



Dated 23.03.23

CHIEF EXECUTIVES OF EDUCATION BODIES JOINT CALL FOR EDUCATION FUNDING

Eight Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of the key educational bodies in Northern Ireland have come together to collectively call for sustainable and sufficient funding for the education sector and a clear and comprehensive Education strategy that allows our children and young people for generations to come to have the best possible start in life.

The collaborative forum of CEOs, representing all schools in Northern Ireland, collectively agree that this unprecedented situation can only be fixed by:

- A strategy for education to provide direction and enable leadership at all levels across the system.
- Sustained investment in education
- Continued transformation of critical services
- Adequate investment to improve the fabric of our school buildings
- A greater recognition of the significantly important role education plays in shaping, investing and protecting the future of our children and young people and of the immeasurable impact education has on the economy and wider society.

Education body leaders remain very concerned about the ever growing, unprecedented, pressures facing education which will carry into the next financial year and the potential detrimental and significant impact this could have for children and young people. For example, on the day to day running of schools, Special Educational Needs support, transport and catering, and ultimately on the educational experience and outcomes of our children and young people.

The financial outlook for 2023/24 is significantly more challenging than anything the sector has faced to date. The funding provided by the Secretary of State in the Autumn Budget Statement (November 2022), whilst very welcome, was non-recurring in nature and therefore the underlying financial pressures of almost £300m that the Education Authority (EA) was reporting earlier in 2022/23 have not been addressed.

Coupled with 2023/24 anticipated pay and price inflation, continued projected growth in demand for Special Educational Needs (SEN) services as well as proposed budget cuts across the Northern Ireland public sector generally, the result is a projected funding shortfall that is very likely to be well in excess of £0.5 billion for the incoming financial year.

Therefore, the CEO's have made the joint call, outlined below, and will continue to work collectively and in the best interests of children.

1. Schools in Northern Ireland must be provided with sufficient funding that values our children and young people equitably with those across these islands. Funding should be stable with a clear commitment to it being kept in line with pay and price pressures.
 - o A recent report from the Institute of Fiscal Studies highlights that educational spend per pupil in Northern Ireland for 2021/22 was the lowest of the 4 UK nations. Scotland was the highest at £7,600 per pupil with Northern Ireland coming in at £6,400 per pupil. Taking England as a mid-range comparator where spend is £6,700 per pupil, if spend in Northern Ireland were at the same level, the annual Northern Ireland education budget would be £108m greater than it is currently (360,000 pupils at £300 per pupil). This does not include the extra 2.3 billion given to schools in England in the Chancellor's Autumn Budget Statement.
2. Education funding must not depend on in year monitoring rounds or ear marked funds. Core funding must be sufficient for schools and those that deliver key services to them.
 - o The education sectoral bodies have been calling out for a number of years the lack of an adequate baseline budget for schools. A balanced financial position has been achieved in the past 3 years due to a combination of cost restraint at schools and at centre, as well as the significant support of additional funding from in-year monitoring rounds (£180m in 2021-22). It is impossible for the education sector to plan effectively when it begins each financial year with a funding gap, as has been the case in each of those years. The position is steadily deteriorating with over 50% of all schools expected to report a funding deficit at 31 March 2023.
3. The significant back log in infrastructure funding (£500m), maintenance and minor capital works must be addressed urgently across all our schools.
 - o Expenditure on the annual programme of work to maintain the fabric of our school estate is currently limited to only those items that are of such criticality that failure to carry them out would pose a significant risk to the health and safety of children and could result in a breach of our statutory obligations. The annual budget for this work is significantly inadequate and it is designated as an earmarked fund rather than being embedded in the baseline funding.
4. Schools need to know that services provided by the education bodies are effectively funded to ensure the provision of consistent, efficient service that will best support them.

5. Education requires an ambitious and innovative strategy to ensure a *ten times better* education for all our children and young people and to provide, promote and enable leadership across the education system. (*example taken from the 10X Economy - an economic vision for a decade of innovation).

6. Transformation of education must be supported by funding and investment. The key focus on any transformation must be based on doing things more effectively for our children and young people and not solely on saving money.
 - o Cost saving initiatives for more than a decade have significantly deteriorated the spending power of funding provided for our schools, children and young people. If the 2011 annual budgets of the legacy Education and Library Boards had simply been increased to keep pace with inflation each year, the budgets would be £150m per annum greater than they are today. In addition, the Education Authority has been forced to implement cost reductions of a further £150m since 2015. Taken together this points to a continual degradation of the education sector funding that amounts to more than a billion pounds over the last decade.

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