

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Education

Response to publication of the Draft Multi-Year Budget for Consultation

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Mr Givan (The Minister of Education): I wish to update Members on the Department of Education's position in relation to the Minister of Finance's intention to publish a Draft Multi-Year Budget for Northern Ireland for the four-year period from 1 April 2026 to 31 March 2030 for public consultation. This draft budget has been issued without prior agreement by the Northern Ireland Executive.

While I acknowledge the significant challenges involved in setting a budget, it is important to be clear: even if I was prepared to accept the devastating cuts implicit in this draft, as a practical matter, such a budget would be undeliverable. A budget must be more than figures on paper; it must be deliverable in reality.

Under the proposed allocations, my Department would be required to make savings of approximately £826 million in 2026-27, £1.01 billion in 2027-28, and £1.15 billion in 2028-29. These levels of reduction are simply not achievable.

By way of illustration, for 2026-27, even if the Department were to implement a number of extreme measures such as withdrawing school transport, removing funding from key organisations such as the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, and ending support for Sure Start and Youth services, this would only release c£180m of funding, leaving £646m of further savings still to be found.

Given that approximately 82% of the education budget is spent on staffing costs, there is no reasonable prospect of living within the proposed allocation without mass compulsory teacher redundancies. This would devastate educational outcomes and undermine the very fabric of our system, as well as requiring dedicated in-year redundancy funding of a similar level to the necessary savings.

The proposed budget would force the unimaginable step of making around 6,700 teachers and 3,100 non-teaching staff redundant in order to achieve savings of £650 million for 2026-27. This would require redundancy funding of approximately £510 million, which is not available. Such action would have catastrophic consequences for our education system.

If this budget were to proceed and redundancies were not implemented, I would be left with no choice but to cut major schemes that families and communities rely on, including home-to-school transport, free school meals, school uniform grants, youth services, and extended schools. The Northern Ireland Childcare Scheme would also become unsustainable. Even after implementing cuts of this magnitude, the Department would fall far short of the savings required. This stark reality demonstrates that the proposed budget is simply undeliverable.

Education has faced historic underfunding for many years, with an inadequate baseline that has only been sustained through in-year allocations. This structural weakness cannot be ignored.