

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Education

Investing in our Children's Future: Education Capital Budget 2024-25

Mr Givan (Minister of Education): Today, I am setting out by Department's Capital Budget Strategy for 2024-25 and an ambitious vision for the development of the schools' estate in Northern Ireland.

Children in **every** school in **every** sector have the right to be educated in schools which are comfortable and safe, are of good quality and are properly designed and resourced to support their learning.

Historic levels of capital investment in the education system have, however, been woefully inadequate to meet our children's needs. In recent years, a static capital budget in an environment of significantly rising costs had significantly reduced our spending power and meant many important school investment projects were paused.

Many mid-20th century schools have reached the end of their shelf-life and are simply no longer fit for purpose. Critically, there are also insufficient school places to meet the needs of increasing numbers of children with complex Special Education Needs.

When I took up office, I, therefore, made it my key aim to secure additional capital funding for education and to ask the Executive to prioritise investment in our education infrastructure. I am, therefore, hugely pleased to have secured an opening Executive capital budget for this year of £254 million pounds - over £80 million pounds more than last year.

This will deliver real benefits for our children and young people.

Capital Budget Strategy 2024-25

My focus for capital investment in 2024-25 will continue to be on the areas of greatest need. Funding will be targeted to keep schools open, pupils safe and provide education access for the most vulnerable.

Increased investment in the education estate will allow over £50 million pounds of funding to be earmarked for Special Educational Needs. It will provide much needed additional school places and support my SEN Capital Programme, which will transform facilities for children with Special Educational Needs over the next decade.

We will also fund the continued roll-out of the EDIS programme to deliver high-quality digital services to schools - supporting learning, teaching and administration.

I am delighted that the additional capital funding I have secured has allowed me to lift the pause on new build and school enhancement projects progressing to construction.

The diversity of our school system is a strength not a weakness and today's announcement will deliver much needed investment in integrated, controlled, Irish-medium, Catholic maintained and grammar schools across Northern Ireland.

Fifteen much-needed major investment projects from every school sector in constituencies across Northern Ireland will now proceed to procurement and construction. The schools are listed below.

- Abbey Community College;
- Bangor Central Integrated Primary School;
- Carniny Primary School;
- Crawsfordsburn Primary School;
- Edendork Primary School;
- Glenwood Primary School;
- Kilronan Special School;
- Lurgan Model Integrated Primary School.
- Mary Queen of Peace Primary School;
- Millennium Integrated Primary School
- Scoil an Droichid;
- St John's Primary School, Kingsisland;
- St Malachy's College, Belfast; and
- St Mary's Primary School, Barr.

Fresh Start

I am particularly delighted to announce that new build projects for two former Fresh Start Projects, Bangor Central and Millennium Integrated Primary Schools, will now progress immediately.

When the UK Government removed Fresh Start funding, I moved those schools which were impacted by the loss of funding to my Department's conventional major works programme. I committed to taking them forward in design and planning. Today, I am able to demonstrate what that commitment means in reality for both of these schools. I also renew my commitment to continue planning of the remaining Fresh Start schools and move them forward to construction when they are ready and funding is available.

Whilst some have tried wrongly to depict the removal of UK Government funding as a decision of my Department and pushed for investment in one school sector at the expense of others, I have concentrated firmly on delivering for the education system as a whole.

Whilst some have cared little for the impact of their words and deeds on six school communities and 4,000 children in Omagh, I have focussed on maximising investment for **all** children and **all** school sectors.

This year, I have delivered both £20 million pounds of additional ring-fenced investment to deliver the flagship Strule Shared Education Campus alongside a much-increased Executive capital budget for education.

Not integrated **or** shared education – but integrated **and** shared education building a prosperous and reconciled Northern Ireland.

Curriculum-Led Programmes

New builds can, however, only be delivered for a relatively small number of schools at any time. I want to ensure the educational experiences of as many children and young people as possible across Northern Ireland are impacted positively by capital investment.

I plan, therefore, over coming weeks to launch a series of targeted smaller scale investment programmes to support and enhance the delivery of the curriculum in our schools.

Potential schemes will include specialist curriculum accommodation at post-primary; outdoor play and PE facilities in the primary phase and curriculum resources and equipment more widely. I hope these programmes will provide a much-needed boost to schools across the country.

Vision for Capital Investment

Capital investment directly supports the twin pillars of excellence and equity in education. Our vision is that every child is educated in a high-quality learning environment.

This does not mean every school is rebuilt but much more conservatively that our children go to a school where the building meets all health and safety requirements; has appropriate disabled access; has the right number of suitable places; is in reasonable condition with a programme of planned maintenance; supports the delivery of curriculum and has sufficient outdoor play space.

Such high-quality learning environments are much more likely to deliver the best outcomes for all children and young people. The additional funding I have secured this year is an important first step to achieving this vision, however, investment will need to be continued over the next decade.

Conclusion

In conclusion, today's announcement is an example of local government working for local people. Earlier this year, we were at a crossroads. Our education system was in real danger of being left behind in facilities from a previous century not designed for 21st century needs.

Now with the recent Executive commitment to additional capital funding for education, we are at the dawn of a new era of investment and renewal in our schools' estate. We are showing early promise but we need sustained and continued investment in education infrastructure.

Today, I offer the vision of an education system where every child benefits from improved facilities and is educated in a high-quality learning environment with the facilities and resources to support a modern curriculum.

We have the opportunity to make tomorrow a better day for our children. Let us rise to the challenge – let us make a positive difference and leave a legacy of wonderful facilities for generations to come.