statistically significant differences

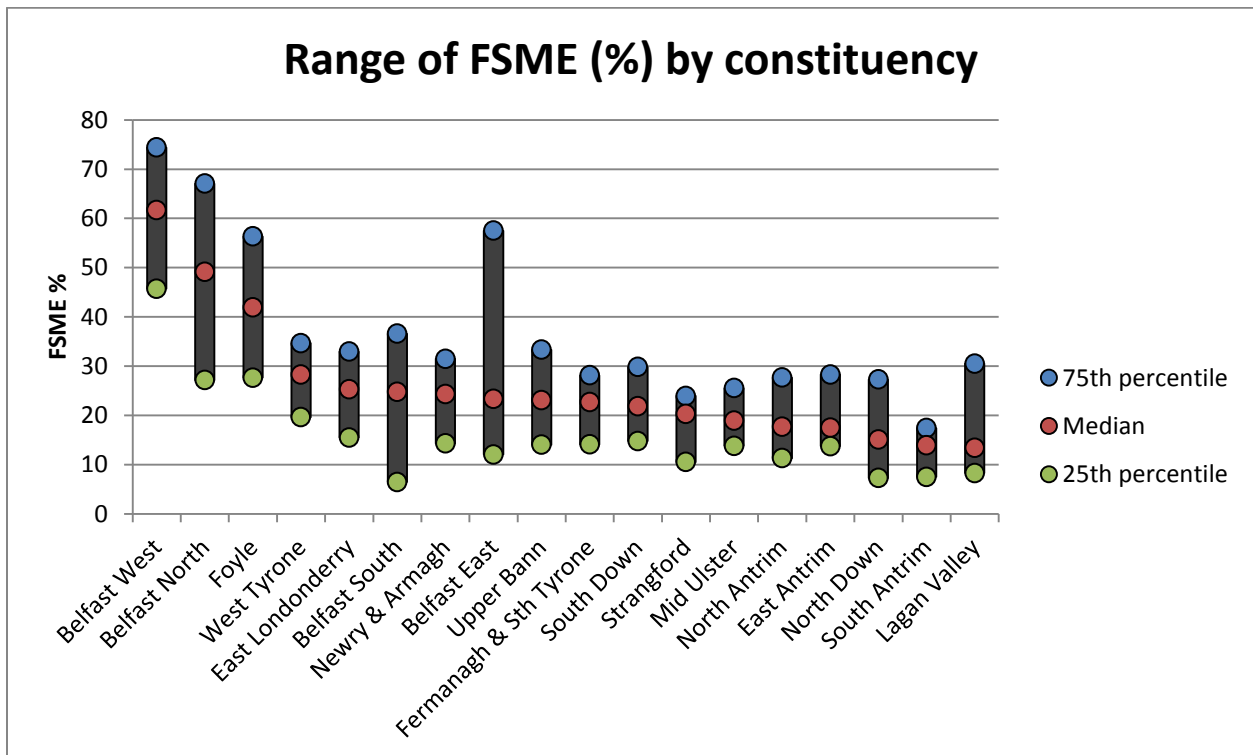
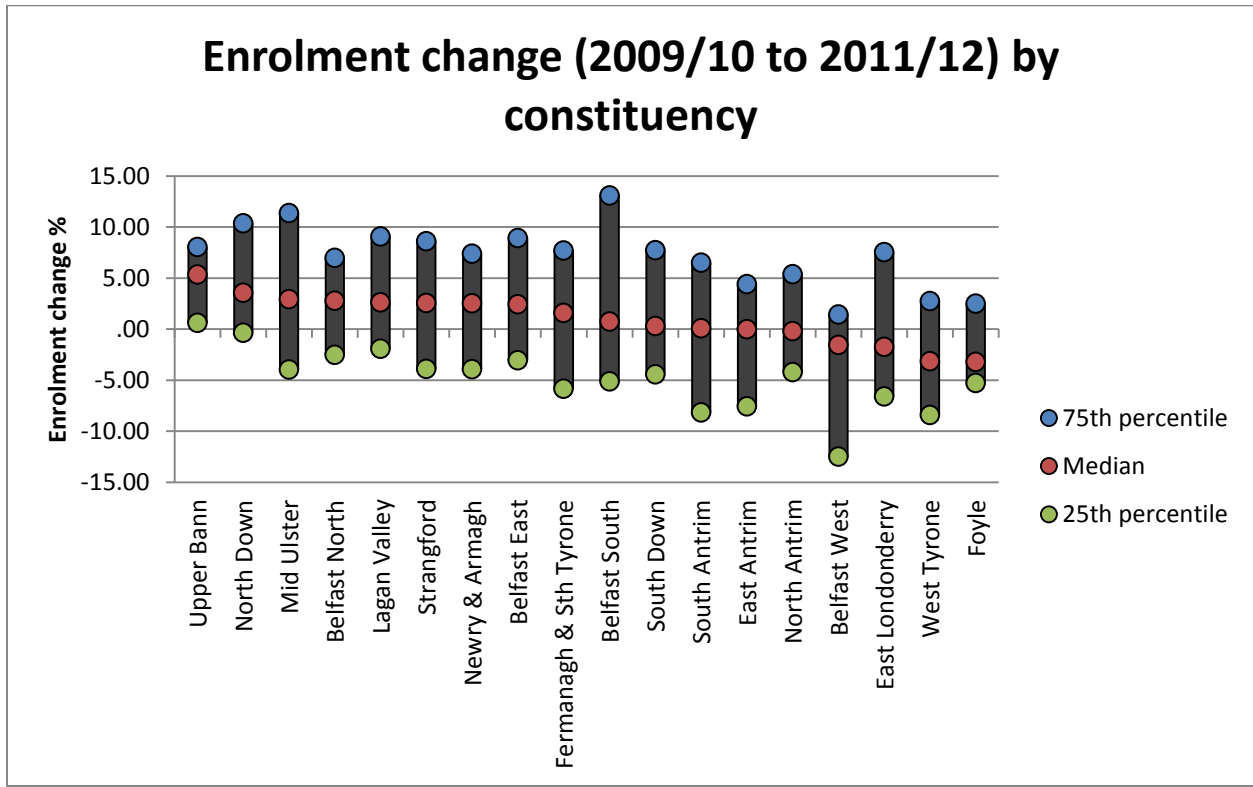
## Conclusions

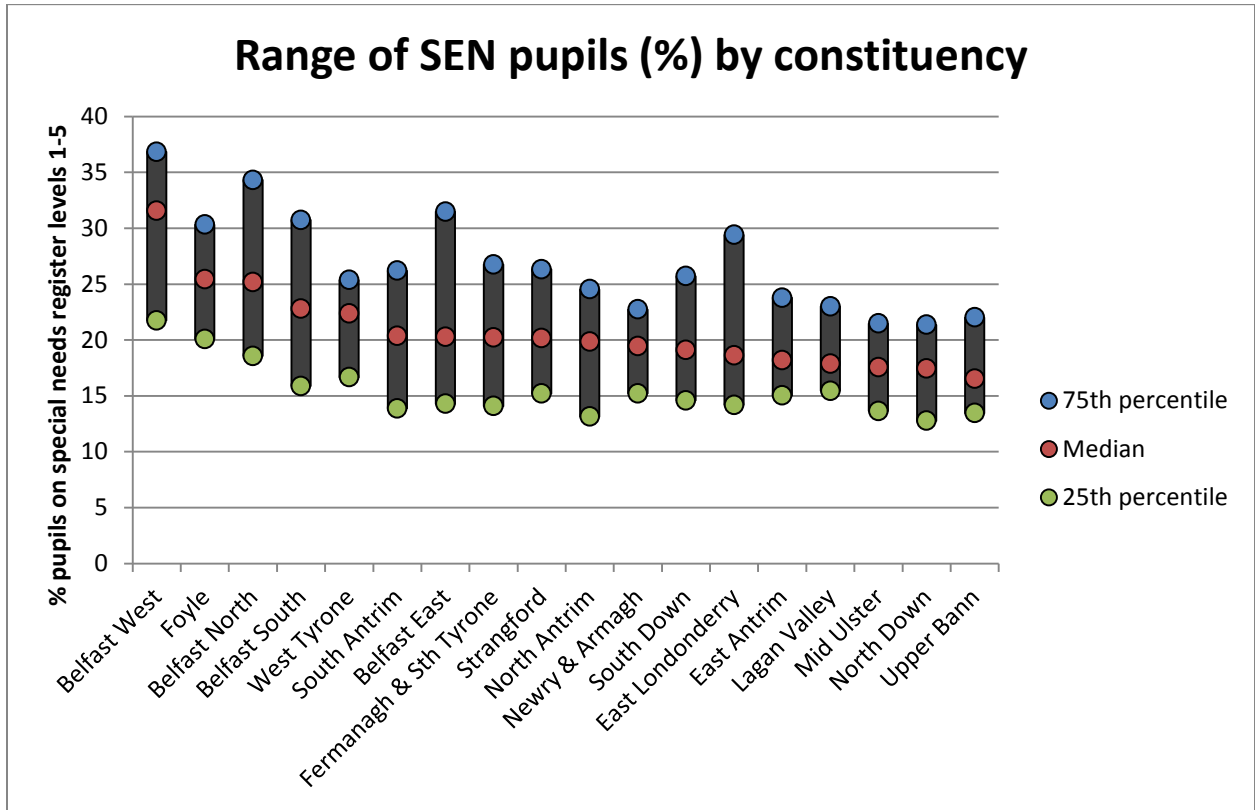
The analysis of the data provided by the viability audit reports from the Education and Library Boards suggests the following conclusions:

- only a small minority of schools are affected by the attainment or intervention stress, the two main output measures of school performance;
- Controlled schools are more likely than others to be affected by attainment stress, while Maintained Other (mainly Irish medium) schools are more likely to be affected by intervention stress;
- A minority of schools are affected by financial stress, and Maintained Other schools were more likely to be in this category;
- The pattern of financial deficits/surplus vary quite considerably, with a very small number of schools demonstrating either very high deficits or very high surpluses;
- For schools for which financial data were available, the combined deficits of schools is more than £9m, while the combined surpluses of schools is more than £11m;
- The stress factor affecting the largest number of schools relates to those with enrolments below the defined minimum viability level and this is a stress factor which particularly affects Maintained Others schools;
- Enrolment stress is an input measure, that is, schools below the minimum enrolment level are assumed to be less likely to be able to provide a strong educational environment or experience for their pupils: there is a relationship between enrolment size and financial stress, although the data are highly variable, and there is little or no relationship between enrolment size and attainment or quality stress.

Tony Gallagher, April 5, 2013

Annex 1







**Northern Ireland  
Assembly**

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**To: Education Committee Members**

**From: Peter McCallion, Committee Clerk**

**Date: 5 April 2013**

**Subject: Viability Audits / Area Planning – Stakeholder event summary**

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The Committee held a stakeholder event on 26 September 2012. Participants including primary and post-primary school representatives; unions and other representative bodies were asked to consider a number of questions. The responses from the event are summarised below.

#### Viability Audits

Participants criticised the use of a limited, time-bound and reportedly inaccurate set of quantitative data for the audits – suggesting alternative quantitative and qualitative measures including ETI data and the degree to which schools add value to their pupils' educational attainment. Participants suggested that the use of enrolment minima was evidence of an undisclosed policy to develop bigger schools which would not necessarily deliver a better educational experience. Participants argued that the methodology for estimating stable enrolment trends was unsound and that the use of enrolment caps for popular schools often led to a misrepresentation of the school in terms of its stable enrolment trend.

Participants suggested that the Viability Audits may lead to the unfair mis-identification of schools in stress as failing or insolvent - leading to an adverse impact on enrolment and thus undermining the sustainability of the school.

#### Rural Schools

Participants commented on what they described as an arbitrary designation of suburban areas in the Belfast conurbation and urban areas in other cities as rural. Participants also

identified the enrolment minima as arbitrary and irrelevant where a school is achieving good levels of attainment etc. Participants highlighted concerns that the closure of primary schools could greatly adversely impact rural communities - leading to higher Home to School transport costs and even depopulation.

### Other Sectors

Participants felt that sectors were not all treated equally – it was suggested e.g. that CCMS received funding for its area planning process and was allowed to include “soft data” including e.g. community impact. It was suggested that other sectors e.g. controlled schools did not receive a similar level of support and were subject to a more rigorous audit and planning procedure. CCMS schools strongly disputed this - some CCMS schools argued that CCMS did not properly their school and that there was no favourable treatment for catholic maintained or voluntary grammar schools.

Integrated and Irish Medium schools were also described as having favourable treatment though these schools and representative bodies again strongly disputed this.

### Shared Education

Most participants felt that the Area Planning process had damaged Area Learning Communities and undermined initiatives that promoted shared education by heightening competition and mistrust between schools.

### Cross-Border Collaboration

Some participants highlighted the benefits to isolated (religious or other) communities in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland of cross-border collaboration in the provision of schools or Area Learning Communities. Participants highlighted existing connections and existing issues in respect of the differing educational systems. Some participants felt that this issue was irrelevant and should not be considered further at this time.

### Area Planning Consultation

Participants complained at length with regard to consultation arrangements. They argued that: the area plans and consultation document were not easily accessed; the documents were poorly and inconsistently worded; parents could not understand the consultation questions; the consultation was based on foregone conclusions; the consultation was based on documents which included options and not actual plans; the iterative or evolutionary nature of the Area Planning process will lead to confusion and uncertainty in communities; and there was insufficient time for schools to respond.

## Other Issues

Participants highlighted concerns associated with the impact on Area Planning of other policy developments e.g. eBacc and ESA. Participants indicated concerns as to how the Area Planning process is to interface with Further Education provision.

## COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

### Informal briefing event with Area Planning Stakeholders

Wednesday 19/06/13 at 6.00pm in Long Gallery

#### PRESENT:

**Members -** Mervyn Storey MLA  
Danny Kinahan MLA  
Brenda Hale MLA  
Trevor Lunn MLA  
Sean Rogers MLA

**Staff -** Peter McCallion  
Chris McNickle  
Sharon McGurk  
Sharon Young  
Ursula Savage

#### Participants from -

- Alexander Dickson PS
- Armoy PS
- Ballycraigy PS
- Belleek Controlled PS
- Blythefield PS
- Carrickmannan PS
- Clontifleece PS
- Craigbrack PS
- Crumlin Integrated PS
- Donegall Road PS
- Duneane PS
- Envagh PS
- Fane Street Primary
- Fermanagh Trust
- Forge Integrated PS
- Hazelwood Integrated College
- Listress PS
- Moneynick PS
- Moy Regional PS
- Mullabuoy PS
- Primary Schools Governors Association NI
- Rural Community Network
- St John the Baptist Belleek
- St John's PS Moy
- Straid PS
- Ulster Farmer's Union

## **NOTE OF ISSUES RAISED**

### **1. Area Planning Assumptions**

Many participants broadly agreed with the Area Planning process assumptions for Primary Schools:

- a higher proportion of small schools will be affected by the process of change
- not all campaigns to save schools tagged for closure or merger will be successful
- there will be a limited capital budget available and allocation decisions will be based on departmental priorities
- the funding formula is likely to change:
  - a higher proportion of funds will be skewed to support work on social and educational disadvantage
  - the small schools protection funding will disappear
  - small schools will be able to seek additional funding from a special pot, if they can make a case that the school is needed, in its location, despite not meeting key viability criteria

### **2. Definitions**

Participants believed that DE's definition of rural schools – i.e. all schools outside of Belfast or the Derry City Council area - was obviously flawed. Participants suggested that rural schools serve their community and have a unique ethos which is simply not recognised by the Department. Participants felt that the Department's core view is that "bigger is better" in respect of primary schools and that this failed to recognise the excellent educational experience provided by many small primaries and their collaboration with other schools. Participants disputed the validity of the Bain thresholds for viable primary schools.

Schools felt that the Department's focus on budget and budget classification for schools was an unwelcome distraction from schools' focus. Schools strongly felt that the Small Schools Factor must be retained if the financial viability of a very large number of primary schools was to be maintained.

### **3. Options open to Schools**

#### **a. No Change**

Many participants believed that to present schools with option of no change would give them a false expectation – thus it was argued that this is not a real option for many schools.

#### **b. Closure**

Participants felt that if schools closed, there would be a domino effect and eventually communities would effectively "close down".

### **c. Merger**

Participants suggested that merging schools seems to be straightforward solution. However in practice, schools have very definite identities which they are reluctant to change – this kind of change takes time.

It was argued that the new build capital programme had a role to play - providing a fresh start where no single school would be seen to be retained and everyone would be starting in a new identity school.

### **d. Shared Solution**

Participants expressed concerns in respect of the operation of shared solutions e.g. how transport costs would be covered; how the timetable would be organised; whether children would have continuity in respect of their teachers.

Participants referred to very successful shared education measures supported in one case by NEELB's Primary Integrating Enriching Education (PIEE) project and in another by the Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) project.

Participants indicated that recent sharing arrangements between schools in different sectors were in many cases working very well. Some suggested that consequently the current definitions of school types based on sectoral origin are becoming outmoded and that ELBs, CCMS and the Department are lagging behind innovative schools.

Some participants suggested that schools and parents were more ready to engage in shared education solutions than ever before – it was suggested that schools were perhaps more forward –thinking in this respect than parents.

### **e. Integrated Solution**

Like the shared solution, teachers felt that there were areas of concern on which they would want more information or clarification.

Some participants strongly felt that integrated solutions were not always the best answer and that they inevitably involved a loss of identity – something which would be strongly opposed by parents.

Some participants referred to recent developments in respect of joint faith options – indicating that although recent progress has been slow, there is potential for another solution to the challenge of cross-sectoral sharing in education.

### **f. Other options**

Participants indicated some confusion and lack of knowledge of other options for schools including federation; confederation etc. Participants suggested that

research was needed in respect of amalgamated schools or community schools and their success in other jurisdictions and that simple explanations of these options should have been provided by the ELBs at the start of the process.

#### **4. Decision-making Process**

There was a broad agreement that the Department of Education, Education and Library Boards, CCMS and other external agencies should work together to provide information and guidance and to suggest and facilitate the development of new options. These bodies should work collectively to keep all schools advised of best practice; new developments; progress etc.

Participants believed that managing authorities should play a lead role in chairing discussions but that Boards of Governors, Teachers, Principals, and Parents also had a role to play in the chairing and leading of discussions. It was agreed that ELBs and CCMS would inevitably play the most significant role in deciding the preferred option, but that other stakeholders should be included as decisions will have a wide-ranging impact.

There was the general consensus that schools have to work together in their local area, to support their cases and be pro-active in this process instead of waiting for the direction from governing bodies.

It was generally agreed that the decision-making process should be open and participative with information being provided to all.

#### **5. Other comments**

Overall, participants felt that the Area Planning Process was based on a top-down approach, with limited information and facts and poor communication. Schools felt very much disengaged from the process. Schools felt that there was a limited time window which precluded discussion and consultation on ideas and problems and limited the opportunity to explore and learn from other schools.

Participants suggested that the viability audit information was in many cases provided with a clear steer from the Boards on the next steps in respect of amalgamations, closures etc. Others argued that there was no guidance for schools or communities to address challenges or develop local area solutions. It was also suggested that there was little time for discussion of options.

It was agreed that the Area Planning process for primary schools had done little or nothing to facilitate the development of local area solutions – be they simple amalgamations or the more “out of the box” suggestions around confederations or shared campuses.

Participants agreed that they needed help – facilitators; guidance access to best practice in other schools – if the local area solution process was to be facilitated. It

was strongly indicated that help was particularly required for the more complex local area solutions like shared campuses. That said, participants also strongly felt that they didn't want another layer of bureaucracy associated with Area Planning and more unhelpful interference from the ELBs and CCMS.

Participants felt that they also needed time and security for their school for a period while they developed robust local area solutions.

Some representatives of schools commented that during the course of their discussions at the Committee's event, they had made valuable connections and learned of progress at other schools which they would take forward.

## COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

### Informal briefing event with Area Planning Stakeholders

Wednesday 04/02/2015 at 6.00pm in Long Gallery

#### PRESENT:

**Members** – Michelle McIlveen MLA (Chairperson)  
Danny Kinahan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Jonathan Craig MLA  
Nelson McCausland MLA  
Sandra Overend MLA  
Robin Newton MLA

**Staff** – Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)  
Paula Best (Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Kevin Marks (Clerical Supervisor)  
Alicia Muldoon (Clerical Officer)

#### Participants -

Professor Gallagher (Special Adviser)  
Governing Bodies Association  
Education Authority – body corporate;  
SEELB; NEELB; WELB; BELB;  
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)  
ATL; NASUWT; NAHT; ASCL; INTO  
Fermanagh Trust  
APTIS; NICIE; Integrated Education Fund

Representatives of and parents from:

Hazelwood Integrated College, Belfast; Edenbrooke PS, Belfast  
St. Comhghall's, Lisnaskea; Assumption Grammar School, Ballynahinch  
Kilkeel High School; St Louise's Comprehensive, Belfast  
Movilla High School, Newtownards; Carrickfergus College  
St. Colm's Lisburn; St Dominic's Grammar School for Girls, Belfast  
Gortagarn Primary School, Omagh; St Joseph's PS, Ballymartin  
Moneydarragh PS, Annalong; Ballycastle Integrated PS  
Rosetta PS, Belfast; Armoy PS, Ballymoney; Derryboy PS, Crossgar  
Bushmills PS, Bushmills; Donaghmore PS, Dungannon  
St Brigid's PS, Cloughmills; Brookeborough PS, Brookeborough  
Derryboy PS, Crossgar; Kesh PS, Enniskillen; St Martin's PS, Garrison  
Belleek PS; Hollybank PS, Newtownabbey; St John the Baptist PS, Belleek  
Our Lady's Girls PS, Belfast; St Mary's PS, Brookeborough  
St Joseph's PS, Ballymartin; St Brigid's PS, Cloughmills  
Ballymacward PS, Lisburn; Envagh PS, Omagh  
Bunscoil An Traonaigh, Lisnakea; Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain, Belfast  
Eastside Learning Group

## **NOTE OF ISSUES RAISED**

### **1. Area Planning – Process / Consultation**

Most participants generally reported dissatisfaction with the achievements of Area Planning to-date. These participants commented at length on the reported failure of the ELBs/CCMS and the Department to explain: the need for Area Planning; the process which was to be followed; and the longer term vision for the schools' estate in Northern Ireland.

Participants also commented unfavourably on the iterative nature of the Area Planning process; the failure to provide consistent criteria or explanation of key terms and variations in practice across the different ELB areas and between ELBs and CCMS.

Schools also highlighted significant dissatisfaction regarding the practice, in the most recent Area Plans, of making schools subject to review on an annual basis. Participants indicated that this undermined parental confidence in the school; placed intolerable pressures on staff and was a distraction from the education of children. These participants suggested that the "under review" status appeared to be a coded reference that the school had failed to undertake a sufficient level of sharing with neighbouring schools. These participants highlighted the absence of local independent facilitation for sharing between schools and cross-sectoral solutions. Some of these participants also highlighted dissatisfaction with what was described as top-down governor appointments in Maintained schools which led to a disconnect between school management and local opinion.

Participants commented unfavourably on what was described as an artificial and meaningless designation of all schools in Belfast and the urban part of the Derry City Council area as urban and all other schools as rural.

Participants commented particularly on the unsatisfactory nature of the Area Planning consultation process – claiming that it: was generally tokenistic; failed to include meaningful engagement with schools, parents or representative bodies; and did not take into consideration feedback from stakeholders in respect of any subsequent Area Planning decisions.

Some participants commented that ELBs/CCMS had completely failed to understand or manage how the media would treat the fall-out from Area Plans and the consequences that this would have for parental confidence and school morale. Other participants disputed this arguing that when school provision is under review or set to be rationalised, there will inevitably be tensions between stakeholders and exploitative adverse media coverage.

Some participants highlighted dissatisfaction in respect of the separate Area Planning processes undertaken by the Controlled and Maintained sectors which served to deliver plans at very different timescales and thus undermined cross-sectoral solutions. These participants highlighted also the failure of the Department to include the Further Education colleges in the Area Planning process – indicating that this was further evidence that Area Planning was about rationalisation at any cost and protecting sectoral interests rather than planning for the provision of a better educational experience.

Participants generally agreed that the Area Planning experience appeared to be evidence of both the limitations of usual consultation practices and the need for new and more effective consultation arrangements. These participants felt that new consultation channels including among others parents and school children should be established and that community audits/surveys should be undertaken.

Some participants contended that Area Planning had successfully supported the Entitlement Framework and the development of sustainable better schools. These participants argued that Area Planning was delivering consistent decision-making and a better range of opportunities for new builds. These participants also disputed the assertion that consultation was not meaningful and argued that rural and community issues had been considered and were evident in decision-making.

These participants contended that at least some of the unsatisfactory aspects of the Area Planning process were a consequence of the extensive nature of the necessary changes to the schools' estate and the limited time and resources available to the ELBs / CCMS to manage Area Planning.

## **2. Needs Model – Vacancy Levels / Sectors**

The Needs Model seeks to plan the supply of school places in an area based on the projected need for places in the existing sectors. The Committee had sought feedback on the efficacy of the Needs Model. Many participants indicated limited knowledge or understanding of the Needs Model and expressed surprise in respect of the nature of the differing calculations of vacancies in schools.

Participants argued that in many cases there was a high degree of mixing – of Protestant and Catholic children – and greater influxes of newcomer children and that consequently assumptions relating to parental preference in the Needs Model were therefore incorrect. Indeed some participants contended that schools had, in some parts of Northern Ireland, outgrown their sectoral definition and that Area Planning currently failed to recognise this. Other participants suggested that this might be recognised through amendments and the inclusion of other subsets in the Needs Model.

A number of participants felt that the Needs Model was being used to unfairly discriminate in favour of the Integrated sector. Other participants disputed this.

Some participants suggested that the Needs Model was being exploited by sectoral interests which were not reflective of the needs of schools as a whole. Other participants disputed this.

Some participants argued that as the Needs Model may focus on all children of post-primary age in an area, it may lead to over-supply of 6<sup>th</sup> form provision.

Some participants argued that demographic changes were putting pressure on the non-selective post-primary sector and that Area Planning had not recognised this. These participants suggested that consideration be given to capping the grammar sector where the post-primary school population was falling in order to protect diversity in post-primary education provision.

Many participants forcefully argued that the focus on school vacancy which underpins Area Planning was an entirely bogus argument which failed to recognise the key function of schools which is the provision of a quality educational experience for children. These participants felt that as in some other jurisdictions, the planning of educational provision should be based on the quality of the experience rather than on a nominal enrolment level linked to the out-dated provisions of the School Building Handbook. These participants highlighted disproportionately high levels of administration costs in the education system and poor teacher to pupil ratios in Northern Ireland which compared most unfavourably with other jurisdictions.

Other participants argued that education planning should, in addition to educational quality, also consider social deprivation and how this may be alleviated through targeted support and greater diversity in school enrolment.

Participants believed that there should be greater joined-up working between DE and DEL.

### **3. Rural Issues**

Participants believed that the Department's definition of rural schools – i.e. all schools outside of Belfast or the urban part of the Derry City Council area - was obviously flawed. Participants suggested that rural schools serve their community and have a unique ethos which is simply not recognised by the Department.

Participants felt that the Department's core view is that "bigger is better" in respect of primary schools and that this failed to recognise the excellent educational experience provided by many small primaries and their collaboration with other schools.

Participants highlighted the important relationship between schools and rural communities and the failure of the Department to recognise this and address rural schooling resource issues including e.g. transport costs.

### **4. Innovative solutions**

Participants felt that there was little or no opportunity to offer innovative solutions for local areas and there was a lack of an appropriate mechanism to explore these solutions including e.g. community schools or even different school building designs which might encourage sharing. Some participants argued that Area Learning communities offered an appropriate vehicle for cross-sectoral or other innovative co-operation. These participants contended that despite some good examples of local co-operation, this was not more widely spread owing to different treatment of Area Learning Communities by the ELBs.

Participant's felt that Area Planning was a top-down process that was sectorally driven and took no account of local circumstance e.g. reductions in school enrolment despite NIHE plans to increase housing which would increase the local school population. It was argued that more locally based solutions were needed.

Other participants disputed the above and contended that innovative solutions were being fostered but that perhaps further structures might be required to facilitate collaboration across sectors at local level.

## 5. **Other Issues**

Some participants highlighted a very significant level of distrust and lack of confidence in respect of the intentions and the competence of the Department. These participants argued that as in other jurisdictions, a proportion of senior officials in the Department of Education should be required to have a background as teaching practitioners.

Some participants called for regular updates of the Area Plans linked to the Annual Area Profile information which would give schools and communities notice of demographic or other changes.