



Future Schools Toolkit

Bates, J., Roulston, S., & O'Connor, U. (2022). *Future Schools Toolkit*.

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Publication Status:

Published (in print/issue): 01/05/2022

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Building a bridge between
community and policy

Future Schools Toolkit

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May 2022



Acknowledgements

The research team, in conjunction with the Integrated Education Fund (IEF), would like to acknowledge funding from the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) which enabled the background research and development of this resource. We would also like to thank everyone who engaged with the project – parents, primary school Principals, Boards of Governors, political representatives, a range of education organisations and stakeholders (including the statutory authorities that have responsibility for education provision – the Department of Education (DE), the Education Authority (EA) and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)). CFNI also provided valuable training throughout the life cycle of the project as part of their Civic Innovation Programme.

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Statements

“The Department of Education has been engaged with the Future Schools Project Team throughout the period of the project as the work being undertaken by them aligns well with the direction of travel for Area Planning. As part of the continuous development and evolution of the Area Planning process, the Department is considering ways to increase and enhance the involvement of schools and communities in local area planning. In particular, it is seeking to develop processes that achieve much earlier and more proactive engagement with schools and communities to ascertain their views on the future shape of education provision to ensure sustainable education provision is the norm for all children. The work of this project will assist with those considerations.”

Director, Sustainable Schools Policy & Planning,
Department of Education

“The Education Authority is pleased to have worked in partnership again with the Ulster University team from the UNESCO Centre, School of Education, in the development of the Future Schools Toolkit. 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 children and young people in their area.”

Michael McConkey, Head of Area Planning,
School Development Service, Education Authority

“The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools welcomed the opportunity to engage with the Ulster University, School of Education, Future Schools’ Project Team in their development of a resource to support school leaders and governors in the process of self-evaluating and assessing the sustainability of their school. The Future Schools Toolkit will encourage earlier school and community engagement in the area planning process with a focus on an area-based approach to sustainable, high-quality educational provision.”

Council for Catholic Maintained Schools

"I believe the toolkit could be very effective as a focal point when engaging Governors on discussions about school sustainability. Some of the indicators are extremely effective in that they can provide quantitative responses that can focus minds on sustainability. The toolkit can encourage communities to be proactive in determining their own future. It also provides opportunities for cross sectoral discussions on school provision in particular areas."

Primary School Principal

"The toolkit enables schools to pinpoint / monitor areas of stress which may become an issue eventually. It provides schools / communities with a catalyst for open dialogue among Principals / Governors and the wider community. It allows everyone to examine options that will benefit communities longer term."

School Governor

"A very welcome addition to self-evaluation tools that Governors can utilise given its specific focus on the SSP."

School Governor

"If, at some stage, there are pressures on keeping both schools sustainable we need to work together to keep the best of what we've got – we need to make decisions about what we want before we are told what is going to be happening."

Parent

Context

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 population of Northern Ireland is served by 791 mainstream primary schools – 56% (441) of these are classified as Rural and 44% (350) Urban (Draft Strategic Area Plan 2022-2027, p. 14). These schools are predominantly either Controlled (managed by the Education Authority) or Catholic Maintained (managed by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools) (Table 1).

Table 1: Breakdown of primary schools by school type

(Draft Strategic Area Plan 2022-2027 p. 19)

School type / sector	No of primary schools
Controlled	359
Catholic Maintained	358
Irish Maintained	26
Grant Maintained Integrated	23
Controlled Integrated	22
Other Maintained	3

Well-documented historical factors have led to the development of a system of education in Northern Ireland that, on the whole, reflects the enduring community division. This situation means that many local areas may be served by two (or more) primary schools.

In order to provide a high-quality educational experience for all pupils, the Department of Education (DE) has set out six criteria for sustainable schools (DE, 2009):

1. **Quality educational experience**
2. **Stable enrolment trends**
3. **Sound financial position**
4. **Strong leadership and management by the Principal and Board of Governors**
5. **Accessibility**
6. **Strong links with the community**

Under the 'Stable enrolment trends' criteria, rural primary schools should have an enrolment of a minimum of 105 pupils and urban schools a minimum of 140 pupils¹ (DE, 2009) to be considered sustainable. Of the 441 primary schools classified as rural, 193 (44%) currently fall below this threshold figure (Draft Strategic Area Plan 2022-2027, p. 14). Below threshold enrolments are not only evident within rural primary schools; 35 (10%) of the 350 schools defined as urban currently fall below the minimum threshold.

In the context of primary school provision, Area Planning is the "process of strategic planning ... to support the implementation of the Sustainable Schools Policy" (Draft Strategic Area Plan 2022-2027, p. 6).

This Future Schools Toolkit has been developed in recognition of the challenges faced in area planning and the need to give a stronger, more effective voice to communities on decisions affecting them with regard to primary school provision. It is intended to support school leadership (Principals and Boards of Governors) to critically examine the sustainability of their school and engage with local communities on the type of school provision that will provide a sustainable, high-quality educational experience for the future.

The Toolkit has been developed by a research team from the UNESCO Centre, School of Education at Ulster University (UU) and was funded through the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) Civic Innovation Programme. The Civic Innovation Programme aims to support initiatives that put people at the centre of decision-making in Northern Ireland.²

The UU team worked with the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) who were funding partners. The research was undertaken by the team from UU to ensure its independence and rigour. The project 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, the Department of Education and other key stakeholders) what option is most likely to deliver a sustainable, high-quality education for all pupils.

Future Schools has, at its heart, a vision that primary schools, parents, and the local community will work together to identify area-based solutions with the potential of ensuring sustainable local school provision. In finding a sustainable solution to education provision in a specific geographic area, schools must engage with the relevant managing authorities, other local schools where relevant as well as with the wider community.

¹NB: These enrolment figures exclude children with a Statement of Special Educational Needs. The 105 and 140 are minimum enrolment figures (for open enrolment purposes – Statemented children are not part of the competitive process).

²See: <https://communityfoundationni.org/programmes/civic-innovation-programme/>

Using the Toolkit

A recurrent theme throughout the Draft Strategic Area Plan 2022-2027 "Planning for Sustainable Provision" is the need to "increase the number of pupils taught in educationally and financially sustainable schools". It is stated unequivocally that, in order to achieve such an outcome:

In many cases a major change requiring cooperation and collaboration across all stakeholders will be needed.

(Draft Strategic Area Plan 2022-2027, p. 10)

The document further states that, "collaborative practices and partnership working will be a priority" along with an intention to "take forward innovative and cross sectoral working to ensure sustainable provision in all areas." It highlights that "early identification of challenges and opportunities" is key to enabling "sustainable education provision within an area" and that self-evaluation is an essential element in ensuring this (Draft Strategic Area Plan 2022-2027, p. 13).

It follows that, if school communities are to have an effective voice in the decision-making processes around school provision, then Boards of Governors and other community stakeholders need to engage constructively and effectively with each other as well as with the managing authorities (principally EA and CCMS).

This Toolkit resource aims to provide school communities with the tools needed to explore five key questions:

1. **How sustainable is our school in the short or medium term?**
2. **What options do we have to better demonstrate or possibly improve our sustainability?**
3. **What could sustainable school provision look like in our area in the longer term?**
4. **What model of school provision would best meet the needs of children in our location?**
5. **How can our community work with CCMS and/or EA and/or the sectoral bodies to bring about change in relation to local school provision?**

"It takes a village to raise a child and a village needs a primary school in order to survive and thrive."

Parent, Toolkit Development Phase

The Toolkit has been specifically designed to enable discussion and cooperation within local communities and to empower them to have a strong effective voice on the future of sustainable educational provision in their area. To achieve this, the following individuals, organisations and institutions will need to work together:

- **Parents**
- **Principals and Boards of Governors**
- **Managing authorities (EA and CCMS)**
- **Sectoral support bodies, Trustees and Transferors**
- **The Department of Education**
- **Schools**
- **Wider community**

Every community is different and every school in every community is different. The issues facing each 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 but, if adhered to, it can enable school communities to become proactive in developing ideas and proposals for local area solutions and support them to develop a plan of action before an outcome is determined for them.

The Toolkit has been designed for use by school leadership (Principals and Boards of Governors) and is constructed in three parts (see Figure 1). The first of these is a rubric enabling School Governors to think critically about the sustainability of their school by assessing it against the DE 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.

For those neighbouring schools that are jointly considering the sustainability of school provision in their area, it is expected that they will already have established links and a history of working together (e.g. through Shared Education or a similar partnership arrangement). Although each school will need to conduct their own self-evaluation, it is expected that this exercise might reveal issues of common concern in an area. A broader conversation can then take place that builds on the information derived from the dual self-evaluation process and explores what longer-term, sustainable school provision could look like for the area. It would be helpful if, prior to this, the self-evaluation data from neighbouring school(s) could be collated and shared.

The second section of the Toolkit describes in detail the practical application of the Community Conversation approach. This element of the Toolkit reaches beyond the school leadership to enable engagement with parents and other stakeholders. Community Conversations offer an effective approach for engaging more widely with the local community, including parents of primary and pre-school children, 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.

Options should be considered, specifically the implications of each, and the actions needed to meet these. In the final Pathways and Processes section of the Toolkit, the possible options that may be available to a community seeking to find a sustainable solution are outlined.

The Toolkit should be read in conjunction with the Sustainable Schools Policy, the Sustainable Schools Policy user guide, the Strategic Area Plan 2002-2027 and the DE Area Planning Guidance.

Figure 1:

Three-part structure of the Future Schools Toolkit Process



Note 1: There may be more than 2 schools involved.

Note 2: The stronger the relationship between the schools the greater the likelihood of a sustainable outcome from the process.



Part One: Self-Evaluation

“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. 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.”

(Draft Strategic Area Plan 2022-2027, p. 13)

Sustainable Schools

The Independent Strategic Review of Education (the Bain Report) (2006) identified that the patterns of education provision in NI placed a particular burden on public finances. The report advised that a policy should be developed to ensure the sustainability of all schools in receipt of state funding. In response, the Department of Education (DE) produced "Schools for the Future: a policy for sustainable schools" (also known as the Sustainable Schools Policy – SSP) in 2009. The SSP places the quality of the educational experience firmly in the foreground:

"[The policy's] 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"

(DE, 2009; p. 1)

The SSP states however that, in order to be classified as being "fit for purpose", schools need to ensure that education is provided in as cost effective a manner as possible.

Self-Evaluation

Since the introduction of Together Towards Improvement (TTI) in 2003, self-evaluation has become a feature of school management and leadership. Every School a Good School (ESaGS) (DE, 2009) and the Inspection Self-Evaluation Framework (ISEF) (DE/ETI, 2017) are current templates that are utilised by schools. The rubric provided in this Toolkit has been designed with and for Principals and Governors to make the self-evaluation process for Sustainable Schools criteria as accessible as possible. It draws on material and evidence sources that may be already routinely gathered for ETI and/or DE, as well as signposting other sources of evidence which may not previously have been considered.

Area Planning

"The policy has as its vision an estate of educationally sustainable schools planned on an area basis, with focus on sharing and collaboration"

(DE, 2009; p. 1)

The SSP recognises that policies can impact differently in rural and urban areas and acknowledges that adjustments may have to be made to reflect particular needs. 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.

Consequently, Area Planning (AP) is about identifying the current situation and responding to the future educational needs of a specific area in order to ensure "an estate of sustainable facilities" (Perry, 2011, p. 14). SSP 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 bodies contribute to the development of the Area Plans.

The Draft Strategic Area Plan 2022-27 (p. 2, 7 & 10) 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."

Benchmarks

The SSP states that, if primary schools are to be considered sustainable by DE, they should meet certain thresholds. The process of self-assessment therefore commences with three quantitative questions:

- 1. Does your school have at least four (full-time-equivalent) teaching posts?
YES/NO**
- 2. Does your school have no more than two composite year groups in a single classroom?
YES/NO**
- 3. Does your school have at least 105 pupils (rural primaries) or 140 pupils (urban primaries)?
YES/NO**

If a school is unable to answer "YES" to ALL of these questions, then its sustainability may, at some stage, come under review in the Area Planning process. However, in the foreword to SSP, it is emphasised that:

The policy is not intended to trigger particular solutions automatically... circumstances need to be considered in determining appropriate action, and the position needs to be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

The SSP outlines six sustainability criteria to be used in assessing a school's viability.

- 1. Quality Educational Experience**
- 2. Stable Enrolment Trends**
- 3. Sound Financial Position**
- 4. Strong Leadership and Management by Principals and Boards of Governors**
- 5. Accessibility**
- 6. Strong Links with the Community**

Each of these six criteria is broken down into a series of indicators. It is important to stress that the SSP states that it is not the intention "to have a mechanistic application of the criteria and indicators" 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." The SSP also acknowledges that "the importance of [these] various factors may vary from case to case."

The pages that follow provide a rubric to help individual schools in identifying the extent to which they meet the SSP indicators. Additional sources of evidence are also signposted. These may be drawn upon to help a school evaluate their sustainability trends.³

³Only those SSP indicators which relate to primary schools have been included in this document.

Sustainable Schools Policy Criterion 1 - Quality Educational Experience

Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability		
		Weak	Fair	Strong
<p>1.1 Attainment/ Progression levels of pupils (Key Stage tests pending development of new indicators for Primary Schools).</p>	<p>Test scores and benchmarks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> https://ccea.org.uk/key-stages-1-2/assessment-and-reporting https://ccea.org.uk/learning-resources/guidance-assessment-primary-school/ <p>ETI assessment: Outcome for learners.</p>	<p>Test/exam results fall below the benchmark for that Key Stage.</p> <p>No evidence of any valued-added activity (e.g. through Shared Education).</p> <p>Recent ETI Inspection assessed Outcomes for Learners and Quality of provision as "Important area(s) for improvement", "Requires significant improvement" or "Requires urgent improvement".⁴</p>	<p>Comparable levels of attainment/ progression meet benchmarks for respective Key Stage.</p> <p>Some evidence of valued-added activity (e.g. through Shared Education).</p> <p>Recent ETI Inspection assessed Outcomes for Learners and Quality of provision as "Good".</p>	<p>Pupils' attainment/ progression exceed benchmarks for respective Key Stage.</p> <p>Evidence of significant value-added activity (e.g. through Shared Education).</p> <p>Recent ETI Inspection assessed Outcomes for Learners and Quality of provision as "Outstanding" or "Very Good".</p>
<p>1.2 No more than two composite year groups in a single classroom at primary school level.</p>	<p>School records (including evidence on website and prospectus).</p>	<p>Composite classes containing three or more year groups in a single classroom.</p>	<p>No composite classes containing more than two year groups in a single classroom.</p>	<p>No composite classes in a single classroom.</p>
<p>1.3 A minimum of four teachers at a primary school. This recognises both the needs of pupils and the demands on teachers.</p>	<p>School records (including evidence on website and prospectus).</p>	<p>Fewer than four Full Time Equivalent (FTE) teaching posts.</p>	<p>Four to six FTE teaching posts.</p>	<p>Seven or more FTE teaching posts and non-teaching Principal.</p>
<p>1.4 The ability of the school to cater for children with Special Educational Needs.</p>	<p>Numbers of statemented/SEN pupils in mainstream education.</p> <p>Inspection reports.</p> <p>Examples of how needs of these pupils have been met.</p> <p>Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) undertaken by teachers and other staff.</p> <p>SEN school policy.</p> <p>Annual review process, target setting (including use of individual education plans and personal development plans).</p>	<p>Limited evidence of how needs of SEN pupils in mainstream education have been met.</p> <p>Little evidence of teachers and staff undertaking SEN TPL.</p>	<p>Moderate evidence how needs of SEN pupils in mainstream education have been met.</p> <p>Moderate evidence of teachers and staff undertaking SEN TPL.</p>	<p>Strong evidence of how needs of SEN pupils in mainstream education have been met.</p> <p>Strong evidence of teachers and staff undertaking a range of appropriate SEN TPL.</p>

⁴It is noted that these may not always be readily available due to the COVID pandemic and ongoing industrial action by the teaching unions.

Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability		
		Weak	Fair	Strong
<p>1.5 The standards and the quality of learning and teaching at the school.</p>	<p>ETI evaluation of the quality of provision.</p> <p>A broad curriculum (including subjects offered through connections with other schools).</p> <p>Academic progression (improvement noted from a baseline).</p> <p>Evidence of reflection and rigorous self-evaluation by teachers.</p> <p>Education outcomes reflect positively on the school and compare well, when benchmarked measurement is undertaken, against the performance of similar schools.</p> <p>Pupils are able to access all six components of the minimum statutory primary curriculum</p>	<p>Recent ETI Inspection assessed Outcomes for Learners and Quality of provision as "Important area(s) for improvement", "Requires significant improvement" or "Requires urgent improvement".</p> <p>A narrow curriculum.</p> <p>Few or no learning opportunities offered through connections with other schools.</p> <p>Limited academic progression.</p> <p>Limited evidence of reflection and self-evaluation by teachers.</p> <p>Education outcomes do not reflect positively on the school; not benchmarked against the performance of similar schools.</p>	<p>Recent ETI Inspection assessed Outcomes for Learners and Quality of provision as "Good".</p> <p>A developing curriculum.</p> <p>Some learning opportunities offered through connections with other schools.</p> <p>Moderate academic progression.</p> <p>Moderate evidence of reflection and self-evaluation by teachers.</p> <p>Education outcomes reflect positively on the school and are comparable with benchmarked measurement against the performance of similar schools.</p>	<p>Recent ETI Inspection assessed Outcomes for Learners and Quality of provision as "Outstanding" or "Very Good".</p> <p>A broad curriculum.</p> <p>Range of learning opportunities offered through connections with other schools.</p> <p>Strong academic progression.</p> <p>Strong evidence of in-depth reflection and rigorous self-evaluation by teachers.</p> <p>Education outcomes reflect very positively on the school and compare well, when benchmarked measurement is undertaken, against the performance of similar schools.</p>
<p>1.6 The range of curricular and extra-curricular activities available for children including physical education, music, art, drama and science.</p>	<p>ETI reports.</p> <p>Allocation of staff duties to review and develop curriculum areas.</p> <p>School records (including evidence on website and prospectus).</p>	<p>Some curricular areas are under-developed.</p> <p>Limited range of extra-curricular activities available for pupils.</p>	<p>Some curricular areas are moderately developed.</p> <p>Moderate range of extra-curricular activities available for pupils.</p>	<p>Good coverage of all curricular areas and evidence of going beyond the core curriculum.</p> <p>Extensive range of extra-curricular activities available for pupils.</p>
<p>1.7 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>Inventory of equipment.</p> <p>Risk assessments.</p> <p>ETI Health and Safety reports.</p>	<p>An incomplete/ outdated inventory of equipment.</p> <p>Limited risk assessments.</p> <p>Inspection report: "Does not impact positively enough on learning, teaching and outcomes for learners".</p>	<p>A current inventory of equipment.</p> <p>Risk assessments in place.</p> <p>Inspection report: "Impacts positively on learning, teaching and outcomes for learners."</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: "Impacts positively on learning, teaching and outcomes for learners."</p>

Sustainable Schools Policy Criterion 1 - Quality Educational Experience

Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability		
		Weak	Fair	Strong
<p>1.8 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>School discipline and other related policies.</p> <p>Minutes/records of meetings of pupils' forum (or similar representative body).</p> <p>Evidence of additional awards, such as a Unicef Rights Respecting Schools Award.</p> <p>Records of TPL training undertaken by staff.</p>	<p>Inspection reports on safeguarding "Unsatisfactory".⁵</p> <p>School discipline policy in place.</p> <p>Inactive or tokenistic pupils' forum – incomplete records of meetings of pupils' forum.</p> <p>Limited recent TPL undertaken by staff.</p>	<p>Inspection reports on safeguarding "Reflects broadly the guidance".</p> <p>School policies on Positive Behaviour, discipline and pastoral care in place.</p> <p>Feedback from pupils' forum – minutes of meetings of pupils' forum. Additional awards e.g. Unicef Rights Respecting Schools Award.</p> <p>TPL training undertaken by staff.</p>	<p>Inspection reports on safeguarding "Reflects the guidance".</p> <p>School policies on Positive Behaviour/ discipline and pastoral care in place and well understood by staff and pupils.</p> <p>Evidence of feedback from pupils' forum being taken on board in school policy or practice – comprehensive minutes of meetings of pupils' forum. Additional awards e.g. Unicef Rights Respecting Schools Award.</p> <p>TPL training undertaken by most staff - including availing of opportunities from external organisations.</p>

Related self-evaluation guidance which may provide additional evidence for Criterion 1:

Indicators of Effective Performance (ESaGS, 2009, p14-15)

Child-centred provision

- Decisions on planning, resources, curriculum and pastoral care reflect at all times the needs and aspirations of the pupils within the school.
- A clear commitment exists to promoting equality of opportunity, high quality learning, a concern for individual pupils and a respect for diversity.
- A school culture of achievement, improvement and ambition exists with clear expectations that all pupils can and will achieve to the very best of their ability.
- Effective interventions and support are in place to meet the additional education and other needs of pupils and to help them overcome barriers to learning.
- There is a commitment to involve young people in discussions and decisions on school life that directly affect them and to listen to their views.
- A commitment to ensuring that all children follow an educational pathway which is appropriate for them.
- The highest standards of pastoral care and child protection are in place.
- A commitment exists, through being a healthy school, to supporting healthy children, who are better able to learn and develop.

⁵Prior to April 2020, ETI used three confidence bands for safeguarding and governance. These are currently under consideration and may not be relevant from September 2022.

High quality teaching and learning

- A broad and relevant curriculum is provided for the pupils.
- An emphasis on literacy and numeracy exists across the curriculum.
- Teachers are committed and enthusiastic, enjoying a positive relationship with their pupils and with other school-based staff and dedicated to improving learning.
- Teachers use adaptable, flexible teaching strategies that respond to the diversity within the classroom.
- Assessment and other data is used to effectively inform teaching and learning across the school and in the classroom and to promote improvement.
- Rigorous self-evaluation is carried out by teachers and the whole school, using objective data and leading to sustained self-improvement.
- Teachers reflect on their own work and the outcomes of individual pupils.
- Education outcomes reflect positively on the school and compare well, when benchmarked measurement is undertaken, against the performance of similar schools.

Effective Practice and Self-Evaluation Questions for Governance (ISEF, 2017, p7-8)

Outcomes for learners:

Standards attained/progression and wider skills and dispositions.

Effective Practice is demonstrated when...

The Governors promote consistently high standards of educational attainment/outcomes, behaviour and attendance through being well informed by senior and middle leaders and their own analysis of first-hand evidence;

The Governors ensure that, at important key transition points, the learners progress successfully to the next stage of their education or employment/careers as relevant;

The Governors support opportunities for the learners to develop wider skills and dispositions such as those outlined in the Curricular Guidance for Pre-School/NI Curriculum Primary (e.g. self-confidence, self-awareness, critical and creative thinking, decision making and respect for others) and develop insights into society and other cultures through participation in a range of activities within the organization and in the wider community through participation in a range of activities both in and out of school.

Self-evaluation Questions for Boards of Governors

Do we know if the standards of achievement, behaviour and attendance by all of our learners, including those with barriers to learning, and/or with additional learning needs are good enough and where possible, compare well with learners in similar schools (using benchmarking where relevant)?

How do we support the school to improve attendance levels and reduce suspension and expulsion rates? Are we addressing effectively the underlying reasons behind them?

How well does the performance of discernible groups such as boys, girls, or those with free school meals entitlement (FSME) and newcomers compare with that of their peers in our school and other similar schools?

How do we support the school in developing effective links with feeder organisations at key transition points?

Do we know our leavers' destinations and how appropriate they are? How well-prepared are they to move on?

What evidence is there that the learners are developing intellectually, socially, emotionally, physically and morally/spiritually?

Do we facilitate a wide range of effective extra-curricular activities, for example, visitors, clubs, educational visits?

Quality of the provision including the curriculum, guidance and support and impact of planning, teaching and assessment.

Effective Practice is demonstrated when...	Self-evaluation Questions for Boards of Governors
<p>The Governors ensure that the curriculum provided meets the relevant curricular guidance such as the statutory requirements of the Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education, the Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC) Primary;</p> <p>The Governors ensure that there is appropriately resourced provision for learners including newcomers and those with special needs and, where relevant, low-or under-achievers and gifted and talented;</p> <p>Governors have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in promoting high quality learning, teaching and assessment through a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum.</p>	<p>What processes are in place to keep us informed about curricular provision and development of a relevant and innovative curriculum within our school? Do we keep under review the relevant curricular policies?</p> <p>How does our school's collaboration with other schools and use of the local environment contribute to curricular opportunities and career aspirations for our learners e.g. Shared Education, area learning communities, clustering, and links with business?</p> <p>Are we provided with evidence that the cross-curricular skills, such as Language Development, early Mathematics, Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT and the progressive development of employability skills, are integrated effectively throughout the curriculum?</p> <p>How effectively is the allocated funding being used to impact positively on the provision and outcomes for specific learners?</p> <p>How do we know that the learning and teaching are of the highest quality? What is our awareness of teacher professional learning?</p> <p>How do we challenge poor practice and ensure appropriate support programmes are in place?</p> <p>How do we know that assessment information is being used to impact positively on the learners' educational experiences and outcomes?</p>

Sustainable Schools Policy Criterion 2 - Stable Enrolment Trends

Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability		
		Weak	Fair	Strong
<p>2.1 The enrolment trends in the school in the past three years and projected demand in the area.</p>	<p>School census data (enrolment trends). NISRA/NINIS data (projected demand). Comparative data – population trends and birth data in other rural areas. Locally generated evidence e.g. planned housing developments.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service (NINIS) https://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/Home.aspx • Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics 	<p>Consistently fewer than 105 pupils (rural) or 140 pupils (urban) enrolled year-on-year.⁶</p> <p>Birth rate and NISRA/NINIS data indicate potential for falling demand for this type of school. No planning evidence that population profile is likely to change.</p>	<p>Generally, 100-110/135-145 pupils enrolled year-on-year.</p> <p>Birth rate and NISRA/NINIS data indicate potential for steady/ consistent demand for this type of school.</p>	<p>Consistently, significantly more than 105/ pupils 140 enrolled year-on-year.</p> <p>Birth rate and NISRA/NINIS data indicate potential for high and ongoing demand for this type of school.</p>

⁶NB; The enrolment figures exclude children with a Statement of Special Educational Needs. At the time of writing DE is undertaking reclassification of urban and rural using NISRA Bands A-E (urban) and F-H (rural).

Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability		
		Weak	Fair	Strong
2.2 At least seven classrooms (one for each year group). The minimum (not optimal) enrolment for newly established schools or existing schools should be 105 for rural primaries or 140 for urban primaries.	ETI reports. School records (including evidence on website and prospectus).	Fewer than seven classrooms in the school buildings. Consistently fewer than 105 pupils (rural) or 140 pupils (urban) enrolled year-on-year.	Seven classrooms in the school building. Generally, around 105/140 pupils enrolled year-on-year.	More than seven classrooms in the school building. Consistently, significantly more than 105/140 pupils enrolled year-on-year.

Sustainable Schools Policy Criterion 3 - Sound Financial Position

Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability		
		Weak	Fair	Strong
3.1 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 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 applied realistic financial planning principles in respect of its delegated budget. Current Monthly budget reports and Annual Budget indicate that the school is endeavouring to live within its delegated budget.	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 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.	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. An Annual Budget is in place and the school can reasonably be expected to live within its 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 live within its delegated budget with capacity for coping with contingencies.
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.	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 pupil against schools cost per pupil.	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 which clearly and realistically addresses 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.

Sustainable Schools Policy Criterion 4 - Strong Leadership and Management

Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability		
		Weak	Fair	Strong
4.1 Governors' views on the school based on quantitative and qualitative evidence.	ETI reports – these may be dated (due to the pandemic) or incomplete (due to industrial action). New evidence can be created (e.g. survey monkey or similar).	No measures are in place to obtain Governors' views on the school.	Quantitative and qualitative measures in place to obtain Governors' views on 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.
4.2 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).	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.	No vacant seats on Board of Governors – and composition in line with guidelines. Good record of attendance. Board includes members with a range of appropriate skills/experience: e.g. personnel management, finance. Board members participate in EA training events with implementation and sharing.	No vacant seats on Board of Governors – and composition in line with guidelines. 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.
4.3 Management of staff attendance and absenteeism.	Staff attendance can be measured through monthly staff returns to the Managing Authority.	Staff attendance is poor – absenteeism is high.	Staff attendance is good – absenteeism is low.	Staff attendance is excellent – absenteeism is minimal.
4.4 Levels and nature of staff turnover and unfilled staff vacancies.	Managing Authority holds information about staff turnover and vacancies.	Excessively high or low levels of staff turnover. Vacant posts remaining unfilled for a protracted period (as measured by Managing Authority).	There are no vacant posts or plans are in place to ensure that any vacant post is filled.	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.
4.5 Teacher morale.	Teacher morale is hard to measure in general terms (teacher well-being may feature in the SDP). Inspection Evidence. Staff Development opportunities.	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.	Teacher/staff morale is good (as assessed in Inspection and/or through staff feedback as part of the SDP process). Teachers have opportunities to contribute to the leadership of the school.	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.

Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability		
		Weak	Fair	Strong
4.6 Management of curricular and organisational demands on the Principal and staff.	Inspection Evidence.	Inspection evidence – ETI attribute leadership and management a low performance level.	Inspection evidence – ETI attribute leadership and management a middling performance level.	Inspection evidence – ETI attribute leadership and management a high performance level.
4.7 Ensuring that the resource allocated is available so that the Principal has at least 1 day per week to attend to leadership and management duties.	Inspection evidence and school records.	The Principal does not have a full day to attend to leadership and management duties every week.	The Principal has at least one day a week to attend to leadership and management duties every week.	The Principal has limited teaching duties or a non-teaching role.
4.8 There is a school development plan (SDP) in place and progress is being made to achieve the plan's aims and objectives.	The SDP offers a focal point for the gathering of inspection evidence. There is also a role for the Managing Authorities in monitoring SDPs. The existence of the SDP should also facilitate self-assessment by a school.	No SDP (or an incomplete or outdated SDP) in place. Progress against aims & objectives not evident.	SDP in place with clear, measurable aims & objectives. Self-assessment: Progress on SDP regularly monitored and reviewed.	SDP in place with SMART aims & objectives. Board of Governors regularly appraised of progress towards stated targets in SDP – minuted.
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).	A variety of statistical evidence is collected routinely to support this wide-ranging indicator.	Little or limited statistical evidence. Poor pupil behaviour – high proportion of suspensions. Poor pupil attendance records. No (or tokenistic) role for pupils in school management.	Statistical evidence is collected routinely to assess this indicator. Some peer support programmes. Pupil Council (or similar) in place.	A variety of statistical evidence is collected routinely to support this wide-ranging indicator. A range of peer support programmes in place. Pupil council (or similar) in place, actively supported by staff and contributing at an appropriate level to school management.

Related Self-evaluation which may provide additional evidence for Criterion 4:

Indicators of Effective Performance (ESaGS, 2009, p16)

Effective Leadership

- An effective school development (SDP) plan is in place, providing clear and realistic targets for improvement based on a sound vision for the school.
- Governors understand their responsibilities and provide clear strategic direction as well as support and challenge to the Principal in carrying forward the process of improvement.
- School leaders demonstrate a commitment to providing professional development opportunities for staff, particularly teachers, and promote a readiness to share and learn from best practice.
- Teachers are given the opportunity to share in the leadership of the school.
- The resources at the disposal of the school are managed properly and effectively, with appropriate arrangements in place for financial management, attendance management, and working relationships.
- School leaders monitor and evaluate effectively school outcomes, policies, practices and procedures and the School Development Plan itself.

Effective Practice and Self-Evaluation Questions for Governance (ISEF, 2017, p9)

Leadership and Management

Effectiveness and impact of the strategic leadership of governors

Effective Practice is demonstrated when...

The Governors ensure they contribute to the vision, ethos and strategic direction of the school;

They meet the statutory requirements with regard to the publication of information, including the school prospectus and annual report, availability of all policies, SDP, relevant scheme of management, and handling of freedom of information requests;

The Governors ensure that the SDP meets the statutory regulations and that staffing, professional development and through effective financial stewardship resources can be accommodated within the associated three-year budget plan;

The Governors ensure that high quality teaching and support staff are recruited and their continuing professional development is promoted and supported and any Governor vacancies are addressed promptly;

The Governors act in a timely and appropriate manner when any aspect of outcomes, provision and/or leadership give cause for concern;

The varied skills and expertise of the Governors are harnessed to good effect and Governors access available training/external support;

There are procedures in place to handle complaints and these procedures are communicated to the school community;

There are regular opportunities provided for middle leaders and other staff to discuss with the Governors key aspects of the school for which they have responsibility;

The Governors support opportunities for staff and the Governors themselves to engage with other learning organisations to share effective practice, for example through cluster groups and online collaboration.

Self-evaluation Questions for Boards of Governors

How do we ensure that our vision, values and aims meet the needs of all learners in the school and are reflective of the needs of the wider community?

How do we ensure that we meet all of our statutory obligations and compliance matters including regular, formal minutes?

How is the SDP drawn up? Was it informed by rigorous self-evaluation including consultation with all members of the school community (and where applicable, relevant Health Trust professionals)?

Have we informed the relevant body of any vacancies that arise?

How do we agree and challenge the priorities in the SDP, including the financial implications, and relevance and impact of staff development?

What accountability procedures are in place? Do relevant members of staff report to us on the progress towards achieving the action plan targets and demonstrating evidence of improvement in provision and outcomes for learners?

How do we respond to Governors'/parents'/staff/learners' suggestions and complaints?

Do we encourage/facilitate our school to participate in and contribute to cluster groups and/or the area learning community? How does this participation impact on provision and outcomes?



Sustainable Schools Policy Criterion 5 - Accessibility

Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability		
		Weak	Fair	Strong
<p>5.1 Home to school transport travel times of less than 30 minutes for primary pupils (i.e. 1 hour per day in total).</p>	<p>Setting of school admissions criteria in line with DE policy and guidance.</p> <p>Pupil postcodes and travel patterns.</p>	<p>Admissions criteria seldom discussed and reviewed.</p> <p>Limited alignment in admissions criteria with DE policy and guidance.</p> <p>Home to school transport travel times of more than 30 minutes for a considerable number of pupils.</p>	<p>Admissions criteria occasionally discussed and reviewed. Some alignment with DE policy and guidance.</p> <p>Home to school transport travel times of less than 30 minutes for most pupils.</p>	<p>Admissions criteria regularly discussed and reviewed. Clear alignment with DE policy and guidance.</p> <p>Home to school transport travel times of less than 30 minutes for all pupils.</p>
<p>5.2 Distance to another suitable primary school.</p>	<p>Local records.</p> <p>Mapping tools.</p>	<p>There is another primary school of the same sector/management-type within a home to school transport travel time of less than 30 minutes.</p> <p>There is another primary school of a different sector/management-type within a home to school transport travel time of less than 30 minutes.</p>	<p>The nearest primary school of the same sector/management-type is further than home to school transport travel time of less than 30 minutes.</p>	<p>There are no primary schools of any sector/management-type within home to school transport travel time of less than 30 minutes.</p>
<p>5.3 Existing co-operative arrangements with other schools -max travel time 30 minutes for a single journey and total of 2 hours per week.</p>	<p>ETI reports.</p> <p>School records (including evidence on website and prospectus).</p>	<p>No (or poorly developed) links with other local schools (within 30 minutes travel time).</p>	<p>Links with local neighbouring schools within and between sectors.</p> <p>Links with local neighbouring schools in different sector (e.g. through Shared Education).</p>	<p>Evidence of strong links with neighbouring primary and post primary schools over many years.</p> <p>Enduring and effective programmes with at least one school of another management type (e.g. through Shared Education).</p>
<p>5.4 Capacity in nearest schools.</p>	<p>Records held by managing authorities/DE statistics.</p>	<p>Other local schools in the area in the same sector are undersubscribed and/or have capacity for expansion.</p>	<p>Other local schools in the area in the same sector are at capacity and/or have no capacity for expansion.</p>	<p>Other local schools in the area in the same sector and other sectors are at capacity and/or have no capacity for expansion.</p>

Indicator	Potential Evidence Sources	Sustainability		
		Weak	Fair	Strong
<p>6.1 Degree and quality of parental involvement (schools will be asked to provide evidence on this).</p>	<p>Constitution/Terms of Reference and Minutes for parents' association.</p> <p>Board of Governors' Membership and Attendance records.</p> <p>Parental surveys.</p> <p>Records of parental feedback to ETI.</p> <p>Evaluation of SDP – highlighting the role played by Parent Governors.</p>	<p>No parents' association.</p> <p>No current parents on the school's Board of Governors.</p>	<p>A functioning parents' association is in place.</p> <p>Parent places on Board of Governors are filled with parents of current pupils.</p>	<p>Strong parents' association – which meets regularly and contributes to school community.</p> <p>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.</p>
<p>6.2 Number of children in the vicinity attending (and not attending) the school.⁷</p>	<p>Pupil distribution maps.</p> <p>Census data (NISRA).</p>	<p>Local children travel to attend primary schools in the same sector/management type further away.</p>	<p>The school is well attended by children from the vicinity.</p>	<p>The school is the first school of preference for children living in the vicinity.</p> <p>The school is consistently oversubscribed.</p>
<p>6.3 Contribution of the school to the community (schools will be asked to provide evidence on this).</p>	<p>SDP evaluation.</p> <p>Record in local media, regional papers etc.</p> <p>School records (including evidence on website and prospectus).</p>	<p>Poor relationships, engagement and communication between the school and the wider community.</p>	<p>Good relationships, engagement and communication between the school and the wider community.</p> <p>Community links included in SDP.</p>	<p>Excellent relationships, engagement and communication between the school and the wider community.</p> <p>Named, specific community links included in SDP.</p>
<p>6.4 Presence of other features of provision, e.g. nursery or specialist unit</p>	<p>SDP evaluation</p> <p>School records (including evidence on website and prospectus)</p>	<p>Limited presence of other provision.</p>	<p>Some presence of other provision.</p>	<p>Strong presence of other provision.</p>
<p>6.5 Multi-functional use of buildings outside formal education, for example, for sport, voluntary and community use.</p>	<p>SDP evaluation.</p> <p>DE sponsored programmes such as Extended Schools or Full Service Schools.</p> <p>School records (including evidence on website and prospectus).</p> <p>Social media, local newspaper reports etc.</p>	<p>School is used as an educational institution 9:00 to 15:00 Monday-Friday and has no other function in the community.</p> <p>Limited after-school or Extended Schools provision.</p>	<p>School is used as a base by community groups outside school hours.</p> <p>School offers after-school and Extended Schools provision.</p>	<p>School is regularly used as a base by a number of community groups outside school hours.</p> <p>School offers a range of after-school and Extended Schools provision.</p> <p>School provides substantial additional programmes and activities aimed at tackling barriers to learning and raising levels of educational attainment/ progression for those pupils in the greatest need.</p>

⁷An allowance may be made for pupils attending Irish Medium or Integrated schools given that these are more geographically dispersed.

Related Self-evaluation which may provide additional evidence for Criterion 6:

Indicators of Effective Performance (ESaGS, DE 2009b, p16)

A school connected to its local community

- Good relationships that facilitate engagement and communication between the school and its parents and the wider community that it serves.
- The school and its teachers are held in respect by parents and the local community who in turn actively support the work of the school.
- The school uses its involvement in particular programmes (for example Extended Schools or Specialist Schools) effectively in meeting the needs of the community and nearby schools.
- Good relationships and clear channels of communication are in place between the school and the education agencies that support it.
- The school works closely with other relevant statutory and voluntary agencies whose work impacts on education, especially Health, Social Services, the Public Library Service and, where appropriate, local Neighbourhood Renewal groups.



Department of Education (2006) Schools for the future: funding, strategy, sharing: report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education (The Bain Report)

https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/9777/1/review_of_education.pdf

Department of Education (2009) Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/a-policy-for-sustainable-schools.pdf>

Department of Education (2022) Schools for the Future – A Policy for Sustainable Schools User Guide

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Department of Education (2009b) Every School A Good School - A Policy for School Improvement

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/every-school-good-school-esags>

Department of Education & Education and Training Inspectorate (2003) Together Towards Improvement: A Process for Self-Evaluation

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Education Authority NI (2017) Providing Pathways - Strategic Area Plan for Schools 2017-2020

<https://www.eani.org.uk/publications/providing-pathways-strategic-area-plan-2017-2020>

Education Authority NI (2020) Area Planning

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

Education Authority NI (2022) Draft Strategic Area Plan 2022-2027

<https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-01/draft%20Strategic%20Area%20Plan%202022-27.pdf>

Education and Training Inspectorate (2017) Effective Practice and Self-Evaluation Questions for Governance

https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/isef-for-governors_1.pdf

Education and Training Inspectorate (2017) The Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework (ISEF): Effective Practice and Self-Evaluation Questions for Primary

https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/the-inspection-and-self-evaluation-framework-isef-effective-practice-and-self-evaluation-questions-for-primary_1.pdf

Perry, C. (2011) Sharing and collaborating in education. Northern Ireland Assembly, Research and Information Service Research Paper NIAR399-11.

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2011/education/16511.pdf>

Part Two: Community Conversation



“If progress is to be made towards an even closer alignment between the two schools it needs to progress slowly, sensitively and mindfully.”

Parent, Toolkit Development Phase

What is a Community Conversation?

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

Why have a Community Conversation?

There are increasing pressures on the accountable use of public resources. Many areas have two (or more) primary schools, often serving different communities, in close proximity and equally struggling to adequately meet DE’s sustainability criteria (Roulston & Cook, 2021). Attending a small school can have advantages and limitations. During the Community Conversations that informed the development of this toolkit, parents commented that smaller schools allowed the teacher to focus on a bespoke education for each child. Parents also recognised that pupils at these schools may be unable to avail of the same range of educational opportunities as those who attend larger institutions.

DE and the organisations involved in supporting and managing the different school sectors in NI are collectively focused on ensuring high-quality education by ensuring 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 Education Minister.

By engaging in Community Conversations, parents and other stakeholders can play a meaningful part in seeking to identify and develop effective local proposals to meet local educational need. The process is intended to aid identification of schools’ sustainability level, support school communities to be proactive rather than reactive, and to commence a process of community engagement before the statutory authorities/management bodies have identified the school(s)/area in an Area Planning action/operational plan.⁸

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.
- Solution-focused and action-oriented discussion so that participants can see its value.
- An optimistic and forward-looking focus on possibilities and potential solutions.
- Ideas and actions emerging rather than imposed.
- Identification of potential solutions that align with a community’s culture, priorities and resources.
- Participant awareness of its purpose so that potential solutions are realistically framed within context and resources of the community.

⁸Action Plan up to 31 Aug 2022. Operational Plan from 1 Sept 2022 with the endorsement of the SAP2 and associated OP1, 2 and 3

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 2) and each phase is comprised of a series of sequential steps:

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 (School Principals and School Governors, teachers, parents of pupils at local schools (and parents of children not yet of school age), community workers, local politicians, local business owners), and the core issue (e.g. what are the sustainability challenges of schools in the area?).

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), Department of Education data (including enrolment figures, breakdown by FSME, SEN, Religion) and relevant ETI inspection reports.

Step 3: Relationship building

Meet with School Principals and Governors, send letters/emails to all parents. Promote the Conversation in local newspapers, with notices in local shops, pre-school facilities and other community amenities. Circulate information through school 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 endeavour to ensure everyone who wishes to participate is able to do so. Your methods of engagement could include individual and group meetings with School Principals and School Governors, multiple daytime face-to-face conversations with groups of parents, an open (evening) meeting in a local hotel or other neutral venue, 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.

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.

Step 11: Conducting the conversation

The starting point for the Community Conversation is a recognition that the current pattern of provision is not sustainable. 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 that are unable to attend to provide their views or, for those who had attended, to add further comment.

Step 12: Note-taking

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

Step 13: Summary

Report back to the 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

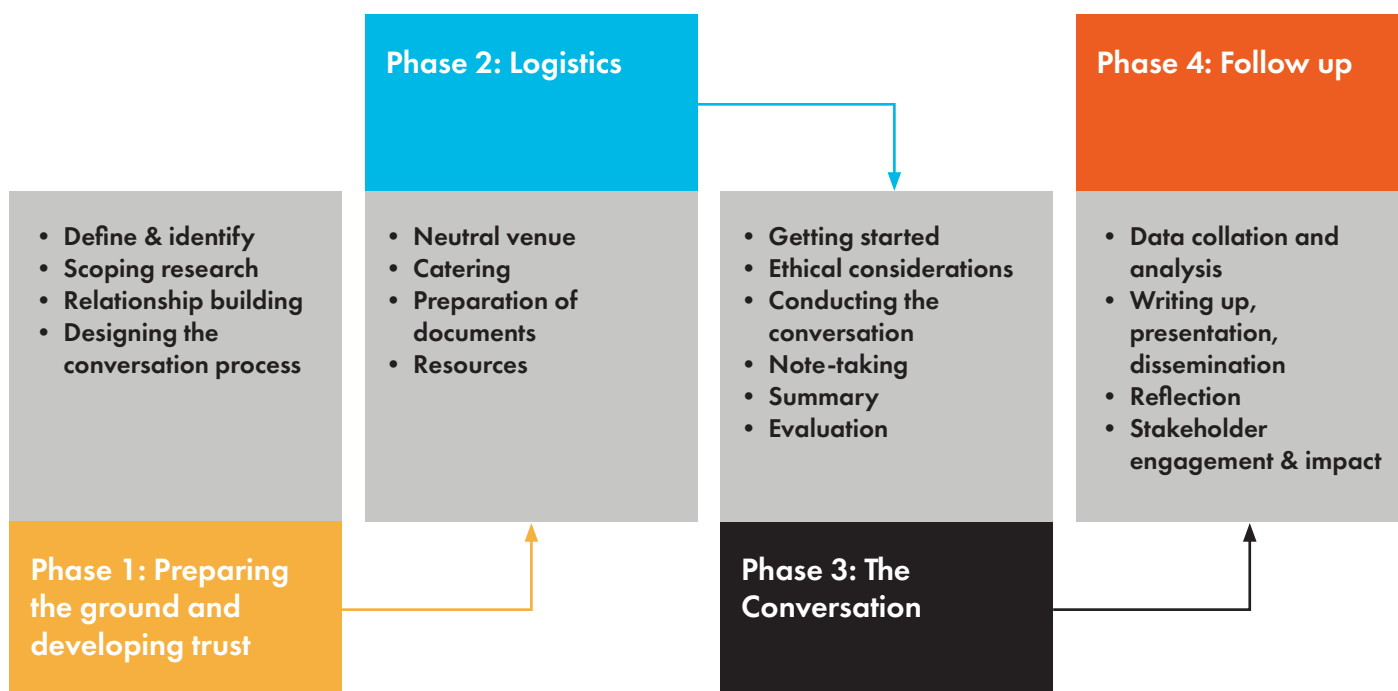
Individual and group reflections to identify what worked particularly well and any adjustments for future Community Conversations.

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.

Figure 2:

Phases involved in a Community Conversation



Facilitating a Community Conversation is a sequential process (Figure 3) 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)

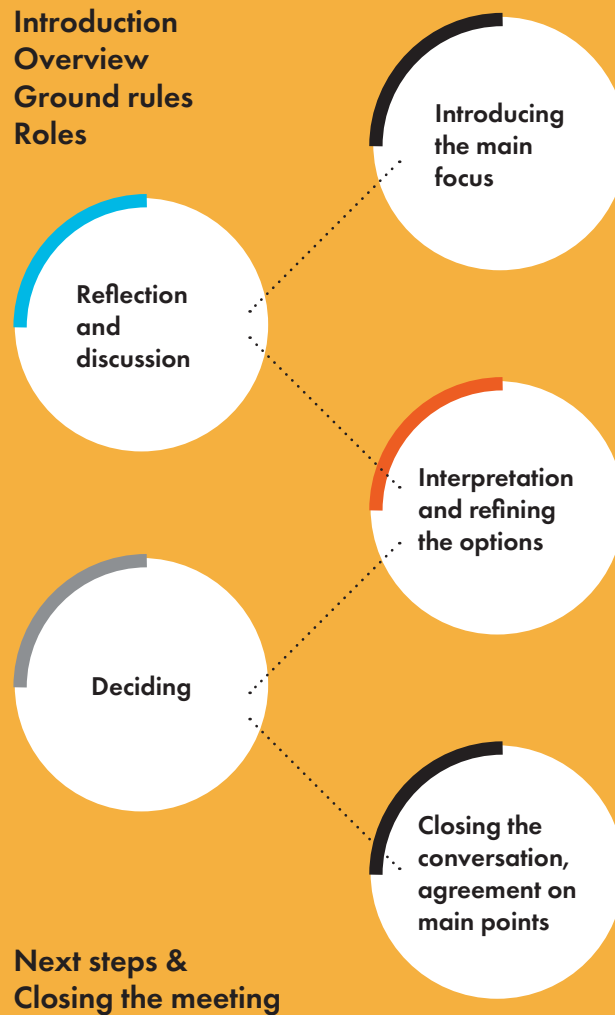
5. Community Conversation (60-75 minutes)

- 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)

The Community Conversation Process



A Suggested Community Conversation Schedule

Introduction:

- The facilitators introduce themselves and thank the participants present for making time to assist.
- The participants should be reminded of the purpose and nature of the Conversation:
 - We are asking you to help us explore together the sustainability issues facing school communities in this area and how we may be able to develop potential longer-term solutions.
 - Each Conversation would typically last one hour.

Possible Questions/Prompts for Community Conversation Participants⁹

1. How many here have children who are not yet in school? And how many are parents of children currently at primary school? [Go round participants individually – allowing each participant to speak]
2. Do you think that the current arrangements for primary education in your 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”?
3. Do you think that the current arrangements for primary education in your area ensure that “human and material resources are used effectively and efficiently?”
 - a. Why?
 - b. Why not?
4. Do you think that the current arrangements for primary education in your area “support those pupils with Special Educational Needs and other barriers to learning”?
 - a. Why?
 - b. Why not?
5. Do you think that the current arrangements for primary education in your area “support the pastoral care arrangements for pupils”?
 - a. Why?
 - b. Why not?
6. Do the current arrangements for primary education in your area entail additional costs?
 - a. “Are these justified by the benefits”?
7. Do you think that your area has an “over provision” of primary education?
 - a. If so, what solutions do you think might be “feasible” and “have the confidence and support of Governors and parents”?
8. What are your thoughts about the current level of sharing between schools in your area and the wider area?
 - a. Does this “involve both intra-sector and cross-sector sharing and collaboration”?
9. Considering education provision on an area basis, rather than from a 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 children and young people?
10. Is there anything else that anyone would like to add?

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Part Three: Processes and Pathways

“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”

(DE, 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 Special Educational Needs and other barriers to learning
- Support the pastoral care arrangements for pupils
- Reduce capital costs, recurrent costs or both
- Entail additional costs, and are these 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 Draft Strategic Area Plan 2022-2027 (SAP2) that was collectively developed by the education sector area planning partners draws particular attention to the importance of embedding partnership working between schools and reflects the priorities of the Ministerial 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 Planning collaborative models have been explored and it has been determined that none of these support sustainable educational provision in an area.

The SSP and SAP2¹⁰ identify a number of possible alternative options for schools that are not meeting the sustainability criteria. Some of these could involve some degree of cross-community and cross-sectoral coming together:

1. Partnership – further development of the existing educational relationships developed through Shared Education (and other initiatives) to improve sustainability.
2. Collaboration – sustainability may be assisted by collaboration between schools to expand the curriculum offered to pupils.
3. Federation – where schools of the same or different management types work in partnership, exchanging teachers, pupils or both, but with each retaining its own Principal and Board of Governors. Schools may share specialist facilities and/or administrative staff; this could also involve a number of schools combining to form a single school with one Principal and one Board of Governors but operating on two or more sites.
4. Transformation to integrated status.
5. 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)
6. Amalgamation - a new school is formed to replace two or more schools of similar size coming together and usually means a new name, uniform etc. (This differs from a closure where a small school closes and pupils are able to transfer to available larger schools).

School closure/discontinuance will be considered by the managing authorities if the other models have been explored and deemed unachievable.

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.

(Draft Area Strategic Plan 2022-2027, p. 33)

It is vital that school communities whose long-term sustainability may be uncertain consider these alternative 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.

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. It is important that all schools undertake an annual self-evaluation against the criteria and indicators of the Sustainable Schools Policy.

(Draft Area Strategic Plan 2022-2027 p. 13)

Any new option or pathway will have wide ranging implications for the school and the community within which it is located, as well as other schools located in the wider area.

¹⁰At the time of writing, SAP2 is in development. Current information will be available from: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/area-planning-guidance-2022-2027> and <https://www.eani.org.uk/school-management/area-planning>

Options and Pathways:

Federation

A federation is where one school combines leadership and governance arrangements with one or more other schools. This approach has been used in a number of locations in England and Wales to increase capacity among schools facing closure. It has yet to be tried in NI.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) – the English counterpart to ETI in NI – found that federations were successful in broadening and enriching the curriculum and care, guidance and support and in supporting good educational outcomes (Ofsted, 2011). The report also found that federations shared a greater pool of resources and expertise, while other research has highlighted: increased opportunities for professional development, and potential for economies of scale.

Transformation

Integrated education is defined in the Integrated Education Bill (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 Bill states that 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.”

With the exception of special schools and hospital schools, any school of any management type is able to 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.

Jointly Managed Church School

A jointly managed church school is a grant-aided school that provides shared education with a Christian ethos. It is managed by a Board of Governors with balanced representation from the two main communities including Transferors and Catholic Trustees. 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.

Although there have, to date, been no joint church schools established in NI, DE expects that such a school would come about through 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.

Amalgamation

Amalgamation is where two or more schools of a similar size come together to form a new school. Development Proposals setting out the effective amalgamation of two schools will normally involve the discontinuance of the existing schools and the establishment of a new school.

Pathways for each model of primary school provision

Options	Process	Considerations	Guidance
Federation	<p>Within the Northern Ireland context legislation regarding Federations only exists for primary schools and is limited to same sector. Currently no federations operate within Northern Ireland.</p> <p>Could involve, for example, a school on two sites - one serving Reception and Years 1-3 the other providing education for Years 4-7.</p>	<p>Two potential options:</p> <p>A soft federation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each school retains its own Board of Governors. • Set up a joint committee to agree common goals. • Shared Principal • Each school has its own budget. • Each school decides their own priorities. <p>A hard federation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single Board of Governors. Common goals. • Each school has its own budget, but finances can be pooled between schools in the federation. 	<p>EA has brought forward a research paper which is being expanded through the Area Planning Working Group to progress to guidance on how a federation could operate.</p>
Transformation	<p>Controlled Integrated School</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Legal process of transformation requires evidence of 'parental wish' – normally, a postal ballot. 2. One school submits a Development Proposal (DP) to EA to <i>transform</i> to a Controlled Integrated School. 3. In the case of amalgamation all other schools involved need to submit DPs to close. 4. DP must detail the joint working between two schools. <p>Grant Maintained Integrated School</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Legal process of transformation requires evidence of 'parental wish' (as above). 2. One school submits a DP to EA to become a Grant Maintained Integrated School. 3. In the case of amalgamation all schools involved (including the school that is transforming) need to submit DPs to close. 	<p>Must follow guidance of minimum pupil intake:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12-pupil intake in year 1. <p>The existing Board of Governors need to stand down.</p> <p>The membership of the reconstituted Board of Governors would include parent, EA and teacher representatives, as well as trustee and transferor nominees, teacher representative and Governors nominated by EA.</p> <p>Must follow guidance of minimum pupil intake:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12-pupil intake in year 1. <p>The existing Board of Governors need to stand down.</p> <p>Grant Maintained Integrated Schools are managed by a Boards of Governors consisting of Trustees or Foundation Governors along with parents, teacher and DE representatives</p> <p>The Board of Governors of a Grant Maintained Integrated school is the employing authority and is responsible for land, liabilities and the employment of staff.</p>	<p>https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/establishing-integrated-school</p> <p>Integration Works – Transforming your School Guidance Department of Education (education-ni.gov.uk)</p> <p>https://www.integratemyschool.com/</p> <p>https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/establishing-integrated-school</p> <p>Integration Works – Transforming your School Guidance Department of Education (education-ni.gov.uk)</p> <p>https://www.integratemyschool.com/</p>

Pathways for each model of primary school provision

Options	Process	Considerations	Guidance
<p>Jointly Managed Church School</p>	<p>To date, no jointly managed church schools have been established in NI.</p> <p>A JMS is most likely through a merger of a Controlled and a Maintained school.</p> <p>Both existing schools would submit DPs to close and a new school would be created.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A JMS is a state-funded school. • Boards of Governors would include <i>balanced</i> representation. <p>Places on the Board of Governors would be reserved for Transferors and Catholic Trustees.</p> <p>The legislative and administrative process to provide for a Jointly Managed Church School in Northern Ireland is currently being progressed by the Transferor Representatives’ Council, and Catholic Schools’ Trustee Service with the expectation that a legal framework would be agreed by 2022/23</p>	<p>Circular 2015/15 - Jointly managed schools Department of Education (education-ni.gov.uk)</p> <p>https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/circular-201515-jointly-managed-schools</p>
<p>Amalgamation</p>	<p>Amalgamation is fully detailed in DE Circular 2018/15 – this circular also provided templates, plans and pro-forma to aid the process.</p>	<p>DE has established an Amalgamations Advisory team. This team will work directly with all parties, including the Interim Board of Governors.</p>	<p>https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Guidance%20on%20Implementation%20of%20Approved%20Development%20Proposals%20for%20School%20Amalgamations%20%28Final%20Version%29.pdf</p>

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A Self Evaluation Resource for Boards of Governors

Criterion 1: Quality Educational Experience

Indicator	Evidence
<p>1.1 Attainment/progression levels of pupils (Key Stage tests pending development of new indicators for Primary Schools).</p>	
<p>1.2 No composite classes of more than two year groups in a single classroom.</p>	
<p>1.3 A minimum of four teachers.</p>	
<p>1.4 The ability of the school to cater for children with Special Educational Needs.</p>	
<p>1.5 The standards and the quality of learning and teaching at the school.</p>	
<p>1.6 The range of curricular and extra-curricular activities available for children including physical education, music, art, drama and science.</p>	
<p>1.7 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>1.8 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>	

Criterion 2: 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 At least seven classrooms (one for each year group). The minimum (not optimal) enrolment for newly established schools or existing schools should be... 105 for rural primaries or 140 for urban primaries.	

Criterion 3: 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 4: Strong Leadership and Management

Indicator	Evidence
<p>4.1 Governors' views on the school based on quantitative and qualitative evidence.</p>	
<p>4.2 Composition of Board of Governors – skills and experience of Board members and number of vacancies.</p>	
<p>4.3 Management of staff attendance and absenteeism.</p>	
<p>4.4 Levels and nature of staff turnover and unfilled staff vacancies.</p>	
<p>4.5 Teacher/staff morale.</p>	
<p>4.6 Management of curricular and organisational demands on the Principal and staff.</p>	
<p>4.7 Ensuring that the resource allocated is available so that the Principal has at least 1 day per week to attend to leadership and management duties.</p>	
<p>4.8 There is a school development plan (SDP) in place and progress is being made to achieve the plan's aims and objectives.</p>	
<p>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).</p>	

Criterion 5: Accessibility

Indicator	Evidence
5.1 Home to school transport travel times of less than 30 minutes for primary pupils (i.e. 1 hour per day in total)	
5.2 Distance to another suitable primary school.	
5.3 Existing co-operative arrangements with other schools -max travel time 30 minutes for a single journey and total of 2 hours per week.	
5.4 Capacity in nearest schools.	

Criterion 6: 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. ¹¹	
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. nursery or specialist unit.	
6.5 Multi-functional use of buildings outside formal education, for example, for sport, voluntary and community use.	

¹¹ An allowance may be made for pupils attending Irish Medium or Integrated schools as these are more geographically dispersed.

Building a bridge between
community and policy

Future Schools Toolkit

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