

Post  
Primary

Building a bridge between  
community and policy

# Future Schools Toolkit

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This research, undertaken by a team from the School of Education, Ulster University, was commissioned by the Integrated Education Fund, made possible by a grant provided by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO).

The research team would like to thank the Future Schools Advisory Group<sup>1</sup> for their input and guidance, as well as everyone who engaged with the project – parents, post-primary Principals, and Governors.

<b>ALCs</b>	Area Learning Communities
<b>AP</b>	Area Planning
<b>CSSC</b>	Controlled Schools' Support Council
<b>CCEA</b>	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment
<b>CCMS</b>	Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
<b>CEIAG</b>	Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance
<b>CI</b>	Controlled Integrated
<b>DE</b>	Department of Education
<b>DfE</b>	Department for the Economy
<b>DP</b>	Development Proposal
<b>EA</b>	Education Authority
<b>EF</b>	The Entitlement Framework
<b>ETI</b>	Education and Training Inspectorate
<b>FE</b>	Further Education
<b>FSME</b>	Free School Meal Entitlement
<b>GCSE</b>	General Certificate of Secondary Education
<b>GMI</b>	Grant Maintained Integrated
<b>IEF</b>	Integrated Education Fund
<b>IRE</b>	The Independent Review of Education
<b>KS4</b>	Key Stage 4
<b>NICIE</b>	Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education
<b>NINIS</b>	Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service
<b>NISRA</b>	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
<b>SAP</b>	Strategic Area Plan
<b>SBR</b>	Sustainability Schools Policy
<b>SDP</b>	School Development Plan
<b>SEN</b>	School Educational Needs
<b>SIMS</b>	School Information Management System
<b>SSP</b>	Sustainable Schools Policy
<b>TPL</b>	Teacher Professional Learning
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

<sup>1</sup>The Future Schools Advisory Group comprises of individuals representing the following organisations: Education Authority, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, Controlled Schools Support Council, NI Council for Integrated Education, the Integrated Education Fund, and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta.

# Rationale for the Toolkit

This Toolkit is designed to support and enable school communities to assess the sustainability of current school provision within an area and to identify whether there may be an alternative model of provision that is more sustainable in the long term.

It aligns with current Area Planning (AP) policy for school provision in Northern Ireland and is intended to support a process of proactive engagement in exploring what sustainable education provision within an area could look like. It can also assist with the ongoing process of School Improvement.

Throughout the development of the Toolkit, the research team from Ulster University have consulted with key educational bodies involved in Area Planning in Northern Ireland as well as a number of Principals<sup>2</sup> and School Governors.<sup>3</sup> A sample of the comments and views of the Principals and Governors follow. These reflect a range of views and experiences, including those from areas where there may be a misalignment between the availability of school places and current demand. Responses are anonymous as they are intended to give an overall sense of some of the emergent issues and views.

## Input and views from Principals:

*“If Governors and Principals are using this from the outset, they can then potentially see if there are going to be issues that they need to work on and develop.”*

*“I think it is the only way forward, I know that we need to have a clear evidence base of how we move forward to the schools of the future, the Toolkit is the only way.”*

*“We’ve got to be in charge of our own destiny as opposed to anything being imposed on anybody. So, I think the Toolkit will give a sense of security to any Board of Governors in any Area Planning aspect, which we’re all comfortable with in terms of how we move forward and change together... the Toolkit will be a very welcomed support mechanism for any Board of Governors and Trustees in terms of any change that’s to come. Every school should always have change as a focus in the priorities for their learning for the school development plan, because if you sit on your laurels thinking you’ve got it good, that’s when you’ll get a rude awakening...”*

## Input and views from Governors:

*“There remains too many schools and different sectors within our education system in NI.”*

*“We have too many schools in our area providing the same narrow subject choices and duplicity of effort is in itself hugely inefficient.”*

*“Schools all over subscribed.”*  
[in the area in which this Governor serves]

*“All schools concerned must be open to sharing and trusting each other with support from the various Education Dept, Boards etc.”*

*“In the management of school rationalisation processes the sectoral interests should be accommodated but should be secondary to the formation of high capacity, educationally excellent schools to which all of the community feels happy to enrol in. High standards of educational provision in each future school should always be the key emphasis. Governors still do not feel well equipped to address this matter in their schools. Something should be included in the toolkit to help with this issue.”*

# Endorsements for the Toolkit

*The Education Authority is pleased to have worked in partnership again with the School of Education research team from Ulster University in the development of the Future Schools Toolkit for Post-Primary.*

*The Education Authority fully supports the Toolkit’s intention to support school leadership to engage at an early stage and critically examine the sustainability of their school while engaging with local communities on the type of school provision that will provide a sustainable, high-quality educational experience for the future.*

*In doing so, the Education Authority believes that the Toolkit will further aid communities to meaningfully engage with educational planning, and Area Planning in particular, to identify sustainable area-based solutions that best meet the needs of young people in their area.*

Education Authority

*CCMS is committed to ensuring that pupils have access to high-quality education in sustainable settings, and we welcomed the opportunity to engage with the University of Ulster, School of Education, Future Schools’ team on the development of this toolkit for post-primary schools.*

*The toolkit offers a helpful framework for school leaders and Governors to evaluate the challenges and opportunities for sustainability, and to meaningfully engage with the wider community on future provision.*

*As we look to the future, it is important that schools proactively consider their long-term sustainability. We trust therefore that this toolkit will help to initiate and guide these important conversations and prove beneficial to all schools.*

Council for Catholic Maintained Schools

*The Council for Integrated Education firmly believes that alongside educating children together, our school system should reflect the wishes and desires of parents, children and the wider community. The Future Schools Toolkit provides a practical and robust approach to engaging all partners in a process of deliberation about how we can best serve the educational needs of our children and young people.*

Council for Integrated Education

*The Controlled Schools’ Support Council (CSSC) welcomes the Future Schools Toolkit as an additional resource to support schools and communities to participate in conversations regarding sustainable area based school provision. Our communities are changing and schools are adapting to meet the needs of a changing pupil profile. CSSC encourages schools to be rigorous in their self-evaluation processes and to engage with their pupils and communities to ensure that all children and young people have the opportunity to experience high quality education in sustainable schools embedded within their local communities.*

Controlled Schools’ Support Council

<sup>2</sup> Principals in two Area Learning Communities were consulted prior to developing the Toolkit and were also invited to provide feedback on the Toolkit towards its completion.

<sup>3</sup> A NI-wide survey of School Governors in post-primary schools was undertaken during the initial phase of the project.

**Future Schools** has at its heart, a vision that post-primary schools, parents/carers, and the local community will work together to identify **area-based solutions** with the potential of ensuring sustainable, local school provision ensuring high quality education for young people. It is intended to contribute to ongoing efforts to create a school network that meets the needs of all learners and promotes social cohesion whilst also providing a comprehensive curriculum in a cost-effective manner.

**“The education system has a diversity of school types, each with its own distinctive ethos and values. However it is not sustainable.”**

(New Decade, New Approach, 2020, p. 43)

**“The principle of support for parental choice should be maintained but should be subject to an imperative that increasingly all learners should learn together. ... The aim of all learners learning together should be energetically pursued.”**

(Investing in a Better Future: The Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland – Volume 2, 2023, p. 264)

In addition to an emphasis on working towards ‘all learners learning together’ the Independent Review of Education (IRE) also emphasises the need for a strong, collaborative approach in relation to the provision of schools. There is an emphasis on “collaboration rather than competition” (Volume 1, 2023, p. 60) particularly in relation to the provision of education and training for 14-19 year olds. The IRE is also clear that “Smaller sixth forms are unable to offer as wide a choice of courses as a young person would rightly expect and costs per pupil in non-viable sixth forms are unacceptably high” (Volume 1, 2023, p. 53). The IRE reflects the Department of Education’s (DE) recognition of the need to “‘right size’ the network of schools based on sustainable and efficient enrolment numbers” (Volume 1, 2023, p. 53).

It states that: “The current area planning processes and structures inhibit innovative cross-sectoral solutions and hinder the pace at which transformation can occur. We recommend that the network of schools be reconfigured to adhere strictly to minimum enrolment thresholds (105/140 for rural/urban primary schools, 600 for post-primary schools (excluding sixth form) and 240 for sixth forms). This would maximise the number of schools with enrolments on efficient enrolment boundaries. The objective is to improve the educational experience of the learner and guarantee the educational viability of the school” (Volume 1, 2023, p. 86).

The population of Northern Ireland is served by 192 post-primary schools – 19% (37) of these are classified as Rural and 81% (155) Urban (Strategic Area Plan 2022-27, p. 15). These schools are predominantly either Catholic Maintained (managed by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools - CCMS), Voluntary Grammar, or Controlled (managed by the Education Authority - EA), see Table 1.

**Table 1: Breakdown of post-primary schools by school type**

(Operational Plan 2: 2024-26, p. 17)

School type	No of post-primary schools
Catholic Maintained	56
Voluntary Grammar	50
Controlled	47
Controlled Grammar	16
Grant Maintained Integrated	15
Controlled Integrated	6
Irish Medium	2

Well-documented historical factors have meant that school provision in Northern Ireland is predominantly associated with religious and community identity. Many local areas may be served by more than one school of differing types. A projected decline in the post-primary school age population will also impact school viability.

The Department of Education’s (DE’s) Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools (referred to as Sustainable Schools Policy or SSP) places the quality of the educational experience firmly in the foreground: “My aim is to have strong viable schools which provide our children with a high-quality education for their benefit, and for the benefit of society as a whole.” (Ministerial Foreword, Sustainable Schools Policy, 2009, p. 1).

**Area Planning (AP)** is the “process of strategic planning ... to support the implementation of the Sustainable Schools Policy” (Strategic Area Plan 2022-27, p. 6). In the context of post-primary school provision, the Minister for Education has signalled that schools and sixth-forms below minimum enrolments, that are failing to provide a broad and balanced curriculum, will be prioritised for consideration within AP decision-making (Strategic Area Plan 2022-27, p. 7).

The Sustainable Schools Policy recognises that Area Planning policies can impact differently in rural and urban areas and acknowledges that adjustments may have to be made to reflect such particularities. It also acknowledges that developments at one school may impact significantly upon other schools in the surrounding area. DE therefore considers school provision on an area basis, taking account of the needs that are projected for the whole area rather than each individual school: “The policy has as its vision an estate of educationally sustainable schools planned on an area basis, with focus on sharing and collaboration” (Sustainable Schools Policy, 2009, p. 1).

Consequently, Area Planning is about identifying the current situation and responding to the future educational needs of a specific area to ensure “an estate of sustainable facilities” (Perry, 2011, p. 14). The Sustainable Schools Policy envisions that planning is undertaken on a whole system basis, taking account of impacts within and across areas, and across sectors. The managing authorities and sectoral support bodies contribute to the development of the Area Plans.

The Strategic Area Plan 2022-27 emphasises that the mission is to provide: “A network of viable and sustainable schools that are of the right type, the right size, located in the right place at the right time with a focus on raising standards.” (2022, p. 2)

It is important to emphasise the necessity for early engagement to consider what school sustainability, viability and quality education provision would look like on an area basis: “Too often, concerns about a school’s viability are addressed only when enrolments have already declined over a period of years to an untenable position and rationalisation is the only option remaining.” (Sustainable Schools Policy, 2009, p. 6).

In order to provide a high-quality educational experience for all pupils, DE has set out **six criteria for sustainable schools** (Sustainable Schools Policy, 2009):

- A. Quality educational experience**
- B. Stable enrolment trends**
- C. Sound financial position**
- D. Strong leadership and management by the Principal and Board of Governors**
- E. Accessibility**
- F. Strong links with the community**

A key aspect of the SSP is that it provides a framework for assessing school sustainability through these six criteria and associated indicators.

The most quantifiable of these criteria are **Stable enrolment trends** and **Sound financial position**.

Under the **Stable enrolment trends** criteria, schools accommodating Years 8-12 should have a minimum enrolment of 500 pupils, whilst sixth forms should be financially self-sufficient and have a minimum of 100 pupils to be considered sustainable.

Below threshold enrolments are evident within both rural and urban post-primary school settings. Of the 37 post-primary schools classified as rural, 18 (49%) fall below the 500-pupil threshold. Nine out of 24 (38%) rural schools providing post-16 education fall below the 100-pupil threshold. Of the 155 schools designated as urban, 32 (21%) fall below the 500-pupil threshold for Years 8-12 (Strategic Area Plan, 2022-27, p. 15). Operational Plan 2: 2024-26 shows there is still a significant challenge with regard to the number of post-primary schools falling below SSP minimum thresholds: more than one in five (45 of the 192) post-primary schools are below the minimum threshold for enrolments (p. 17).<sup>4</sup>

While **funding** allocated under the Local Management of Schools funding formula is mainly determined by pupil numbers, it has elements including the Small Schools Support Factor that target the additional financial needs of smaller schools (Sustainable Schools Policy, 2009, p. 29). However, despite this additional funding, a significant number of schools are in financial deficit (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2018). The financial position of schools in NI is recognised as being one which is deteriorating and according to the EA (2023) “over 50% of all schools [are] expected to report a funding deficit at 31 March 2023.”<sup>5</sup>

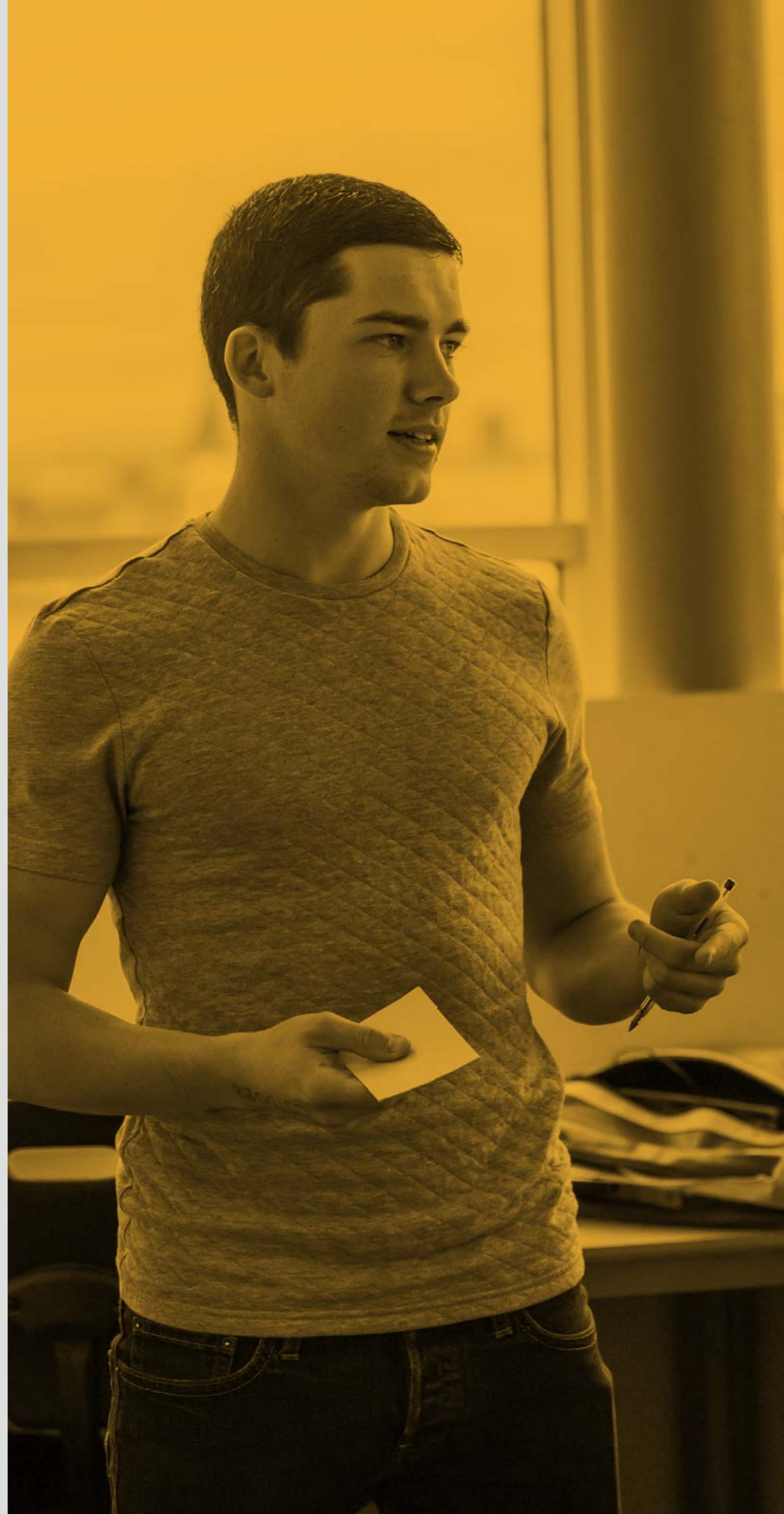
<sup>4</sup><https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-01/Operational%20Plan%202024%E2%80%932026.pdf>  
<sup>5</sup><https://www.eani.org.uk/news/chief-executives-of-education-bodies-joint-call-for-education-funding>

The **Entitlement Framework (EF)** for post-primary schools in Northern Ireland provides Key Stage 4 and post-16 students access to a minimum number and range of courses via Area Learning Communities (ALCs). There are 27 ALCs in Northern Ireland.<sup>6</sup> These enable local schools to work together in planning their curriculum on an area basis; although there may be some variation in the range of curriculum options available, this collaboration enables access to the EF.

Whilst the Sustainable Schools Policy requires that pupils spend at least 80% of their time in their home school, it is expected that many small schools will work with neighbouring schools, Further Education colleges and other training providers to ensure access to the EF (Sustainable Schools Policy, 2009). In addition to working within an ALC, it is also generally the case that a strong Shared Education partnership can help facilitate the EF between schools within an area.

This **Future Schools Post-Primary Toolkit** has been developed to support the needs of schools and communities regarding Sustainable Schools Policy and Area Planning, and to enable them to explore options and contribute to the Area Planning process in relation to post-primary school provision in their area. It will support school leadership (Principals and Boards of Governors) to critically examine the sustainability of their school and engage with local communities and neighbouring schools on the type of school provision that will provide a sustainable, high-quality educational experience for the future in their area.

The Toolkit does not seek to pre-determine pathways for specific schools or communities, but rather to **empower and support** them in determining (in conjunction with the EA, CCMS, DE and other educational stakeholders) which school type or model is most likely to deliver a sustainable, high-quality education for all pupils in their area. Implementing those **area-based solutions** will help to ensure provision of high-quality education is provided sustainably in the local area.



# Using the Toolkit

**“In seeking to enable sustainable education provision within an area, the key to early identification of challenges and opportunities for individual schools comes from self-evaluation.”**

(Strategic Area Plan 2022-27, p. 13).

For school communities to have a voice in the decision-making processes around school provision, Boards of Governors and other community stakeholders need to engage constructively and effectively with each other as well as with the managing authorities.

This Toolkit aims to provide school communities with the guidance to consider the following key questions:

- 1. How sustainable is our school in the short or medium term and what options do we have to improve our sustainability? Are we meeting the criteria in the Department of Education’s Sustainable Schools Policy?**
- 2. What school type will offer sustainable, high quality, area-based school provision for the young people in this area? How can the wider community contribute to this conversation regarding the best model for school provision in this area?**
- 3. How can we work with educational bodies to bring about change if there is an alternative model of local school provision that is better suited for ensuring high quality, sustainable school provision for the future?**

The issues facing each school will be specific to their location, their history and relationships within and between communities. This Toolkit does not, therefore, set out to prescribe a preferred solution, nor does it attempt to presuppose what the outcomes of this process will be. It offers no guarantees that efforts to ensure sustainability will ultimately prove fruitful; however, if adhered to, it can enable school communities to become proactive in developing ideas and proposals for local area-based solutions and support them to develop a plan of action before an outcome is determined for them.

The Toolkit has been constructed in three parts, aligning with each of the three questions above.

- 1. A school self-evaluation rubric** enabling School Leadership to think critically about the sustainability of their school by assessing it against the criteria and indicators in the Sustainable Schools Policy and other relevant policy documents. Through a process of self-evaluation, Governors should be in a position to better understand the sustainability trends of their school and the implications of this.
- 2. Guidelines for the application of a Community Conversation approach** to enable engagement with parents and other stakeholders around sustainable, area-based school provision. Community Conversations offer an effective approach for engaging more widely with the local community - including parents and carers of pre-school children and primary and post-primary pupils - about options for school provision that would provide a sustainable, high-quality education, particularly where current provision may not meet the six sustainable schools’ criteria.
- 3. Pathways and Processes** which set out the possible options and actions that may be considered to find a sustainable outcome for future school provision in an area.

Additional sources that would be helpful to consult in conjunction with this Toolkit include: DE’s Area Planning Guidance<sup>7</sup> and Sustainable Schools Policy<sup>8</sup>, the Sustainable Schools Policy User Guide<sup>9</sup>, the Strategic Area Plan 2022-27<sup>10</sup>, the Sustainability Baseline Report (SBR) Refresh NI Analysis 2022-23, the SBR Rural Bulletin 2022-23<sup>11</sup> and the Operational Plan 2 for Area Planning<sup>12</sup>, as well as the recommendations of the Independent Review of Education.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the forthcoming DE/DfE 14-19 Strategy will also have a relevance to Area Planning in the post-16 context.

Progress through the Toolkit should be viewed as an incremental exercise. While all schools benefit from undertaking self-evaluation against the Sustainable Schools Policy criteria and indicators, Part 2 of the Toolkit will be of most value to those schools and communities that recognise there may be a need for a more sustainable approach to school provision in their area. Part 3 of the Toolkit will support those schools looking towards a potential process of change.

*“It is important that all schools undertake an annual self-evaluation against the criteria and indicators of the Sustainable Schools Policy. This should not be considered as additional to what schools already do but rather provide a structure and context as to where the school sits within the Sustainable Schools Policy.”*

(Strategic Area Plan 2022-27, p. 13)

The rubric provided in this Toolkit has been designed with and for Principals and Governors to make the self-evaluation process aligning to the Sustainable Schools criteria as accessible as possible. It draws on material and evidence that may be already routinely gathered for DE and as part of the school inspection process for the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), as well as signposting other sources of evidence which may not previously have been considered.

<sup>7</sup><https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/area-planning-overview>

<sup>8</sup><https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/schools-future-policy-sustainable-schools>

<sup>9</sup><https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/sustainable-schools-policy-user-guide-february-2022>

<sup>10</sup><https://www.eani.org.uk/school-management/area-planning/strategic-area-plans-2022-27>

<sup>11</sup><https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/sustainability-baseline-report-20223-update>

<sup>12</sup><https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-01/Operational%20Plan%202024%202024%E2%80%932026.pdf>

<sup>13</sup><https://www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk/key-documents/investing-better-future>

## Initial Thresholds

The Sustainable Schools Policy (SSP) recognises that “Post-primary schools are much more expensive to provide than primaries because of the need for specialist classrooms and other facilities. In addition to the financial implications, smaller post-primaries can have the effect of narrowing the range of provision available to pupils within their schools. The larger the school, the more scope there is to recruit, develop and retain teachers to teach subjects and to offer a broad range of extra-curricular activities and enrichment opportunities.”

(2009, p. 26)

It states that, if post-primary schools are to be considered sustainable by DE, they should meet certain thresholds:

“The minimum enrolment level should apply to the establishment of new schools and replacement of existing schools. In effect therefore, a post-primary school would be expected to have a minimum annual intake of 100 pupils on average. The minimum enrolment for new sixth forms will be 100.”

(Sustainable Schools Policy, 2009, p. 25)

The Independent Review of Education has recommended that post-primary schools should have a minimum of 600 pupils in Years 8 to 12, and 240 in sixth forms.

Therefore, a negative assessment in response to the current enrolment thresholds could indicate a significant concern regarding the longer-term sustainability of the school.

The Sustainable Schools Policy outlines six **sustainability criteria** to be used in assessing a school’s viability.

- A. Quality Educational Experience**
- B. Stable Enrolment Trends**
- C. Sound Financial Position**
- D. Strong Leadership and Management by Principals and Boards of Governors**
- E. Accessibility**
- F. Strong Links with the Community**

Each of these six criteria is broken down into a series of more detailed indicators, which can be found in Annex A of the Sustainable Schools Policy.

The pages that follow provide a rubric to help individual schools in assessing themselves against all of the Sustainable Schools Policy criteria and indicators. Additional sources of evidence are also signposted. These may be drawn upon to help a school evaluate their sustainability trends.<sup>14</sup>

It is important to stress that the Sustainable Schools Policy states that it is not the intention “to have a mechanistic application of the criteria and indicators” (2009, p. 35) and that “schools must be considered on a case-by-case basis taking into account the levels of social disadvantage, how the school compares to schools of similar characteristics, and any particular circumstances” (2009, p. 36). The SSP also acknowledges that “the importance of [these] various factors may vary from case to case” (2009, p. 36).

It is recommended that the Sustainable Schools criteria in this section are read alongside other self-evaluation guidance in documents such as -

- DE (2009) *Every School a Good School*
- DE/Education and Training Inspectorate (2017) *Inspection Self-Evaluation Framework*
- Education and Training Inspectorate (2024) *Empowering Improvement: New Framework for Inspection*.
- Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools – User Guide (2022) Annex C Boards of Governors Checklist – Sustainability and Sustainable Schools Policy (SSP).

# Part One: Self-Evaluation

<sup>14</sup>Only those SSP indicators which relate to post-primary schools have been included in this document. The full list of Indicators can be found in Annex A of the Sustainable Schools Policy, <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/a-policy-for-sustainable-schools.pdf>

Does your school:

- provide a broad and balanced educational experience for pupils?
- sustain and realise high standards of educational attainment?
- provide and deliver a full set of option choices to allow learners to pursue their chosen subjects to the highest level?
- cater for learners with Special Educational Needs?
- provide high quality Pastoral Care?
- have members of your Boards of Governors who have availed of training provided by EA on Sustainable Schools Policy Criteria and Self-evaluation?

Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability	
		Weak	Strong
1.1 Attainment levels of pupils, GCSE results.	GCSE results Benchmarking statistics e.g. Qualification Reports and Results Statistics (CCEA) Internal test scores and benchmarks ETI Assessment	Learners' attainments fall below that expected or forecast  Recent ETI inspections suggest that learners are not prepared sufficiently for the next stage of education (training or employment), do not progress or achieve sufficiently in line with their abilities and do not sufficiently develop and demonstrate wider skills and capabilities	Learners' attainments exceed that expected or forecast  Recent ETI inspections suggest that learners achieve their targets, experience challenge, progress, are well prepared for the future, develop appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding, display positive dispositions and value learning and have sufficient knowledge and skills to make informed choices and keep themselves safe
1.2	Not applicable to post-primary schools		
1.3	Not applicable to post-primary schools		
1.4 The ability of the school to cater for children with Special Educational Needs.	Number/proportion of statemented/SEN learners in mainstream education Examples of how the needs of these learners have been met ETI reports Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) relating to SEN undertaken by teachers and other staff SEN School Policy Annual Review Process, target setting (including the use of individual education plans and personal development plans) Transition plans	Limited evidence of how needs of SEN learners in mainstream education are being addressed and have been met  Limited evidence of teachers and staff undertaking SEN TPL  Limited evidence of SEN School Policy being applied, underpinning an inclusive environment  Limited evidence of the Annual Review Process being used effectively  Limited evidence of transition plans being developed and applied	Strong evidence of how needs of SEN learners in mainstream education have been met  Strong evidence of teachers and staff undertaking a range of appropriate SEN TPL and incorporating this into practice, where required  Strong evidence of the SEN School Policy being understood by staff and others, and applied effectively in an inclusive environment  Strong evidence of the Annual Review Process being used effectively  Strong evidence of transition plans being developed and applied

Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability	
		Weak	Strong
1.5 The ability to be able to provide suitable access to the entitlement framework including, where appropriate, linkages with other schools, the FE sector or other providers.	Evidence that the requirements of the Entitlement Framework are being met e.g. subjects offered at each level, and number of students.  Collaboration with other providers and details of pupil movement in and out of the school to study identified subjects  Minutes of Area Learning Community meetings, where appropriate  Consideration of the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland Skills Barometer or other sources to help to create a broad and balanced curriculum offering which meets the needs of learners  Careers advice provided by the school and outside bodies, where appropriate and TPL for appropriate staff	Limited evidence that the school provides access to at least 21 qualifying courses, at least one third general and one third applied, for KS4 and post-16 learners  Limited evidence of discussion, planning and decision making at an ALC level  Limited evidence that up-to-date labour market information and DfE's priority skills areas have been used to design course offerings which are coherent and economically relevant for learners  Limited evidence of careers support for learners and limited TPL for staff involved	Strong evidence that the school provides access to at least 21 qualifying courses, at least one third general and one third applied, for KS4 and post-16 learners  Strong evidence of discussion, planning and decision making at an ALC level  Strong evidence of the use of up-to-date labour market information and DfE's priority skills areas to help to develop and coherent and economically relevant set of course offerings for learners  Strong evidence of careers support for learners and effective TPL for Careers staff
1.6 The standards and the quality of learning and teaching at the school.	ETI Inspections  A broad and balanced curriculum (including, where possible, subjects delivered through collaboration with other schools)  Knowledge and skills progression (improvement noted from a baseline)  Evidence of reflection and rigorous self-evaluation by teachers and departments  Educational outcomes reflect positively on the school and compare well against the performance of similar schools  School Development Plan (SDP)	Limited evidence that the needs, interests and aspirations of all learners have been considered in designing, planning and reviewing the curriculum, and the school seems not to have considered sufficiently the impact of the curriculum offer on progression pathways	Strong evidence that the school has a strategic vision and rationale for the curriculum, manages resources effectively, including finances, staffing and accommodation. There is strong evidence that staff professional learning is prioritised and best use of expertise is made to inform curriculum provision and ongoing change, development and planning
1.7 The range of curricular and extra-curricular activities available for children including career guidance, physical education, music, art, drama and science	ETI Reports  Allocation of staff duties to review and develop curriculum areas  School records (including school website and prospectus)  Meaningful Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) and work-related learning is available for learners  Evidence of use of outdoor space	There is limited evidence that all curricular areas are fully developed  Evidence for a range of extra-curricular activities available for learners is scant  There is limited evidence that the school celebrates and builds upon success including extra-curricular and wider achievements  Little CEIAG or work-related learning is available for learners	There is strong evidence of good coverage of all curricular areas and it is clear that the school is going beyond the core curriculum  There is strong evidence for an extensive range of extra-curricular activities available for learners  There is strong evidence that the school evaluates the effectiveness of strategies to celebrate and build upon success including extra-curricular and wider achievements  The school has considerable CEIAG and work-related learning opportunities for learners



Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability	
		Weak	Strong
<p><b>1.8</b> The quality of the physical environment for learning and teaching i.e. the condition, energy and water efficiency and suitability of the buildings.</p>	<p>Recently updated and accurate inventory of equipment</p> <p>Risk assessments</p> <p>ETI Health and Safety Reports</p> <p>Staff and/or department meeting minutes</p> <p>Minutes of Board of Governors' meetings</p> <p>DE guidance and EA Statement and Policy on managing health and safety in schools including risk assessments, security and personal safety</p>	<p>An incomplete / outdated inventory of equipment</p> <p>Limited risk assessments</p> <p>Inspection report indicates that the quality of the physical environment does not impact positively on learning, teaching and outcomes for learners</p> <p>There is limited evidence to demonstrate effective planning across the curriculum to ensure a coherent and proactive provision for health, safety and wellbeing.</p> <p>There is limited evidence that DE and EA guidance has been considered and implemented where necessary</p>	<p>A full and current inventory of equipment</p> <p>Full and comprehensive set of risk assessments – regularly reviewed and updated</p> <p>Inspection report references the quality of the physical environment for learning and teaching impacts positively on learning, teaching and outcomes for learners</p> <p>Evidence suggests that provision reflects the importance afforded to keeping safe and healthy lifestyles with priority given to a coherent and proactive promotion of health, safety and wellbeing.</p> <p>Evidence that DE and EA guidance has been considered and implemented where necessary</p>
		<p>Limited evidence that learners are well enough informed about how to develop and maintain healthy lifestyles, or about the consequences of their choices and behaviours</p> <p>Limited evidence that learners have sufficient awareness of potential risks, and the skills needed, to make informed decisions about their safety and wellbeing</p> <p>Limited evidence that learners are well enough informed about relevant issues and how to deal with them or access support</p> <p>Limited evidence that learners feel safe or know who to speak to if they have any concerns</p> <p>Limited evidence of a school Pupil Behaviour Policy being in place and being used effectively</p> <p>Limited evidence that a pupils' forum is active or other than tokenistic. Limited records of meetings of pupils' forum</p> <p>Limited evidence of recent TPL and Governor training in this area</p>	<p>Evidence that learners feel safe and cared for, are self-aware and can manage their emotional wellbeing</p> <p>Evidence that learners understand the importance of following a healthy lifestyle, including a healthy diet and partaking regularly in physical activity</p> <p>Evidence that learners are equipped to make informed choices in order to minimise risk and keep themselves and others safe, and know how to access support if needed</p> <p>Learners contribute to curriculum planning around the preventative curriculum, health, nutrition and emotional wellbeing</p> <p>School policies on Positive Behaviour and pastoral care are in place and are well understood by staff and learners</p> <p>Evidence of feedback from pupils' forum being taken on board in school policy or practice – comprehensive minutes of meetings of pupils' forum</p> <p>Evidence of additional awards e.g. UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools Award</p> <p>Evidence that TPL and Governor training has been undertaken by most staff and Governors – including availing of opportunities from external organisations – and evidence of use in practice</p>
<p><b>1.9</b> The quality of, and arrangements for, pastoral care including the active promotion of the principles of social justice in all areas of the formal and informal curriculum</p>	<p>ETI inspection reports</p> <p>School Pupil Behaviour Policy and other related policies</p> <p>Minutes/records of meetings of pupils' forum (or similar representative body)</p> <p>Evidence of additional awards, e.g. UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools Award</p> <p>Records of relevant TPL training undertaken by staff</p>	<p>Limited evidence that learners are well enough informed about how to develop and maintain healthy lifestyles, or about the consequences of their choices and behaviours</p> <p>Limited evidence that learners have sufficient awareness of potential risks, and the skills needed, to make informed decisions about their safety and wellbeing</p> <p>Limited evidence that learners are well enough informed about relevant issues and how to deal with them or access support</p> <p>Limited evidence that learners feel safe or know who to speak to if they have any concerns</p> <p>Limited evidence of a school Pupil Behaviour Policy being in place and being used effectively</p> <p>Limited evidence that a pupils' forum is active or other than tokenistic. Limited records of meetings of pupils' forum</p> <p>Limited evidence of recent TPL and Governor training in this area</p>	<p>Evidence that learners feel safe and cared for, are self-aware and can manage their emotional wellbeing</p> <p>Evidence that learners understand the importance of following a healthy lifestyle, including a healthy diet and partaking regularly in physical activity</p> <p>Evidence that learners are equipped to make informed choices in order to minimise risk and keep themselves and others safe, and know how to access support if needed</p> <p>Learners contribute to curriculum planning around the preventative curriculum, health, nutrition and emotional wellbeing</p> <p>School policies on Positive Behaviour and pastoral care are in place and are well understood by staff and learners</p> <p>Evidence of feedback from pupils' forum being taken on board in school policy or practice – comprehensive minutes of meetings of pupils' forum</p> <p>Evidence of additional awards e.g. UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools Award</p> <p>Evidence that TPL and Governor training has been undertaken by most staff and Governors – including availing of opportunities from external organisations – and evidence of use in practice</p>

## B) Stable Enrolment Trends

Does your school have evidence of:

- **stable enrolment figures year on year?**
- **meeting the minimum enrolment thresholds?**
- **enrolment aligning with the school capacity or is there a significant or increasing surplus of places in relation to capacity?**

Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability	
		Weak	Strong
<p><b>2.1</b> The enrolment trends in the school in the past three years and projected demand in the area.</p>	<p>School census data (enrolment trends)</p> <p>Data suggesting future demand for school places from sources such as Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)</p> <p>Comparative data – population trends and birth data in other rural areas</p> <p>Locally generated evidence e.g. planned housing developments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NISRA <a href="https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics">https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics</a></li> </ul>	<p>Birth rate and NISRA data indicate potential for falling demand for this type of school. No planning evidence that population profile is likely to change</p>	<p>Birth rate and NISRA data indicate potential for high and ongoing demand for this type of school</p>
<p><b>2.2</b></p>	<p>Not applicable to post-primary schools</p>		
<p><b>2.3</b> The minimum (not optimal) enrolment for newly established schools or existing schools should be 500 pupils for an 11-16 school, i.e. an annual average intake of 100 per year.</p>	<p>School records (including evidence on website and prospectus)</p> <p>ETI reports</p>	<p>Consistently fewer than 500 pupils enrolled year-on-year in Years 8-12 and/or annual average intake less than 100 per year</p>	<p>Consistently more than 500 pupils enrolled year-on-year in Years 8-12 and/or an annual average intake over 100 per year</p>
<p><b>2.4</b> The sixth form should be self-sufficient financially and have a minimum of 100 pupils.</p>	<p>Monthly financial reports</p> <p>Annual financial reports</p> <p>School records (including evidence on website and prospectus)</p>	<p>The sixth form not financially self-sufficient and/or has fewer than 100 pupils</p>	<p>The sixth form is financially self-sufficient and has at least 100 pupils</p>
<p><b>2.5</b> Key Stage 4 and sixth form enrolments should enable pupils to spend 80% or more of their time in their home school.</p>	<p>School records (including timetabling)</p>	<p>Key Stage 4 and sixth form pupils spending less than 80% of their time in their home school</p> <p>Weak application of Entitlement Framework in relation to subjects offered and uptake</p>	<p>Key Stage 4 and sixth form pupils spending 80% or more of their time in their home school</p> <p>Strong application of Entitlement Framework in relation to subjects offered and uptake</p>

## C) Sound Financial Position

Does your school:

- expect to sustain financial viability or will it have an ongoing budget deficit?
- have members of your Board of Governors who have undertaken training provided by EA on Financial Planning and Sustainable Schools Policy Criteria and Self-evaluation?

Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability	
		Weak	Strong
<b>3.1</b> The school's annual finances indicate that it can live within its delegated budget.	Monthly budget reports Annual Budgets (over a number of years) Three Year Financial Plan Comparative material – trends in similar schools managing their budgets	Historic patterns show that the school has struggled to live within its delegated budget  Current Monthly budget reports and Annual Budget indicate that the school requires a budget considerably greater than that which has been delegated to it	Historic patterns show that the school has lived within its delegated budget  Current Monthly budget reports and Annual Budget indicate that the school will continue to operate within its delegated budget
<b>3.2</b> The school's financial trends indicate that it will continue to be able to live within its annually delegated budget.	Monthly budget reports Annual Budgets (over a number of years) Three Year Financial Plan Comparative material – trends in schools managing their budgets	No monthly budget reports are in place or the reports indicate a pattern of overspend  There is no Annual Budget in place or the costs identified exceed the school's delegated budget	Monthly budget reports are in place which indicate prudence in financial management  An Annual Budget is in place and the school can reasonably be expected to operate within its delegated budget with capacity for coping with contingencies
<b>3.3</b> The school's three-year financial plans, based upon realistic assumptions, indicate that where there is a deficit this can be substantially reduced or recovered.	Monthly budget reports. Annual Budgets (over a number of years) Three Year Financial Plan Comparative material – trends in schools managing their budgets Average cost per learner against schools cost per learner	There is no 3-year Financial Plan in place – or the plan does not adequately address how any deficit can be substantially reduced or recovered	A 3-year Financial Plan is in place. The school has no deficit that needs to be reduced or recovered

## D) Strong Leadership and Management by Boards of Governors and Principals

Does your school have evidence of:

- strong leadership and effective management in the school?
- demonstrating how effective leadership and management affects morale and motivation, and contributes to consistent standards of attainment and provides direction and accountability?
- effective teaching to increase learning opportunities leading to high academic achievement?
- a lack of pupil disaffection and good attendance and behaviour with a positive impact on teaching and effective use of teaching resources, contributing to administrative efficiency, and high staff motivation?
- have members of your Board of Governors who have availed of training on Effective Governance provided by EA on Sustainable Schools Policy Criteria and Self-evaluation?

Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability	
		Weak	Strong
<b>4.1</b> Board of Governors' views on the school based on quantitative and qualitative evidence.	ETI reports  New evidence (e.g. anonymous online school survey or similar)  Governors are aware of and knowledgeable about initiatives such as Learning Leaders (DE, 2016) and the implications they may have for their school	No measures are in place to obtain Governors' views on the school  No items on Governors' meetings are concerned with the leadership and management of the school	Regular and consistent quantitative and qualitative measures in place to obtain Governors' views on the school. Evidence of action in response to these
<b>4.2</b> Composition of Board of Governors – skills and experience of Board members and number of vacancies.	Governor Reconstitution Application Forms  School records (including evidence on website and prospectus)  Record of Governor Training  Minutes of Board of Governor meetings	There are vacant seats on Board of Governors  Records show poor attendance record for Governors  Inadequate number of applications for Governor roles for the Board to be quorate/ compliant with designated composition  Board members do not participate in EA training events	There are no vacant seats on Board of Governors – and composition in line with requirements for the school type  Excellent record of attendance  Skills audit has been conducted with Board of Governors and no gaps have been identified which need to be addressed  Board members participate in EA and other relevant training events with implementation and sharing
<b>4.3</b> Management of staff attendance and absenteeism.	Staff attendance can be measured though monthly staff returns to the Managing Authority  Staff attendance is managed appropriately, with a recognition of staff health and wellbeing, in line with EA's Managing Attendance Toolkit, where appropriate  Evidence that relevant staff have taken the EA training on Supporting and Managing Staff Attendance  Evidence of use of internal and external support, where appropriate	Staff attendance is poor – absenteeism is high  Staff absenteeism is not managed appropriately and there is limited or no evidence that the steps taken are in line with advised procedures in relation to staff attendance  Relevant staff have not attended any training in relation to staff attendance  There is scant evidence that support, internal or external, has been sought where it may have been required	Staff attendance is excellent – absenteeism is minimal  Staff absenteeism, when it occurs, is managed appropriately and procedures are followed consistently and with care  Relevant staff have undertaken training in relation to staff attendance  There is strong evidence of the use of internal and external support, where required
<b>4.4</b> Levels and nature of staff turnover and unfilled staff vacancies.	Levels and nature of staff turnover and unfilled staff vacancies.	Excessively high or low levels of staff turnover  Vacant posts remaining unfilled for a protracted period (as measured by Managing Authority)	Staff turnover is at a healthy level to ensure both consistency and a refreshing of the staff team  There are no vacant posts or plans are in place to ensure that any vacant post is filled
<b>4.5</b> Teacher morale.	While hard to measure, teacher morale may be assessed in Inspection and/or staff feedback as part of the SDP process. A school may also draw on external tools/resources as part of this process.  Inspection Evidence  Staff Development opportunities  Appropriate developmental Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) opportunities made available to all staff, with a high rate of uptake	Teacher/staff morale is low (as assessed in Inspection and/or staff feedback as part of the SDP process)  Teachers have limited opportunities to contribute to the leadership of the school  Little evidence of appropriate TPL being offered to staff  Little evidence of TLP uptake by staff	Teacher/staff morale is very good (as assessed in Inspection and/or through staff feedback as part of the SDP process)  Teachers are actively encouraged and enabled to contribute to the leadership of the school  Appropriate developmental TPL opportunities are available to all staff with high levels of uptake, and their outcomes in terms of changed practice are evaluated

Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability	
		Weak	Strong
<b>4.6</b> Management of curricular and organisational demands on the Principal and staff.	<p>Evidence for ETI inspections</p> <p>School Development Plan (SDP)</p> <p>Audits of curriculum provision, staff skills and whole school responsibility</p> <p>Evidence of staff development for capacity building</p>	<p>ETI attribute leadership and management a low performance level</p> <p>Limited evidence of capacity building e.g. coaching and succession planning</p>	<p>ETI attribute leadership and management a high performance level</p> <p>Strong evidence of capacity building e.g. coaching and succession planning</p>
<b>4.7</b>	Not applicable to post-primary schools		
<b>4.8</b> There is a School Development Plan (SDP) in place and progress is being made to achieve the plan's aims and objectives.	<p>The School Development Plan (SDP) offers a focal point for the gathering of inspection evidence</p> <p>There is also a role for the Managing Authorities in monitoring SDPs</p> <p>The existence of the SDP should also facilitate self-assessment by a school</p> <p>Minutes from Board of Governor meetings</p> <p>Minutes from Subject Area/Department meetings</p>	<p>No School Development Plan (SDP) (or an incomplete or outdated SDP) in place</p> <p>Limited evidence that an existing SDP has an impact on the operation of the school and progress against aims and objectives not evident</p>	<p>School Development Plan (SDP) in place with clearly articulated aims and objectives</p> <p>Board of Governors regularly appraised of progress towards stated targets in SDP, which is minuted</p> <p>Evidence that teaching staff are aware of the SDP, have contributed to it and see how it affects their practice</p>
<b>4.9</b> Pupil behaviour, expulsions, suspensions and non-attendance as well as positive behaviours such as involvement in school management (e.g. buddying and mentoring schemes).	<p>A variety of statistical evidence is collected routinely to support this wide-ranging indicator</p> <p>School policies available and on school website</p>	<p>Little or limited statistical evidence</p> <p>Limited use of SIMS (School Information Management System) to record incidents</p> <p>Poor pupil behaviour – high proportion of suspensions</p> <p>Poor learner attendance records</p> <p>No (or tokenistic) role for learners in school management</p> <p>No evidence of positive behavioural schemes</p>	<p>A variety of statistical evidence is collected routinely to support this wide-ranging indicator</p> <p>SIMS (School Information Management System) is used effectively to record incidents, and all appropriate staff have access where required</p> <p>Learner attendance is monitored and support provided as required</p> <p>School Council (or similar) in place, actively supported by staff and contributing at an appropriate level to school management</p> <p>A range of peer support programmes in place with positive behavioural schemes such as mentoring or buddying, and are regularly monitored for effectiveness</p>



## E) Accessibility

Does your school have evidence of:

- reasonable home to school distance and travel time for pupils?
- suitable transport arrangements between local schools and Further Education Colleges/training organisations?

Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability	
		Weak	Strong
5.1 Home to school transport travel times of less than 45 minutes (i.e. 1.5 hours per day in total).	Setting of school admissions criteria in line with DE policy and guidance Pupil postcodes and travel patterns	Admissions criteria seldom discussed and reviewed. Limited alignment in admissions criteria with DE policy and guidance  Home to school transport travel times of more than 45 minutes for a considerable number of pupils	Admissions criteria regularly discussed and reviewed. Clear alignment with DE policy and guidance  Home to school transport travel times of less than 45 minutes for the majority of pupils
5.2	Not applicable to post-primary schools		
5.3 Existing co-operative arrangements with other schools and FE Colleges/ training organisations - max travel time 30 minutes for a single journey and total of 2 hours per week.	ETI reports  School records (including evidence on website and prospectus)  Records, agendas and minutes from ALC meetings	No (or poorly developed) links with other local schools and FE/training organisations (within 30 minutes travel time)	Evidence of strong collaborative arrangements with neighbouring primary and post-primary schools and FE/training organisations over many years  Enduring and effective programmes with at least one school of another management type (e.g. through Shared Education)
5.4 Capacity in nearest schools.	Records held by managing authorities/DE statistics and Area Planning	Other local schools in the area in the same sector are undersubscribed and/or have capacity for expansion	Other local schools in the area in the same sector and other sectors are at capacity and/or have no capacity for expansion

## F) Strong links with the community

Does your school have evidence of:

- strong links and relationships with parents/carers and the local community?
- parents/carers being actively involved in the school?
- local children attending the school?
- how the school actively contributes to the local community?

Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability	
		Weak	Strong
6.1 Degree and quality of parental involvement (schools will be asked to provide evidence on this).	Constitution/Terms of Reference and Minutes for Parents' Association  Board of Governors' Membership and Attendance records  Board of Governors' annual meeting with parents  Parental surveys  Records of parental feedback to ETI  Evaluation of SDP – highlighting the role played by Parent Governors  Proportion of parents who attend Parents' Evenings  Provision of outreach and skills training for parents/carers, where appropriate.  Inclusive means of communication with parents/carers	No Parents' Association No current parents on the school's Board of Governors School does not take sufficient account of the views of parents and carers to support the learners' wellbeing and development	Strong parents' association – which meets regularly and contributes to school community  Parent places on Board of Governors are filled with parents of current pupils and are 'refreshed' as pupils move into the next level of education  School engages with parents and carers to support the learners' wellbeing and development
6.2 Number of children in the vicinity attending (and not attending) the school.	Pupil distribution maps. Census data (NISRA)	Local children travel to attend post-primary schools in the same sector/management type further away	The school is the first school of preference for children living in the vicinity  The school is consistently oversubscribed
6.3 Contribution of the school to the community (schools will be asked to provide evidence on this).	School Development Plan (SDP) evaluation  Record in local media, regional papers etc  School records (including evidence on website and prospectus)	Poor relationships, engagement and communication between the school and the wider community  Opportunities not provided for learners to be active citizens and contribute to their local/global communities	Excellent relationships, engagement and communication between the school and the wider community  Learners are active citizens and contribute positively to their local/global communities  Named, specific community links included in SDP
6.4 Presence of other features of provision, e.g. specialist unit.	SDP evaluation  School records (including evidence on website and prospectus)	Limited presence of other provision e.g. specialist provision in line with need	Strong presence of other provision e.g. specialist provision in line with need
6.5 Multi-functional use of buildings outside formal education, for example, for sport, voluntary and community use.	SDP evaluation  DE sponsored programmes such as Extended Schools or Full Service Schools  School records (including evidence on website and prospectus)  Social media, local newspaper reports etc.	School is used as an educational institution 9:00 to 15:00 Monday-Friday and has no other function in the community  Limited after-school or Extended Schools provision	School is regularly used as a base by a number of community groups outside school hours  School offers a range of after-school and Extended Schools provision  School provides substantial additional extra-curricular programmes and activities aimed at tackling barriers to learning and raising levels of educational attainment/ progression for those pupils in the greatest need

## Part Two: Community Conversations

### What is a Community Conversation?

The Community Conversation approach is a way of reaching out across political, religious and social spheres to help people address an issue of common concern. By engaging in a Community Conversation, school Governors, parents/carers and other stakeholders can come together to identify, discuss and generate potential solutions for sustainable local school provision which can then be further explored with the managing authorities and other relevant sectoral bodies.

### Why have a Community Conversation?

There are increasing pressures on the accountable use of public resources. Many areas have multiple post-primary schools in close proximity, often serving different communities and struggling to adequately meet DE's sustainability criteria (Roulston & Cook, 2021; Roulston & Cook, 2024).

The Department of Education and organisations involved in supporting and managing the different school types in Northern Ireland are collectively focused on ensuring high-quality education through the provision of a network of viable and sustainable schools. Decisions on school viability are based on collected evidence leading to a proposal for change, with the final decision taken by the Minister for Education.

Engaging in Community Conversations enables parents and other stakeholders to play a meaningful part in seeking to identify and develop effective proposals to meet local educational needs. Community Conversations are intended to support school communities to be proactive rather than reactive, and to commence a process of engagement before the statutory authorities/management bodies potentially identify or have identified the school(s)/area in an Area Planning action/operational plan.<sup>15</sup>

Community Conversations provide an opportunity for the community to have their say and to articulate potentially a range of voices, in the hope that a consensus can be reached, or at least that the most widely articulated viewpoint with most support from parents and prospective parents (and, potentially, governors and staff in schools) can be discerned. In any Community Conversation it is unlikely that there would be no dissenting voices, and therefore it is important they are undertaken in a sensitive manner and with the rigour and respect they deserve.

It is also important to emphasise to potential participants that holding a Community Conversation does not guarantee any particular outcomes. The Community Conversation is a methodology to give the community a voice and the results may become part of the evidential basis of presenting a case for change. While Community Conversations may sit outside of any formal Area Planning process, the evidence and learning from a Community Conversation may help inform decision-making regarding the provision of schools within an area.

### How to carry out a Community Conversation?

#### Principles

The key principles of a Community Conversation include:

- **Transparent process.**
- **Non-partisan leadership and co-ordination of the process.**
- **Some structure to limit or prevent unproductive conversation.**
- **Open-framed questions to encourage and guide a fluid conversation.**
- **Acknowledgement of, and respect for, local knowledge and perspectives.**
- **Active listening.**
- **Mutual recognition and respectful understanding of differing viewpoints.**
- **Shared discussion, reflection and negotiation rather than driven by individuals.**
- **Guided encouragement towards the development of shared group understanding.**
- **Participant awareness of its purpose so that potential solutions are realistically framed within the context and resources of the community.**
- **Solution-focused and action-oriented discussion.**
- **An optimistic, positive and forward-looking focus on possibilities and potential solutions.**
- **Emerging rather than imposed ideas and actions.**
- **Identification of potential solutions that align with a community's preferences, priorities and resources.**

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.eani.org.uk/school-management/area-planning>

## Who to involve?

A Community Conversation involves three key actors:

- **Independent Facilitator**

- Creates a constructive space for meaningful dialogue
- Promotes discussion and ensures all participants have an opportunity to participate
- Encourages critical thinking, open discussion and respect for all viewpoints
- Guides the direction and flow of the conversation and maintains group focus
- NB: If an external host is not engaged it is beneficial to have a co-hosting arrangement involving representatives from all schools involved

- **Note-taker**

- Liaises with the facilitator in advance of the conversation to agree roles and responsibilities
- Ensures key points from the conversation are recorded accurately
- Checks any points of clarity with participants

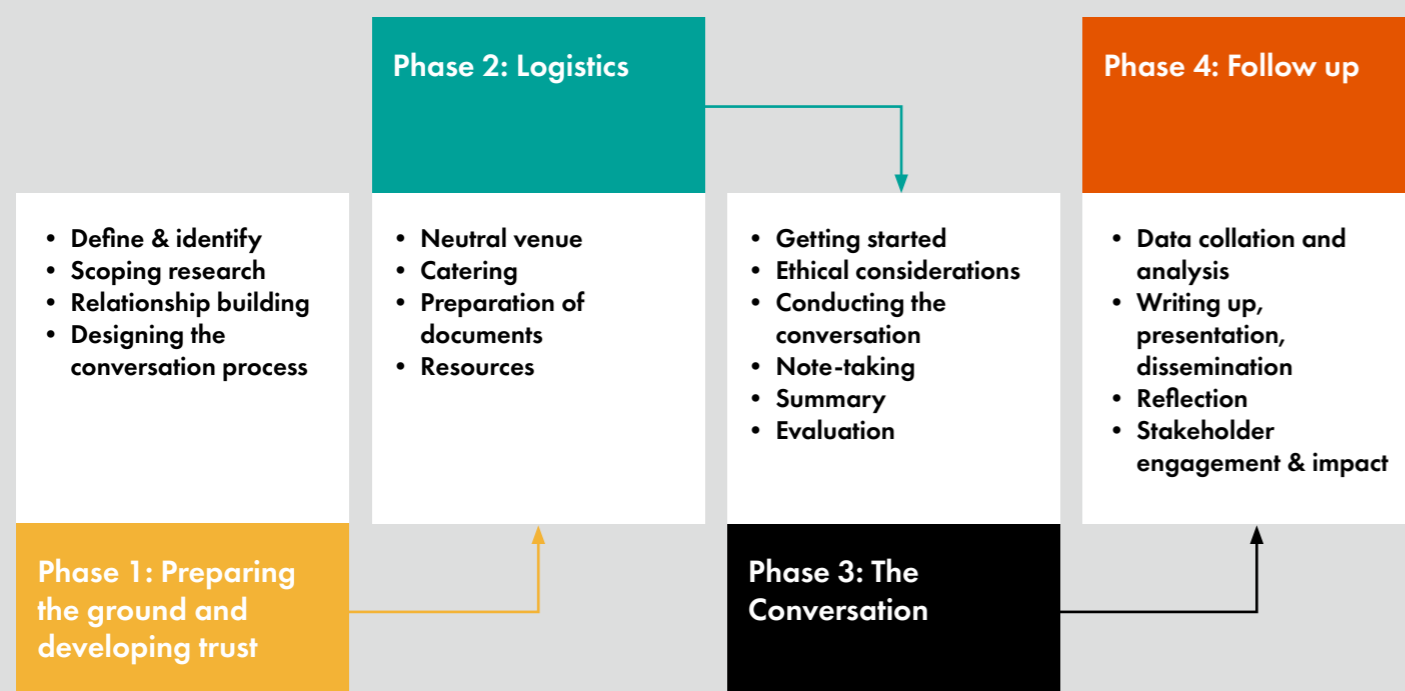
- **Participants**

- Provide grassroots insight into local community issues
- Give voice to the potential outcome and impact of government/policy decision-making
- Offer suggestions and solutions that are meaningful and achievable in a local context

## Process

There are four distinct phases in the setting up and running of a Community Conversation (Figure 1) and each phase is comprised of a series of sequential steps.

Figure 1:  
Phases involved in a Community Conversation



## Phase 1: Preparing the ground and developing trust

### Step 1: Define the community and identify the issue and objectives

Agree the geographic area (and the schools that could be affected in any change process), identify the community members that you want to engage with (Principals and Governors, teachers, parents/carers of pupils at local schools, community workers, local politicians, local business owners), and the core issue (e.g. what are the sustainability challenges of schools in the area now or in the future?).

### Step 2: Background scoping and research

Consider and review the self-evaluation evidence which should inform the Community Conversation. Ensure in-depth demographic knowledge of the area – this could include, for example, census data, location and demographic maps, deprivation measures (NISRA), DE data (including enrolment figures, breakdown by FSME, SEN, Religion) and relevant ETI reports.

### Step 3: Relationship building

Meet with Principals and Governors, send letters/emails to all parents. Promote the Conversation in local newspapers, with notices in local shops and other community amenities. Circulate information through the local primary and post-primary schools and community Facebook pages and other social media.

### Step 4: Create and design multiple methods for engagement

By providing multiple opportunities for community engagement, you can ensure everyone who wishes to participate has an opportunity to do so. Your methods of engagement could include individual and group meetings with Principals and Governors, multiple daytime face-to-face conversations with groups of parents, an open (evening) meeting in a local hotel or other neutral venue(s), an online conversation/meeting and an online response form.

## Phase 2: Logistics

### Step 5: Identify and book a neutral venue/location

It is best to use neutral or shared community spaces – some people may not feel safe discussing sensitive issues in a location associated predominantly with one side of the community.

### Step 6: Organise access and catering

If funding is available, it is always better to be hospitable. Provide Community Conversation participants with refreshments.

### Step 7: Preparation

You need to ensure that you have copies of relevant documents for each event. This could include an agenda or list of questions and prompts information sheets about the event, signing-in sheets to keep a record of attendance. Templates for these have been included in the appendices to this Toolkit.

### Step 8: Resources

You will need to have pens and paper, a laptop/projector for larger meetings and possibly a digital recording device to help with writing-up. Options for anonymous input, for example, via an online survey or online collaborative whiteboard platform can also be explored.

## Phase 3: The Conversation

### Step 9: Getting started

The type of Conversation and who is present will determine the introductions. In the case of a small group facilitated Conversation, it is advisable to start with introductions from the facilitators and note-takers, and there should also be an opportunity for the participants to introduce themselves. In the case of larger events, where there are multiple tables of attendees, it may be more appropriate for participants to introduce themselves to others at their table and any stakeholders who are present should also introduce themselves and outline their interest in the project. The facilitators should also provide background information and the context and rationale for the Community Conversation.

### Step 10: Ethical considerations

Ensure participants understand the purpose of the Community Conversation and that they are participating in a voluntary capacity and have the opportunity to ask any questions they might have about the process. It is also important to reassure all participants that no individual will be identified in any resulting report of the Community Conversation and that the aim is to understand the perspectives of participants.

### Step 11: Conducting the conversation

The starting point for the Community Conversation is a recognition that the current pattern of provision is not sustainable or may not be in the future. Working through a series of questions and prompts will enable a Conversation that encourages discussion around the key issue of school places, possible solutions and, potentially, a new vision for education in the area.

Facilitated Conversations with parents enable each parent to contribute their views to the discussion. For a large number of participants, an open event can take the form of a 'world café' conversation, with each table working through a series of questions when prompted by the host and recording the responses from the table in writing. Demographic data on all participants can be collected through a survey. An online response form could be opened in parallel to the face-to-face meetings to enable those who were to attend to provide their views or, for those who had attended, to add further comment. A series of Community Conversation events may be needed to ensure all those who wish to participate have an opportunity to do so (in-person or online).

### Step 12: Note-taking

There should be a designated note-taker at all facilitated conversations with parents and at any open event.

### Step 13: Summary

Report back to participants the main points from the Conversation and checking that their views have been accurately reflected. Thank everyone for taking the time to contribute their views. Provide details of the online response form if participants have something further to add or a view they did not wish to articulate during the Conversation. It is vital that expectations are managed in terms of how the Conversation might ultimately inform the statutory consultation process.

### Step 14: Evaluation

Feedback from participants on their experience of the Community Conversation can be very useful in ensuring that subsequent conversations run smoothly.

## Phase 4: Follow up

### Step 15: Data collation and analysis

Collate and analyse material gathered through the different Community Conversation events and quantitative data obtained from the online response form.

### Step 16: Writing up, presentation and dissemination

Write up a final report, present the report to any funders and engage in dissemination events to share the report findings with key stakeholders – including the school managing authorities.

### Step 17: Reflection

Individual and group reflections to identify what worked particularly well and any adjustments for future Community Conversations.

### Step 18: Stakeholder engagement and impact

Follow up with key stakeholders to identify any implications of the Community Conversation and possible longer-term impacts in terms of shaping and informing policy implementation, statutory consultation and decision-making regarding school provision in the area.

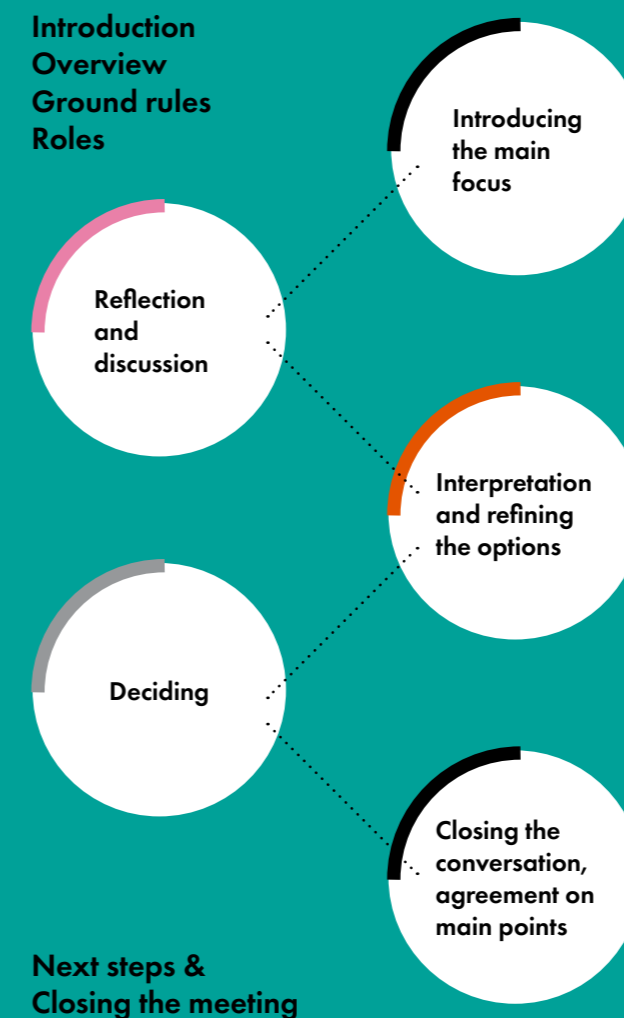
Facilitating a Community Conversation event is a sequential process (Figure 2) that conforms to an agreed and manageable timescale. Within this process, the Conversation itself can be broken down further into a series of discrete steps that enable open, constructive and respectful dialogue. Whilst timelines are not definitive, the suggested sequence is representative of a commonly used approach.

1. Introduction (5 minutes)
2. Overview (5 minutes)
3. Ground rules (5 minutes)
4. Identify roles: facilitator, note-taker, participants (5 minutes)
5. Community Conversation (60-75 minutes)
  - I. **introducing and informing:** providing the participants with information (including evidential data), explaining the context (5 minutes)
  - II. **reflecting:** letting the participants reflect on the information and context and formulate their views (15 minutes)
  - III. **interpreting:** enabling participants to process and discuss different views and options to begin to consider the best way forward (20-25 minutes)
  - IV. **deciding:** participants should move on to articulating what they see as the best way forward, identify possible solutions, clarify priorities, compromises and non-negotiables, identify next steps (20-25 minutes)
  - V. **closing** the Conversation (5 minutes)
6. Next steps (eg online survey) (10 minutes)
7. Close (5 minutes)



Figure 2:

## The Community Conversation Process



## A Suggested Community Conversation Schedule

### Introduction:

- The facilitators introduce themselves and thank the parents/participants present for making time to assist.
- Background information relating to current school provision and enrolment trends in the area should be provided to give context to the conversations.
- The participants should be reminded of the purpose and nature of the Conversation (and this may also involve an outline of the different models of school provision across Northern Ireland and how they can be achieved):
  - We are asking you to explore together the sustainability issues facing school communities in this area [identify scope of area and raise potential implications for wider, neighbouring provision] and to determine, discuss and consider potential longer-term solutions that would provide sustainable, quality school provision on an area-basis.
  - Each Conversation will typically last 60-90 minutes.

If you would like to read more about the Community Conversation approach the reports below are useful resources to consult -

## Possible Questions/Prompts for Community Conversation Participants<sup>16</sup>

These are indicative questions and prompts and the ones used in a specific Community Conversation will reflect the broad context and circumstances of the particular area.

1. How many here are parents/carers of children currently at post-primary school or who are due to go to post-primary school? [Go round participants individually – allowing each participant to speak]
2. What matters to you about post-primary education in this area?
3. Do you think that the current arrangements for post-primary education in this area provide pupils with access to a wide range of educational opportunities?
  - a. In what way do they allow pupils to have good learning experiences and to achieve high standards?
4. Do you think that the current arrangements for post-primary education in this area ensure that human, financial and material resources are used effectively and efficiently?
  - a. Why?
  - b. Why not?
5. Do you think that the current arrangements for post-primary education in this area support those pupils with Special Educational Needs and other barriers to learning?
  - a. Why?
  - b. Why not?
6. Do you think that the current arrangements for post-primary education in this area support the pastoral care arrangements for pupils?
  - a. Why?
  - b. Why not?
7. Do the current arrangements for post-primary education in this area incur additional costs?
  - a. Are these justified by the benefits?
8. Do you think that this area has an 'over provision' or 'under provision' of post-primary education?
  - a. If so, what solutions do you think might be feasible and have the confidence and support of Governors and parents?
9. What are your thoughts about the current level of sharing between post-primary schools in this area and the wider area?
  - a. Does this involve same-sector and cross-sector sharing and collaboration?
10. Considering education provision on an area basis, rather than an individual school perspective, is there a model of school provision for this area that would be more sustainable and provide a better quality of education for young people?
11. Is there anything else that anyone would like to add?

**Bates & O'Connor (2018) A Community Conversation Toolkit.**

[https://www.ulster.ac.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/1201174/Bates-OConnor-Community-ConversationToolkit-2018.pdf](https://www.ulster.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/1201174/Bates-OConnor-Community-ConversationToolkit-2018.pdf)

**Bates & O'Connor (2021) Community Conversations: deliberative democracy, education provision and divided societies. *SN Social Sciences*, 1(45).**

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-020-00048-8>



<sup>16</sup>Adapted from DE (2009) Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools p.39 and The Bain Report (2006)



**“Sustainability issues may be addressed through increased co-operation and working with other schools particularly where the main issue is affecting a small school with declining rolls.”**

(Sustainable Schools Policy, 2009; p. 38-39).

Collaboration and sharing between schools across a range of curricular and other issues may help sustain provision in an area and provide an enhanced learning experience without a diminution of a school’s ethos. The Bain Report (2006) suggested that schools should consider how collaboration and sharing arrangements could:

- Help to maintain local provision.
- Provide the pupils with access to a wider range of educational opportunity.
- Allow the pupils to have good learning experiences and to achieve high standards.
- Enable human and material resources to be used more effectively and efficiently.
- Support those pupils with SEN and other barriers to learning.
- Support the pastoral care arrangements for pupils.
- Reduce capital costs, recurrent costs or both.
- Entail additional costs which are justified by the benefits.
- Address the issue of over provision.
- Result in feasible solutions in which the benefits outweigh the costs, in terms of, for example, timetabling and travel.
- Involve significant, purposeful and regular engagement and interaction in learning by pupils, and teachers, from the partnership schools.
- Involve both intra-sector and cross-sector sharing and collaboration.
- Have the confidence and support of Governors and parents.

The Strategic Area Plan (SAP) 2022-27, collectively developed by education sector area planning partners, draws particular attention to the importance of embedding partnership working between schools and reflects the priorities of the then Minister for Education’s Statement on Setting the Priorities for the Next Regional Area Plan (9 August 2021). The Plan emphasises that the option of ‘discontinuance’ will only be considered after all Area Plan collaborative models have been explored and it has been determined that none of these support sustainable educational provision in an area. A key theme within the Strategic Area Plan is to “Promote cooperation, collaboration and sharing across all Sectors” (2022, p. 17) and within this to “encourage and facilitate the development of sustainable provision” in the Integrated sector, the Irish Medium sector and in Shared Education (2022, p. 20).

Evidence that change to an Integrated school type would provide greater sustainability alongside strong community preference for this option involves a formal Transformation process. Transformation is a legal process that allows a school of any management type to transform to an Integrated school. Any school can transform to become Integrated, with the exception of Special Schools, hospital schools and those already approved for closure (subject to parental support and a decision by the Minister or Permanent Secretary if no minister).

Amalgamation between two or more post-primary schools of the same school type or denomination is currently the predominant approach where a multi-school amalgamation is intended, with the resulting school being a Voluntary Grammar, Controlled, Catholic Maintained or Integrated school. There have been no amalgamations of different school types until recently, with a current example in the Coleraine area involving the amalgamation of two Controlled schools and a Grant Maintained Integrated school to form a new Controlled Integrated School.

The Strategic Area Plan 2022-27 identifies a number of additional possible alternative options for schools for schools facing sustainability challenges.<sup>17</sup> These involve some degree of cross-community and cross-sectoral coming together, for example through a federation or jointly managed school (although legislation, which may be needed, is not yet in place for either of these options).

- Partnership – further development of the existing educational relationships developed through Shared Education (and other initiatives) to improve sustainability.
- Collaboration – sustainability may be assisted by collaboration between schools to expand the curriculum offered to pupils.
- Federation – schools of the same or different management types work in partnership, exchanging teachers, pupils or both, and potentially with a shared Principal and Board of Governors. Schools may share specialist facilities and/or administrative staff; this could also involve two or more schools combining to form a single school with one Principal and one Board of Governors but operating on two or more sites. However, as the Strategic Area Plan notes, no legislation currently exists for creating Federations in post-primary.<sup>18</sup>
- Jointly Managed Church Schools – to a “grant-aided school, providing shared education with a Christian ethos, with Trustee representation agreed by the Transferor churches and the Catholic Church and managed by a Board of Governors with balanced representation from both the main communities” (DE Circular 2015/15). There are no existing examples in Northern Ireland where this option has been adopted.

## Part Three: Processes and Pathways

<sup>17</sup> See Annex B (p. 27-28) [https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Strategic%20Area%20Plan%202022-27%20-%20Planning%20for%20Sustainable%20Provision\\_0.pdf](https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Strategic%20Area%20Plan%202022-27%20-%20Planning%20for%20Sustainable%20Provision_0.pdf)  
<sup>18</sup> p. 16 [https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Strategic%20Area%20Plan%202022-27%20-%20Planning%20for%20Sustainable%20Provision\\_0.pdf](https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Strategic%20Area%20Plan%202022-27%20-%20Planning%20for%20Sustainable%20Provision_0.pdf)

Additionally, the Independent Review of Education, refers to the need for stronger provision of and access to Integrated schools or 'Jointly Managed Community Schools' and the panel recommends that

**“as soon as reasonably practicable, Integrated schooling or jointly managed community schools should be an option for all that wish it”**

(Volume 2, p. 247).

School closure/discontinuance will be considered by the managing authorities if other models have been explored and considered unable to offer sustainable provision.

**“While this will be a loss to the individual school and local area, it should be seen as positive as an area solution as it will strengthen the sustainability of other local schools”**

(Strategic Area Plan 2022-27, p. 33).

It is vital that school communities whose long-term sustainability may be uncertain consider alternative potential pathways as early as possible. The Community Conversation process should provide evidence of the education provision that would be supported by parents and the wider community within an area. Any new option or pathway will have wide ranging implications for the school and the community within which it is located, as well as for other schools located in the wider area.

The Final Report of the Independent Review of Education (IRE) in Northern Ireland recognises and recommends that:

**“The principle of support for parental choice should be maintained but should be subject to an imperative that increasingly all learners should learn together”**

(Volume 2, p. 264)

and that the number of integrated schools or jointly managed schools should be increased so that

**“all families should have such options within a realistic travelling distance as soon as possible.”**

(Volume 2, p. 264).

If current school provision is not meeting the sustainability criteria and indicators (assessed using Part 1 of the Toolkit), then a Community Conversation (as set out in Part 2 of the Toolkit) provides the opportunity for community wide engagement with parents about what model of sustainable school provision for the area would be most appropriate. This next section, Part 3 of the Toolkit, sets out the pathways and processes that schools may need to consider where an alternative type of school provision is under consideration.

## What are Development Proposals?

**“Development Proposals are the statutory means by which proposed changes of significance to education provision can be effected. The changes proposed must align with the current Area Plan for education provision and Operational Plan.”**

(DE website)<sup>19</sup>

A Development Proposal (DP) is required under Article 14 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 before any significant change can be made to a school. A DP is required for new schools wishing to be recognised for grant-aid, school closures, amalgamations of schools, significant changes to the character or size of a school and changes which would have a significant impact on another grant-aided school. More detail on the DP process is provided by DE's Development Proposal Guidance - October 2024.<sup>20</sup>

Examples of previous and current Development Proposals can also be viewed on the DE website.

The final decision following the submission of one or more related Development Proposals for school provision in an area rest with the Minister for Education who will base their judgement on the information available to them.

## Models of school provision and processes involved

### Transformation

Integrated education is defined in the Integrated Education Act (2022) as the education together, in an Integrated school, of:

- A. those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons;
- B. those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not; and
- C. those of different abilities.

In addition, the Act states than an Integrated school:

**“Intentionally supports, protects and advances an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding between those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, between those of different socio-economic backgrounds and between those of different abilities, and has acquired grant-maintained integrated status, or controlled integrated status under the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989.”<sup>21</sup>**

With the exception of special schools and hospital schools, schools of any management type can transform to Integrated status. Transformation is a legal process whereby a school that is already in existence changes its status to become Integrated. Schools can transform to become either Controlled Integrated (CI) or Grant Maintained Integrated (GMI). The path for each of these two types of school is similar but each has a different legal status and, accordingly, there are different implications for the role and composition of the school's Board of Governors.

A legal process of Transformation<sup>22</sup> is initiated either by parents or by the Board of Governors and leads to a ballot of parents to determine if there is support for this model. Support for this process is provided by the Integrated Education Fund, the Education Authority and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, and parents can trigger a postal ballot when parents of more than 20% of pupils in the school have registered their support for an Integrated school through the online Integrate My School portal<sup>23</sup> or by submitting letter/petition directly to the school. For a parent ballot to be successful, at least 50% of parents must vote and if 51% or more of those who have voted, are in favour of Transformation, then a Development Proposal for Transformation must be submitted to the Education Authority for the school transform to a Controlled Integrated school or Grant Maintained Integrated school.

Under current legislation, in situations where an Integrated school is the intended model for two or more schools that are amalgamating, one school will submit a Development Proposal (DP) to the Education Authority to Transform to become an Integrated school (Controlled or Grant Maintained), with the other school(s) submitting DPs to close.

### Amalgamation

An amalgamation is where two or more schools come together to form a new school. Development Proposals setting out the effective amalgamation of the schools will normally involve the discontinuance of the existing schools and the establishment of a new school. Typically, amalgamations have been used as a consolidation of provision within a particular school sector of an area but this does not need to be the case and there are emerging examples of cross-sector amalgamations. Amalgamation may also be a route to both Integrated or Jointly Managed provision (although the latter requires legislation to first be in place).

Amalgamation is fully detailed in DE Circular 2018/15 Guidance on Implementation of Approved Development Proposals for School Amalgamations<sup>24</sup> – this circular also provides templates, plans and pro-forma to aid the process. Managing authority/ies will work closely with the schools to prepare the Development Proposals and sectoral support bodies for the resulting school type may also have an involvement.

<sup>19</sup><https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/development-proposals>

<sup>20</sup>[www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/DP%20Guidance%20October%202024.pdf](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/DP%20Guidance%20October%202024.pdf)

<sup>21</sup>Integrated Education Act 2022, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2022/15/section/1>

<sup>22</sup><https://www.ief.org.uk/integrated-education/how-to-access-an-integrated-education/transformation/>

<sup>23</sup><https://www.ief.org.uk/integrate-my-school/>

<sup>24</sup><https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/circular-201815-guidance-implementation-approved-development-proposals-school-amalgamations>

## Jointly Managed Church School

A jointly managed church school is a grant-aided school where representatives of the Transferor churches and the Catholic Church work together and have a joint role in the management of the school. A 'jointly managed church school' is not a particular school management type set out in legislation but reflects the practical operation and ethos of these schools.

The Department of Education provides guidance for schools considering this model in Circular 2015/15.<sup>25</sup>

This Circular provides the following definition:

***“A jointly managed church school is a grant-aided school, providing shared education with a Christian ethos, with Trustee representation agreed by the Transferor churches and the Catholic Church and managed by a Board of Governors with balanced representation from both the main communities here.”*** (2015, p. 6)

The Circular also states – ***“A jointly managed church school may be and will most likely be established as a result of the amalgamation of former controlled and Catholic maintained schools. However, this does not preclude the establishment of an entirely new school of this type where no provision currently exists.”*** (p. 6)

## Jointly Managed Community School

The Independent Review of Education includes the recommendation for this new type of school, and although it is not currently clear if there will be legislation to enable this new type of school, this may change in the future. If this recommendation of the IRE were to be accepted, it would allow Jointly Managed Community Schools to be established. While detail of the establishment, structure and operation of such schools is still speculative, the Independent Review anticipated that ***“these schools would most likely be formed from the amalgamation of a former controlled and Catholic maintained school with all relevant interests being represented on the BoG... the management type of the school would be determined by the Board with the possibility of it being classified as Controlled or Maintained (Other Maintained)”*** (Volume 2, pp. 275-276).

Whilst 'most likely' to be formed in this way, the IRE seems to accept that Jointly Managed Community Schools could be formulated in other ways, so it may be that broader models of provision are explored, should the recommendation be accepted.

## Federation

A federation is where one school combines leadership and governance arrangements with one or more other schools where the schools agree to share a Principal and/or single Board of Governors for the schools involved. There are emergent instances within the primary sector of both 'hard' and 'soft' federations but no evidence yet of formal structures in place at post-primary and new legislation may be needed for cross-sectoral federations at post-primary.

## School closure

Where a school is not able to meet the criteria set out in the Sustainable School Policy, the managing authority may propose that the school should be discontinued with the final decision taken by the Minister for Education (or Permanent Secretary if there is no Minister in place). This may be proposed alongside an increase in enrolment of a neighbouring school where this is the most sustainable model for future provision in the area. It is important that plans are made for the accommodation of existing pupils in other nearby schools.

***These three parts of the Toolkit may be worked through individually and / or sequentially depending on the specific circumstances.***

***Additional sources of useful information follow.***

<sup>25</sup><https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/circular-201515-jointly-managed-schools>



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## A Self Evaluation Resource for Boards of Governors

### Criterion A: Quality Educational Experience

Indicator	Evidence
1.1 Attainment/progression levels of pupils, GCSE Results.	
1.2 Not applicable to post-primary schools.	
1.3 Not applicable to post-primary schools.	
1.4 The ability of the school to cater for children with Special Educational Needs.	
1.5 The ability to be able to provide suitable access to the entitlement framework including, where appropriate, linkages with other schools, the FE sector or other providers.	
1.6 The standards and the quality of learning and teaching at the school.	
1.7 The range of curricular and extra-curricular activities available for children including career guidance, physical education, music, art, drama and science.	
1.8 The quality of the physical environment for learning and teaching i.e. the condition, energy and water efficiency and suitability of the buildings.	
1.9 The quality of, and arrangements for, pastoral care including the active promotion of the principles of social justice in all areas of the formal and informal curriculum.	

### Criterion B: Stable Enrolment Trends

Indicator	Evidence
2.1 The enrolment trends in the school in the past three years and projected demand in the area.	
2.2 Not applicable to post-primary schools.	
2.3 The minimum (not optimal) enrolment for newly established schools or existing schools should be 500 pupils for an 11-16 school, i.e. an annual average intake of 100 per year.	
2.4 The sixth form should be self-sufficient financially and have a minimum of 100 pupils.	
2.5 Key Stage 4 and sixth form enrolments should enable pupils to spend 80% or more of their time in their home school.	

### Criterion C: Sound Financial Position

Indicator	Evidence
3.1 The school's annual finances indicate that it can live within its delegated budget.	
3.2 The school's financial trends indicate that it will continue to be able to live within its annually delegated budget.	
3.3 The school's three-year financial plans, based upon realistic assumptions, indicate that where there is a deficit this can be substantially reduced or recovered.	

## Criterion D: Strong Leadership and Management

Indicator	Evidence
4.1 Governors' views on the school based on quantitative and qualitative evidence.	
4.2 Composition of Board of Governors – skills and experience of Board members and number of vacancies.	
4.3 Management of staff attendance and absenteeism.	
4.4 Levels and nature of staff turnover and unfilled staff vacancies.	
4.5 Teacher morale.	
4.6 Management of curricular and organisational demands on the Principal and staff.	
4.7 Not applicable to post-primary schools.	
4.8 There is a school development plan (SDP) in place and progress is being made to achieve the plan's aims and objectives.	
4.9 Pupil behaviour, expulsions, suspensions and non-attendance as well as positive behaviours such as involvement in school management (e.g. buddying and mentoring schemes).	

## Criterion E: Accessibility

Indicator	Evidence
5.1 Home to school transport travel times of less than 45 minutes (i.e. 1.5 hours per day in total).	
5.2 Not applicable to post-primary schools.	
5.3 Existing co-operative arrangements with other schools and FE Colleges/ training organisations - max travel time 30 minutes for a single journey and total of 2 hours per week.	
5.4 Capacity in nearest schools.	

## Criterion F: Strong Community Links

Indicator	Evidence
6.1 Degree and quality of parental involvement (schools will be asked to provide evidence on this).	
6.2 Number of children in the vicinity attending (and not attending) the school. <sup>26</sup>	
6.3 Contribution of the school to the community (schools will be asked to provide evidence on this).	
6.4 Presence of other features of provision, e.g. specialist unit.	
6.5 Multi-functional use of buildings outside formal education, for example, for sport, voluntary and community use.	

<sup>26</sup>An allowance may be made for pupils attending Irish Medium or Integrated schools as these are more geographically dispersed.



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## Feedback on the Toolkit

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We welcome feedback on this Toolkit and would particularly like to hear how it is being used. To provide feedback please email Dr Jessica Bates (j.bates@ulster.ac.uk) or Dr Clare McAuley (c.mcauley@ulster.ac.uk).





Building a bridge between  
community and policy

# Future Schools Toolkit



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