

Budgetary Outlook 2018-20
Room S1
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
Bangor
BT19 7NA

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Briefing on Northern Ireland Budgetary Outlook 2018-20

The Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) was set up in September 2016 to represent and support the controlled sector in Northern Ireland.

The controlled sector is:

- Large - the largest education sector in Northern Ireland, accounting for 48% of all schools and catering for over 140,600 children.
- Diverse – providing education across all school types – nursery, primary, secondary, grammar and special schools.
- Inclusive – providing education for children of all faiths and none (66% of pupils define as Protestant, 10% Catholic, 18% no religion and 6% 'other') and over a third of newcomer pupils in Northern Ireland. The controlled sector includes a number of integrated and Irish speaking schools.

CSSC welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Briefing on Northern Ireland Budgetary Outlook 2018-20 consultation. Our comments are outlined below.

Budgetary pressures in education

Over the last few years the reduction in funds available to education has placed many schools in difficult financial circumstances. We therefore welcome the acknowledgment of budgetary pressures in education in the Budgetary Outlook document and agree that any continuation of the same is unsustainable.

A survey of our member schools in late 2017 revealed that funding cuts are resulting in:

- a reduced curriculum offer
- significantly larger classes
- reduced planning and preparation time for teachers
- a reduction in teaching and non-teaching staff across schools
- a reduction in extra and co-curricular activities¹.

It is evident that recent budget outcomes have undoubtedly impacted on core day to day teaching and learning. Controlled schools report having to make efficiencies in terms of staff

¹ CSSC (2017) *CSSC finance survey findings*, available at: <http://www.csscni.org.uk/publications/cssc-finance-survey-findings/>

which is leading to an increase in class sizes and reductions in curriculum offer. Further to this many schools are having to cut back on books, language and music classes, counselling services and IT equipment. Schools are becoming increasingly more reliant on parents and families making greater financial contributions. This is not sustainable in the long term and is damaging to the educational experience children and young people receive.

Programme for Government

As stated in the document, a budget for Northern Ireland must be constructed with the aim of delivering the Programme for Government (PfG) outcomes. The draft PfG is made up of 12 outcomes. It can be argued that education underpins each of the 12 outcomes, and is particularly crucial to outcome 12: 'giving every child the best start in life'. It is essential that the quality of education is of a standard which can continue to deliver on this for the future.

The reductions in the education budget thus far, have led to larger class sizes, fewer teachers, cutbacks to educational resources, extracurricular activities and provision for SEN. All of this impacts on the quality of education offered. This impacts directly on children and young people, but also the future of the Northern Ireland economy.

The children and young people in schools today are Northern Ireland's future workforce. The local economy will only be sustainable if our education system produces a highly educated, literate, numerate and technologically savvy workforce. It is essential that Education is valued and given the priority it deserves across all government departments.

Protection of the education budget under all scenarios

We welcome the common assumption in all three suggested scenarios that the education budget (alongside the health budget) will be exempt from any reductions.

Over the last number of years the education budget has undergone many reductions. Recently the Education Authority estimated that since 2010/11 there has been a reduction of around £200 million. Schools have seen their budgets decrease by 10%. There are now over 300 schools in deficit². It is correct that going forward the education budget should be protected.

Any strategic decisions regarding the budget are for Ministers to decide, therefore we welcome the protection of the education budget in the Budgetary Outlook document, and hope that this suggestion is taken forward by the Executive when in place.

Balancing the budget

We wish to make the following comments on the methods suggested to balance the budget:

1. Transformation

² Education Authority (2018) *Education Authority Chief Executive confirms funding crisis in education*, available at: <http://www.eani.org.uk/about-us/latest-news/education-authority-chief-executive-confirms-funding-crisis-in-education/>

Transformation requires investment in the short term to realise efficiencies in the longer term. Whilst it is widely recognised that a significant transformation programme is needed for public services such as education, the reality is that the legislative requirements and existing service delivery structures continue; in this environment sufficient funds are required to support schools, teaching and learning.

2. Budget choices - Raising additional revenue

Home to school transport is being seen as a potential savings area and yes, while either reducing the number of pupils eligible for free transport and/or forcing payment for some or all of the journey may reduce the transport bill, this could present some unforeseen consequences to the system.

It is not clear how school transport charges can be introduced at this time, given that the requirement to provide free home to school transport is set out in legislation.

Conclusions

Controlled schools are already working in difficult financial circumstances to provide the essential curriculum to enable over 140,600 children and young people to meet their potential.

It is essential that schools are supported to provide the best educational experience for children and young people. The funds available to schools, and the education sector as a whole, are crucial to the standard of education provided. It is important that education is prioritized in future budgets and that decisions or actions taken to balance the budget do not negatively impact on the quality of education our children and young people receive.

CSSC is willing to discuss the issues raised in this response to find a sustainable way forward.

I can be contacted on 028 9531 3030 or by email barry.mulholland@csscni.org.uk.

Yours faithfully

Barry Mulholland

Chief Executive