Written Evidence submitted by the Education Authority for the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee’s inquiry into Devolution and democracy in Northern Ireland – dealing with the deficit (DDD0036)

Executive Summary

- EA was created on 01 April 2015 as the single regional authority responsible for funding schools and providing education and operational support services such as transport, catering, cleaning and providing professional support and development for teachers.
- EA is also the planning authority for schools.
- EA replaced the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs) in Northern Ireland.
- With an annual budget of around £1.8bn and 37,000 staff, it is one of the largest organisations in Northern Ireland.
- Since its creation, EA has reduced the number of administration staff by over 20%, reducing running costs by over £30m per year.
- The budget for the education sector has reduced in real terms by about £200m since 2010/11.
- The system has become unsustainable with education facing a projected shortfall of around £134m in 2018/19.
- Schools are under severe financial pressure with around 80% indicating that they will not be able to live within their budget allocations for 2017/18.
- School’s financial deficits are increasing as a result and the cost must be met from within the EA centre budget.
- The financial unsustainability is creating an environment in many schools where it is becoming more difficult to meet the educational needs of children.
- The education system in Northern Ireland needs transformation, driven by improving educational experiences and outcomes for all young people and preparing them for life and work in the future.
- The supporting education structures, systems, processes and people must be reviewed and transformed into a cost effective model that supports the best possible education for young people.
- Business continuity and service delivery must be maintained in the interim.
- Investment is needed.
- EA has begun the conversation and engagement with key stakeholders.
- Political support is essential.

Background to EA
1. EA was established on 01 April 2015 as a regional organisation with responsibility for delivering education and support services for the whole of Northern Ireland. Prior to April 2015, these services were delivered by five Education and Library Boards (ELBs) each of which served a defined geographic area. EA is one of the largest organisations in Northern Ireland with around 37,000 staff supporting education through a range of teaching, education support and management and administration roles. EA has an annual budget of around £1.8bn.

2. EA has been engaged in a process of reorganisation focused on bringing together the staff, structures and functions of the five ELBs. A key goal was to ensure that business continuity and service delivery were maintained during reorganisation and that the education of children and young people continued uninterrupted.

3. This work has been taking place against a backdrop of severe financial pressures and other challenges as the education sector budget has been reducing since 2010/11. 750 staff were released through the voluntary severance programme delivering annual cost savings in excess of £30. In addition, demand for statutory services such as support for children with special educational needs continues to grow.


Financial Context in Education

5. The financial pressures in the Northern Ireland education sector far outweigh the budget available. It has been acknowledged in the Department of Finance’s Budget Briefing document published in December 2017 that continuing with the same pattern of spend as in previous years is simply unsustainable.

6. Education has a direct impact on the economy and the health and wellbeing of communities. It is vital that Northern Ireland’s education system is fit for purpose, delivers what young people need to prepare them for the future and is properly resourced.

7. Whilst great efforts have been made in recent years to protect front line service delivery, there has been a real terms reduction in the spending power in education of over £200m (20%) since 2010/11. Coupled with continued growth in demand for statutory services such as special education, this has created an unsustainable financial context for education.
8. Schools are now under significant pressure. In 2017-18 just over 20% of schools are indicating that they can live within their budget allocations. It is estimated that around 400 schools will have accumulated a collective deficit in the region of £50m by the end of this year. The cost of these deficits must be covered from EA’s centre budget. This has a direct impact on the funding available for other services which support schools, children and young people such as special education, school meals and transport.

9. EA welcomes recent announcements of additional funding for education. However, it is important to continue to highlight the increasing financial challenges facing the education sector and the growing demand for services.

10. EA’s core responsibility is to ensure the best possible education for the young people of Northern Ireland and to prepare them for life and work in the future.

11. It is clear that the current model of education delivery is financially unsustainable. A significant number of schools are below the DE threshold for sustainability. It is the view of EA that the current structures do not deliver the best possible model of education with many schools unable to provide the broad curricular and extracurricular experiences that young people deserve.

Transformation for the Future

12. Education in Northern Ireland has many strengths. For example Northern Ireland students continue to achieve a high level of success each year. In addition, Northern Ireland primary schools were recently ranked sixth in the world in an international literacy study.

13. However there is a significant gap between the highest and lowest achievers. The system does not suit the needs of all learners. It is clear that reform is required to develop a system that delivers better outcomes for all our young people and this must supported by a model that is more cost effective and financially sustainable.

14. Fundamental transformation of the education system is essential to improve the life chances of young people and ensure the future success of Northern Ireland. Any reform programme will take time and money. Significant investment is needed to ensure that vital services continue to be delivered and education continues uninterrupted as reform is implemented.

15. EA has begun engaging with key stakeholders and has begun to shape a proposed transformation programme that focuses on:
• Improving outcomes for all children and young people;
• Targeting support for the most vulnerable and those at risk;
• Building a new relationship with schools which develops a self-sustaining school system, focused on continuous improvement;
• Improving leadership and management in the education system;
• Working in partnership with stakeholders;
• Reshaping the pattern of school provision – getting the right schools in the right places of the right type;
• Building community and parental involvement and support for education; and
• Achieving greater efficiencies.

16. Transformation of this scale will require the engagement of a broad range of stakeholders and will require strong leadership and support from within the education sector, local communities, interest groups and elected representatives.

17. EA has begun the debate with leaders and key stakeholders in education. Transformation of education is of the greatest public interest and has an impact on the life of every Northern Ireland citizen.

18. Political leadership locally and support for much needed reform in education will have a direct impact on the success of the transformation programme.

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