

## 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Council welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Northern Ireland Executive's 'Draft Programme for Government 2011-15-Building a Better Future' (the draft programme). Given its statutory remit, the Council will concentrate on the implications of the draft programme for the education service and educational policy in N. Ireland. Furthermore, and notwithstanding a welcome for the Minister's statement of 12 January 2012, the Council will take this opportunity to address what it sees as the unacceptable uncertainty which has been allowed to develop in the funding of schools; a degree of uncertainty which has been to the detriment of effective school development planning and teacher deployment. Moreover, over recent years the high degree of uncertainty in the arrangements for the administration of the education system has also had a negative impact on the school system and political leaders must now endeavour to ensure greater policy, administrative and resource stability.
- 1.2 As stated above, the Council will restrict itself mainly to education proposals that are contained in the draft programme. However, it may, at times be necessary to contextualise the response within the overall economic and social policy parameters of the draft programme.

## 2.0 The Executive's Approach

- 2.1 The Executive has situated its draft programme within the broad principles of Peace, Prosperity, Fairness & Well-Being. As general guiding principles, the Council regards this is a laudable point of departure. In developing these principles the Executive has established five priorities, as follows:

- Growing a sustainable economy and investing in the future;
- Creating opportunities, tackling disadvantage and improving health and well-being;
- Protecting our people, the environment and creating safer communities;
- Building a strong and shared community; and
- Delivering high quality and efficient public services.

In the context of the above, the Executive states that it will direct all government departments to work together 'to produce policies, plans and strategies – the building blocks – that are consistent with the priorities identified' (Draft Programme for Government p27). Moreover, there is a commitment that government and partners in the private, community and voluntary sectors should develop a synergy of purpose to work collaboratively in pursuit of these priorities.

- 2.2 The Council welcomes these developments as an example of appropriate multi-level governance which ensures that the central government has the necessary flexibility to deal with the fundamental problems that the community faces. However, in order to ensure effective multi-level governance the civil service needs to be more open, flexible and accountable if its engagement with civil society is to bring sustainable benefits at both individual and community level. It is clear to the Council that although governance arrangements may change and adapt, there appears to be a time-lag within the state bureaucracy in responding to emerging problems that need urgent solutions. This is of particular interest to Council in relation to education policy and its implementation.

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2.3 The Council recognises that each of the priorities identified can be referenced against a high quality education service within which teachers play a pre-eminent role. Indeed, the availability and access to high quality education must, of necessity, be a sine qua non for the achievement of the Executive's priorities. The draft programme refers to all government departments working together to put in place 'the building blocks' that are consistent with the identified priorities. The Council wishes to emphasise that the education system and its schools (and teachers) provide the foundation stone for these 'building blocks'. The Council therefore wishes to highlight the centrality of education policy and provision if the priorities identified are to become a reality.

### 3.0 Turning to the specifics

3.1 The five priorities referred to earlier are to be supported by a series of building blocks (either existing policies or new ones to be developed). Each priority is now considered in turn against the specific building blocks identified.

#### **Priority 1:**

#### **Growing a Sustainable Economy and Investing in the Future      Related building blocks to education policy:**

The Skills Strategy

The Essential Skills Strategy

The Revised Curriculum and the Entitlement Framework

Every School and Good School – A Policy for School Improvement

Success through Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics

Related to the above priority, the Executive has identified a number of key commitments

and milestone/outputs directly relating to education policy:

- Increase uptake in economically relevant science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) places.
- Increase the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who achieve 5 GCSEs at A star – C or equivalent GCSEs in Maths and English.
- Upskill the working age population by delivering 200,000 qualifications.

*RESPONSE: The Council gives a cautious welcome to the details outlined at priority one, however, sight must never be lost that a broad and balanced curriculum must remain the central entitlement for all children and young people. However, the Council is concerned that too great an emphasis is placed on GCSEs in terms of school accountability. The Department of Education urgently needs to ensure that alternative vocational courses are given appropriate weight when it comes to evaluating school effectiveness.*

*The Council welcomes the Minister's recent statement (12 January 2012) allocating much needed resources to schools from the 2012/13 financial year on. These newly allocated resources help in part alleviate the earlier budgetary retrenchment that was envisaged and which would have had very serious implications for schools. However, lessons need to be learned. Schools and teachers have, in recent years, had to put up with financial uncertainty which negatively impacts on internal planning processes especially in the area of school development planning. The Executive should now ensure that greater financial planning stability across the public sector is a priority.*

*Furthermore, the Council believes that the planned cuts to the Education Budget will still have serious implications for schools. Serious planning weaknesses exist in that policies are developed without a detailed economic assessment of their implications including appropriate risk assessment*

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*analysis, for example the Entitlement Framework was developed at a time of economic growth but may fail to reach its potential as a consequence of recession and retrenchment.*

#### **Priority 2:**

#### **Creating Opportunities, Tackling Disadvantage and Improving Health and Well-being Related building blocks to education policy:**

- 10 year Strategy for Children and Young People
- The Skills Strategy
- Count, Read: Succeed – A Strategy to Improve Outcomes in Literacy and Numeracy Related to the above Priority the Executive has identified a number of key commitments:
- Ensure there are no increases in student fees beyond the rate of inflation for Northern Ireland students.
- Improve literacy and numeracy levels among all school leavers with additional resources targeted at areas of educational underachievement.
- Ensure that at least one year of pre-school education is available to every family that wants it.

*RESPONSE: The Council welcomes this priority and the key commitments identified but it is mindful of the challenge it involves. Even during economically auspicious times educational disadvantage and underachievement is a steadfast and intractable problem. However, if this priority is to be realised the root causes of disadvantage must be identified and their impact of educational underachievement addressed. Therefore a renewed energy from the Executive is required to reinvigorate the 10 year Strategy for Children and Young People. The Council is concerned that the Executive and the civil service departments fail to carry through agreed policies with a sense of urgency. In this context, there is*

*a growing expectation in the community that 'delivery' will be a priority of this programme for government.*

*The Council now wants to address the issue of pre-school education. In its response to the DE consultation on the 'Early Years(0-6) Strategy, the Council drew DE's attention to the importance of providing high quality pre-school education and identified research that emphasised the crucial role that professional and qualified teachers play in ensuring quality outcomes (see for example EPPE and EPPENI research findings). This quality provision is mainly to be found in the statutory sector and in nursery units attached to primary schools. In developing policy in the crucial area of pre-school provision, the Executive must not weaken statutory sector provision where high quality outcomes are achieved. Indeed, policy innovations are required to allow the voluntary and private sectors to draw on the expertise of the statutory sector. By way of example, principals of statutory schools could be resourced to adapt more strategic leadership roles in their local communities in the area of pre-school provision to maximise quality educational outcomes. The development and resourcing of high quality pre-school education, the Council suggests, is surely one of the most economically efficient means to redress educational disadvantage in later life.*

#### **Priority 3:**

#### **Protecting Our People, the Environment and Creating Safer Communities**

No specific education policy building blocks are benchmarked against this priority,

#### **Priority 4:**

#### **Building a Strong and Shared Community Related building blocks to education policy:**

- Community Relations, Equality and Diversity in Education Policy.

Related to this priority the Executive has identified the following commitments:

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- Establish a Ministerial advisory group to explore and bring forward recommendations to the Minister of Education to advance shared education.
- Ensure all children have the opportunity to participate in shared education programmes by 2015 and substantially increase the number of schools sharing facilities by 2015.

*Response: The Council welcomes this priority and the stated commitments. However, as always the 'devil will be in the detail' and the practical outworking of the commitments. It is also unclear what the current benchmark position is vis-à-vis shared education. In fact establishing a benchmark position must necessarily be one of the first tasks of the proposed advisory group. Moreover, it is unlikely that the success of the priority will be cost neutral and, at a time when the financial resources allocated to schools are under strain, the Executive's ambitions may not be realised. Of course, a commitment to a 'Shared Education' if properly managed may well lead to savings in terms of duplication of resources both human and physical but this is unlikely to be the case in the short to medium term when additional expenditure and investment will be necessary. There will be many practical issues to be resolved for example, leadership training, timetabling and co-ordinating school holiday arrangements to name but a few. In addition, the commitment to 'Shared Education' must be based on a consensus reached by agreement of the existing sectors. In order to achieve this, the proposed Ministerial Advisory Group must ensure agreement through a genuine participatory engagement of all the sectors and, crucially, by starting with recognition of the integrity and value of education they already provide.*

#### Priority 5:

##### **Delivering High Quality and Efficient Public Services Related educational policy building blocks include:**

- Schools for the future: A policy for sustainable schools
- (Establishment of) Education and Skills Authority Related to this priority the Executive has identified the following commitments:
- (We will) make the Education and Skills Authority operational in 2013 (to be fully functional by 2014/15).

*Response: The Council welcomes this priority and would begin by reminding the Executive it must lead by example in ensuring 'high quality and efficient public services.' In terms of educational administration, there must be no further 'political delay' in establishing the Education and Skills Authority and, if local political leaders are really serious about education, then the timeframe set out in the draft programme to establish the ESA needs to be brought forward. Indeed there is now a strong case for the ESA to be established in shadow form by April 2012. Moreover, at departmental level, the recent proposal to merge DE and DEL could, if carried through, lead to more coherent education policy with a renewed and clear focus on lifelong learning. The Council would support this development.*

*In terms of sustainable schools, while the Council supports the concept, this policy objective must not be achieved through the implementation of wholesale school closures and reduction in teaching posts. Moreover, there is a sense that financial strictures are now driving DE education. In this context, many of the existing policy initiatives were planned and launched at a time of growing public expenditure. The Council suggests that the time may well be right for an 'audit' to ensure that policy objectives are more closely aligned with the resources available. Furthermore, the most*

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*important 'resources' within the education system are teachers and other support personnel and, as a consequence, it is incumbent of the Executive and DE to ensure that front-line services are protected. Moreover, the Executive must be aware of the frustrations of those 'at the front line' when policy expectations are not met with adequate resources to deliver. A lack of leadership and direction has serious consequences for morale and those in positions of power must now redouble their efforts to provide leadership to the wider community.*

*In striving to achieve the sustainable schools outcome there now needs to be a strategic and proactive workforce planning drive at DE level. There is a range of issues that need to be addressed as a matter of urgency and only DE has the remit and the resources necessary to develop systematic plans in this area. Therefore the Council calls on the Executive and DE to engage with the following matters by way of short term, medium and long term goals and measurable policy outcomes. Moreover, the Council would be willing to support DE in this task in whatever way practicable.*

1. The current imbalance in the supply and demand of teachers needs to be addressed. The Executive and DE/DEL should set an objective to get the supply/ demand of teachers into reasonable equilibrium by 2020 with substantial progress towards achieving this goal reported to the Assembly by 2015 and again by 2017. As a first step, the Executive (DE, DEL) should ensure that there are no contradictory policies currently in operation with regard to facilitating schools pupils who may wish to undertake initial teacher education programmes either locally, in Northern Ireland, or at higher education institutions in other United Kingdom jurisdictions. For example, this may involve the current advice provided by the Careers Advisory

Service in relation to beginning teachers' employment prospects in Northern Ireland and other student support mechanisms (including financial). It is also essential that both DEL and DE when seeking to establish a supply/demand equilibrium for in Northern Ireland prioritise their support for local higher education institutions whose programmes have been accredited by the GTCNI.

2. Teaching is a very demanding professional activity and a career in teaching requires constant intellectual, physical and emotional renewal. Therefore, the proposed changes to the teachers' pension scheme including increasing the retirement age have been a cause of serious concern to the profession; however, the Minister is to be commended for his recent allocation of funding to employing authorities regarding teacher redundancy compensation. Notwithstanding this positive move the Executive should now instruct DE, as a matter of urgency, to carry out a comprehensive review of teachers' career cycle from induction to end-of-career exit processes with a view to ensuring the profession is continually renewed while, at the same time, maintaining a demographic profile that ensures an appropriate professional balance of early career teachers and experience within our schools. By way of practical examples, this should include, among other things, an induction programme that is fit-for-purpose, a centralised substitute cover programme and end-of-career 'work-out' schemes. This approach would ensure better long term planning which would be more congruent with the sustainable schools' policy.

## 4.0 Conclusion

4.1 Notwithstanding the concerns expressed above, the Council endorses the broad general themes in the draft programme. However, as stated earlier, the focus must now be on delivery based on achieving a broad consensus on the way forward. The Executive must provide a greater sense of leadership and adopt a renewed urgency in order to achieve the policy objectives in the draft programme. The Council in responding to previous Government consultations has emphasised that the dynamics of the global knowledge economy will have major implications for the future economic prosperity of Northern Ireland. Therefore education must be a policy priority for the Executive. Of course, the STEM priority is an important response to the demands and challenges of the knowledge economy, however, care must be taken not to lose sight of other crucial areas in education for example, creativity, flexibility, team working and cooperative working skills, and nurturing dispositions to lifelong learning.

In conclusion, if by 2015 the Executive can report measurable successes on the areas listed below and follow through on the points raised by the Council in this response, then it may reasonably claim to have achieved something worthwhile for the community, if not, the community at large will have been done a major disservice.

- Tackling underachievement and educational inequality,
- The Revised curriculum and Entitlement Framework,
- Every School a Good School,
- Shared Education,
- An emphasis on literacy and numeracy,
- The establishment of the ESA,
- Sustainable Schools,

For its part, the Council wishes the Executive well as it embarks on the 'delivery' of the draft programme, however, it must also realise that the community has invested enormous hope in the whole enterprise of devolved government and political leaders now need to move our society forward to a truly 'shared future' that guarantees, Peace, Prosperity, Fairness and Well-Being.