

**Public Consultation on the Strategic Plan 2017 - 2027**  
**[Education Authority for Northern Ireland]**  
**Draft Consultation Response from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council**

## **Brief Background to the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council Area**

The District Council area is home to 114,992 people, approximately 52,500 jobs and 7,175 businesses. The District Council area is Northern Ireland's largest region in terms of land mass - approximately 3,000km<sup>2</sup> (or 20% of NI) - and is the smallest in terms of population. As a result, the population density of approximately 41 people per km<sup>2</sup> is the sparsest in Northern Ireland. This is a key feature of the district but presents challenges in terms of accessibility and service delivery.

## **Consultation Response**

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Education Authority's Public Consultation on the Strategic Plan for 2017-2027.

The Council acknowledges that the Education Authority is a key strategic partner within the Community Planning process and looks forward to future partnership working to the betterment of the local community.

## **Vision, Mission and Values**

The Council supports the Education Authority in the description of its vision, mission and values. Not only does the vision correspond with Outcome 14 of the recent Programme for Government documentation, it also places the needs of each child at the forefront of the organisation, acknowledging that the Education Authority should be 'child focused' in all its activities.

Although all children have individual and varying needs, it is important that each child receives the best possible educational opportunities – allowing them to achieve their full potential.

The Council believes that a proactive Strategic Plan, and subsequent Corporate and Business Plans, can play a vital role in assisting the focusing of resources and services - allowing all children and young people the best possible start in life.

Council recommends that there should also be a clear commitment demonstrating that the Education Authority will seek to ensure that children and young people, along with their families and/or carers are satisfied with the quality of the education services they are receiving and participating in. This type of engagement and feedback will assist the Education Authority with future planning.

## **Area Planning**

The Council agrees that there is a need for the continuation of, and an increase in the momentum of, Area Planning for the Education Authority – however, several issues raised within the previous consultation process should also be addressed.

The Council submitted a Consultation Response to the Education Authority's public consultation in December 2016, and it is vital the Strategic Plan is reflective of the out-workings of this consultation process on Area Planning.

The Council remains concerned that decisions emanating from the Area Planning process may have a long-term impact on the educational provision and social cohesion of the District.

As part of the Council's response in relation to Area Planning – it was suggested that consideration needs to be given to each school's individual circumstances e.g. number of pupils, number of teachers, location, rurality.

One of the key aspects in terms of Area Planning, must be timely communication with communities, parents, pupils, teachers and other relevant stakeholders.

The Council remains concerned with certain aspects of the recently published Area Plan, and would urge the Education Authority to re-visit the comments contained within its original response, as well as those contained within this consultation response document.

## **Sustainability**

The Council is concerned with the inclusion of 'sustainable schools' as part of the Medium-Term Corporate Objectives. Within the Fermanagh and Omagh 2030 Community Plan document, 'Sustainability' is one of the Shared Values and Principles.

Although, the Council acknowledges that a sustainable educational provision for every child within the District is vital, there are several complexities contained within the Fermanagh and Omagh District including:

- The rurality of the District.
- Geographical locations.
- The varying population densities of each District Electoral Ward (and local community).
- Proximity to the border.

These complexities all add a unique set of challenges facing the Education Authority, and indeed all public authorities working within the Council District.

The Council believes that all pupils should have access to a broad and balanced curriculum that meets their needs. There should also be an emphasis placed on creating sustainable schools – the right type, in the right place and the right size.

However, it should be noted that placing too large an emphasis on ‘sustainable’ schools, and ‘target numbers for sustainable schools’, within the Fermanagh and Omagh District could have huge consequences given its geographic size, population density and the rural locations of many schools.

It is important that there is an investigation of the possibility of enhancing existing community linkages between schools and local communities. Schools benefit from, and contribute to, social cohesion through their relationships with local communities. This in turn plays a major role in educating young people as well as making a key contribution to the local community’s social stability. There is a large body of evidence that documents the positive contribution of rural-based schools to the preservation, support and development of rural communities. This evidence also details the negative impact rural school closures have upon their local communities.

Planning for future educational services should be linked to the wider goals of local regeneration. For example, the ‘Every Child Matters’ document looks to integrate some aspects of the health and education services. One potential method of ensuring sustainability, or economic viability, of school resources going forward could include sharing the use of buildings/estates to include Post Office facilities, IT access, community hall provision or the provision of other leisure/recreational services.

### **Sustainable Schools Policy**

The Council also requests that the Education Authority does not make any presumptions which will benefit larger schools, ahead of smaller schools. Therefore, it is important that the Sustainable Schools Policy does not make any presumptions in favour of larger schools.

The Council acknowledges that, per capita, small schools may be more expensive. However, very often these small schools are situated in rural communities and these schools are legitimate investments in these rural communities.

The Council also believes that the Education Authority should also perform a review of the Funding Criteria, as schools currently have limited control of their budgets. This is something that should be addressed, in order to ensure that local schools can best meet the needs of their local communities.

### **Accessibility**

The Council is clear that ‘accessibility’ to education is one of the most important, and fundamental, issues facing the Education Authority. In the ‘Schools for the Future’ document the Department for Education acknowledges that ‘accessibility is likely to

assume a much greater importance for an isolated rural school than for an urban based school’.

Exploring various examples of good practice, shows that for an Education Authority to assess travel arrangements for pupils being ‘suitable’, the arrangements must enable the child to reach school without stress, strain, or difficulty that may prevent them from benefitting from their education.

All transport provided should also be safe and of reasonable comfort.

The Council has concerns that children from poorer backgrounds may be disproportionately affected by travel problems within rural areas. Such children are more likely to be dependent upon the school bus for travel to and from school, and therefore have difficulty in accessing both informal and formal after-school activities. Therefore, pupils who are most likely to benefit from activities such as homework clubs or access to computers are less likely to be able to participate unless these activities are provided close to their homes or additional access/transport is made available.

The Council believes that it would be worthwhile for the Education Authority to assess the current provision of transport, particularly for those children in rural areas. Many children, who live closer to larger urban settlements may have a choice of transport to and from school (e.g. various times, pick-up points, a number of routes, etc). Children who travel on Education Authority buses are quite often very limited in their choice of route, pick-up times, pick-up points and so forth. This can be a disadvantage to children/families in rural areas particularly children who wish to partake in afterschool activities or families who are reliant on child minding services.

### **Educational Attainment**

Currently within the Fermanagh and Omagh District, the educational breakdown of the local population is:

- 26.7% qualified to NVQ Level 4, or above.
- 14.9% of the local population have no qualifications.

Any initiatives which are aimed at reducing the percentage of people with ‘no qualifications’ would be an extremely positive step; however, the Council would stress the need for the inclusion of a mechanism which reflects ‘local circumstances’ for example the impact of rurality and TSN impacts.

Within the Fermanagh and Omagh District there is a particular issue with disengagement, especially amongst boys - 21% of whom do not achieve 5 GCSEs (A-C Grade).

Statistics also show that whilst 65% of individuals in the District obtain 2 A Levels (or equivalent), 32% of FSME students do not achieve 5 GCSEs (A-C Grade).

Therefore, every attempt must be made to improve the educational attainment of these groups, as well as all other pupils within the Council District.

Council would encourage the Education Authority to include a specific priority relating to 'Inspections, Accountability and Reporting'. This priority could be driven by the progress and attainment of pupils, providing parents (and Governors, where applicable) with clear and accessible information on how each school is performing.

All children and young people should leave school with the essential building blocks to help them to reach their full potential.

## **Resources**

Within the Fermanagh and Omagh District, there are several "good" and "excellent" schools. However, it is vital that these schools are all properly resourced in order to reflect local circumstances, such as their rurality, location.

One of the key recommendations within the 'People and Communities' Theme from the 'Fermanagh and Omagh 2030' Community Plan is to: 'Develop and enhance programmes to raise educational attainment levels in children and young people in the most deprived households'. With the Education Authority, and the Department of Education, being key partners within the Community Planning process the Council looks forward to working in partnership to achieve this recommendation.

The Council believes that the Education Authority should also include an objective which addresses the recruitment, retention and training of teachers and school staff. The Strategic Plan does reference 'working with the Department and other stakeholders to support the implementation of professional learning strategies for all staff'.

In the current climate, Council recommends the inclusion of a commitment to recruit, retain and continually develop teachers and other school staff, which will have a positive impact on the educational achievement of pupils.

## **Data Collection**

Within the consultation, there is an emphasis being placed on 'overall data'. The Council is therefore concerned that a reliance on data at this level could leave certain pockets or gaps (locally), going unnoticed or ignored.

For example, at the Local Government Data level for the Fermanagh and Omagh District, 'Free School Meal Entitled (FSME) Boys' are a key grouping that needs to be addressed and targeted. It is vital that the various Corporate and Business Plans, developed by the Education Authority going forward, address this key group within the District – however the Strategic Plan 2017-2027 does not reference a difference between overall and local targets/issues.

Each Council District throughout Northern Ireland could have different groups which need to be prioritised in relation to targeting, which is dependent on the possibility of delivering local outcomes and actions.

Another issue within the Fermanagh and Omagh District is the 'brain drain' which has been experienced over the last number of years. The Education Authority should work in partnership with key organisations to put in place initiatives aimed at lessening the effect of the 'brain drain' from various District Council areas in the future.

### **Shared and Integrated Education**

The Council notes that within the Consultation Documentation, there is a reference to 'Shared Education', namely to: 'Encourage, facilitate and promote Shared Education'.

Although the Council does acknowledge the benefits of Shared Education, it would urge the Education Authority (as well as the Department of Education) to provide appropriate education to each local area – thus meeting the educational needs of all young people. There are many examples of successful 'Shared Education Models' within the Fermanagh and Omagh District (for example the Brookeborough Shared Education Campus).

The Council is committed to 'promoting and supporting the growth and development of shared education for all through the establishment and continuation of shared education models'. However, in relation to Integrated and Shared Education Models, the Council believes that there is no single education model that will best suit every area within the District, let alone Northern Ireland.

It is important that the Education Authority, and the Department of Education work in partnership with the Council and other relevant Community Planning Partners to assess the needs of individual areas and what would best meet their needs – if this is deemed necessary.

### **School Transport**

The Council is concerned that within the Education Authority's ten-year Strategic Plan, there is no commitment given to the provision of School Transport. Transport within the District, particularly for the more rural areas, is a very important issue.

Many families are dependent on 'Home to School' transport for their children. Any potential changes to transport links could put additional pressures on to parents – both financially and logistically.

Any change in the provision of school transport could have a negative impact on rural dwelling families. One of the main barriers to education, employment and training for young people in rural areas is transport. There are numerous reports and

statistics which demonstrate that rural dwellers are much more significantly reliant upon school transport when attending schools/colleges, in comparison to their urban counterparts.

### **Rural Proofing**

The Council believes that the Education Authority should ensure that the Strategic Plan 2017-2027 is rural proofed.

The Strategic Plan does not include community/parish boundaries and loyalties, therefore these should also be included in any rural proofing process.

The Council also feels that the Strategic Plan continually makes comparisons between rural and urban schools, and the Council believes that the innate characteristics of rural schools should be considered to ensure that there is no discrimination against rural schools.

### **Conclusion**

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council welcomes the draft Strategic Plan for 2017-2027 and stresses that the Education Authority should strive to ensure that all children and young people should reach their full potential, regardless of their background.

The Council agrees that the future of education, within the District, is not solely an issue about schools. It requires flexibility, joined-up thinking and making the best use out of existing resources.

Education provision has the potential to effect improvements in integration, innovation and in the actual outcomes for children, communities and the economy, and it is important the Education Authority's Strategic Plan 2017-2027 as well as all subsequent action/business plans contribute to these outcomes.

Through the Council's Community Planning function (and any subsequent partnership working) Councils can assist in achieving some of the outcomes as there is a shared common purpose between the Strategic Plan and the Council's Community Plan.