

Minutes of Meeting of Policy and Resources Committee of Mid Ulster District Council held on Thursday 11 January 2024 in the Council Offices, Burn Road, Cookstown and by Virtual Means

Members Present

Councillor Corry, Chair

Councillors Bell*, Brown*, F Burton*, J Burton*, Cahoon, Gildernew*, McAleer, McFlynn*, McLernon*, S McPeake*, Molloy*, Totten*, Wilson

Officers in Attendance

Mr McCreesh, Chief Executive**

Mr Black, Strategic Director of Communities & Place (SD: C&P)**

Mrs Campbell, Strategic Director of Environment (SD: Env)**

Mrs Canavan, Strategic Director of Organisation Development, Strategy and Performance (SD: ODSP)

Ms Dyson, Head of Human Resources (HoHR)**

Mr McGuckin, Head of Strategic Services and Engagement (HoSS&E)

Ms McNally, Assistant Director of Corporate Services and Finance (AD: CS&F)**

Mr O'Hagan, Head of IT (HoIT)

Mr Tohill, Strategic Director of Corporate Services & Finance (SD: CS&F)

Mrs Grogan, Committee and Member Services Officer

Others in Attendance

Councillor McConnell***

Deputation:

Integrated Education Fund – Future Schools Project

Ms Fiona McGinn and Mr Sean Pettis

* Denotes members present in remote attendance

** Denotes Officers present by remote means

*** Denotes others present by remote means

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm.

The Chair, Councillor Corry welcomed everyone to the meeting and those watching the meeting through the Live Broadcast. Councillor Corry in introducing the meeting detailed the operational arrangements for transacting the business of the committee in the chamber and by virtual means, by referring to Annex A to this minute.

PR001/24 Notice of Recording

Members noted that the meeting would be webcast for live and subsequent broadcast on the Council's You Tube site.

PR002/24 Apologies

Councillors Johnston and and McLean.

PR003/24 Declarations of Interest

The Chair, Councillor Corry reminded Members of their responsibility with regard to declarations of interest.

PR004/24 Chairs Business

None.

PR005/24 Deputation: Integrated Education Fund – Future Schools Project

The Chair, Councillor Corry advised Ms Fiona McGinn and Mr Sean Pettis from Integrated Education Fund – Future Schools Project were in attendance and invited them to make their presentation (appendix 1).

The representatives advised that the Future Schools Project has been undertaken by researchers from the School of Education, Ulster University in a project partnership with the Integrated Education Fund.

The core aim of the Programme is “To support initiatives that put people at the centre of decision making (regarding the provision of education) in Northern Ireland.

Ms McGinn and Mr Pettis provided members with a brief synopsis of the project which included:

- Why the Future Schools Project was developed
- How the Future Schools Project can support communities
- The Future Schools Toolkit
- How Future Schools Project can link with the Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland

Ms McGinn said what they would really like was if there was any members here tonight who thought there were any primary schools in their area which were not sustainable and would possibly like more information about the Future Schools Project and how support can be given to their communities or schools, to discuss other options and try to find a way forward to make their provision more sustainable, then they could contact herself.

Ms McGinn stated if members would like more information about the role of Ulster University or to discuss the Toolkit, to contact Ms Jessica Bates who would be happy to assist with any comments or queries.

The Chair thanked Fiona and Sean for their very interesting presentation and asked for members comments.

Councillor Wilson said that it would be useful if the overhead presentation could be circulated to members.

Councillor Wilson referred to the risk of closure of country schools as people would not be supportive of that.

Ms McGinn said that they understood completely that schools are the heart of the community and very important to communities and would rather the community having a say in what was happening to the schools and coming to some sort of agreement together rather than leaving things until it's too late and things being imposed on them from the top where a community could lose their school.

Councillor F Burton asked when talking about sharing did they mean that this related to schools which are working separately but sharing teachers as a resource, so each school doesn't have one Maths or English teacher. The member said that in her own area there is partnership working from different schools where teachers teach subjects between schools which helps with running costs.

Councillor F Burton referred to St. Mary's Primary School in Fivemiletown which was under threat of closure and where the Fivemiletown community as a whole really got behind the school and fought to keep it open. The member said that this was very important as schools are the focus of many rural areas and want to try and ensure that going forward that any support that we can get for primary schools in rural location is obtained. The member also said that it was vitally important that admission numbers do not dwindle down if possible so it becomes a less viable option and if any information is available could this be forwarded on to Council as this would be much appreciated.

Mr Pettis advised members that copies of the Toolkit were available here tonight in booklet form or alternatively online and set out some of what the potential options are. He said that certainly schools sharing resources might be the outcome of a community conversation, like some kind of federation, both hard and soft federations, and all types of models which were possible. He said from their point of view they do not predetermine an outcome and was up to the communities to figure out what works and would help with that process in terms of exploring what the options are. In referring to the situation in Fivemiletown, he said that this was a good example of a community coming together and preventing a decision being made which would have affected the community as a whole. There could be multiple possibilities like amalgamation, a new jointly managed school or an existing school within the community would be ideal and all kids could access that. There are many possibilities and all they were trying to do was to create a process to enable those conversations to happen with no predetermined outcome.

Councillor F Burton referred to Aughnacloy and Caledon being cross-border areas and enquired if this could possibly work for teachers and students who come here to study and asked if this would be an option for the group to support also.

Mr Pettis advised that community conversations would tend to be centred around a geographic area where there were some schools and if a school is drawing families and children from across the border, he felt that this could be part of the conversation. He said that he was unsure if there was legislation for the planning authorities to work at schools on a cross-border basis but for families moving, he did not see why they couldn't be part of the conversation.

Councillor F Burton said that going forward it would be important to make everything as viable as possible and working together on that process and not ruling out opposed to

adding to. The member said as a rural Councillor she wants to make sure that rural families and rural schools are part of the community as they are the lifeline of that community and in the event of that being lost, it would be very hard to get that back again. She said that it was very important that everyone has what they need in terms of adequate education.

Mr Pettis agreed that it was important to engage on what possibilities that there are, but at the end of the day it was the planning authorities which take forward a suggestion and really important that communities are well consulted and part of that decision making.

Councillor S McPeake thanked Fiona and Sean for their presentation and said that he had listened attentively to the discussion and felt that anything that gives communities an earlier and better say in the sustainability of the schools was to be welcomed. He said that in the past we have seen too often examples where these changes were thrust upon communities, parents and the school estate without proper engagement and he would be certainly open to what is being proposed about having early discussions. He said that it would be important that everything is on the table i.e. pooling resources, sharing resources, doubling up and avoiding duplication and anything which would bring that conversation to the fore is very much to be welcomed and wished the group well in their future endeavours.

Ms McGinn and Mr Pettis withdrew from the meeting at 7.20 pm.

Matters for Decision

PR006/24 Elected Member Development Working Group

The Head of Strategic Services and Engagement (HoSS&E) presented previously circulated report which sought approval for the recommendations of the Elected Member Development Steering Group and actions contained, held on 8 December 2023 to include:

- Continue to retain Charter Status and Explore Charter Plus Officer and Member commitment
- Personal Development Plans be progressed
- Code of Conduct Training be progressed
- Terms of Reference

Proposed by Councillor McAleer
Seconded by Councillor Brown and

Resolved That it be recommended to Council to approve the report and recommendations of the Elected Member Development Steering Group meeting and actions contained from meeting held on 8 December 2023 to include:

- Issue of Personal Development Plans
- Code of Conduct Training be progressed
- Terms of Reference of Working Group
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PR007/24 Requests to Illuminate Council Properties

The Head of Strategic Services and Engagement (HoSS&E) presented previously circulated report which sought approval to illuminate and light up the Council's three designated properties to raise awareness for the following:

- NI Chest Heart and Stroke: National Heart Month 1 February 2024 – Colour: Red

Proposed by Councillor Brown
Seconded by Councillor F Burton and

Resolved That it be recommended to Council to illuminate the three designated Council properties as follows –

- NI Chest Heart and Stroke: National Heart Month 1 February 2024 – Colour: Red

PR008/24 Member Services

No issues.

Matters for Information

PR009/24 Minutes of Policy and Resources Committee held on 7 December 2024

Members noted Minutes of Policy & Resources Committee held on 7 December 2024.

Live broadcast ended at 7.22 pm.

Local Government (NI) Act 2014 - Confidential Business

Proposed by Councillor McAleer
Seconded by Councillor Cahoon and

Resolved In accordance with Section 42, Part 1 of Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (NI) 2014 that Members of the public be asked to withdraw from the meeting whilst Members consider items PR010/24 to PR022/24.

Matters for Decision

PR010/24 Staffing Matters for Decision
PR011/24 Land and Property Matters
PR012/24 Lumfords Glen – RIBA Stage 3
PR013/24 2024/25 Insurances Update
PR014/24 Financial Management System – Technology One
PR015/24 Members Allowances Update
PR016/24 Provision of An Employee Assistance Programme and Healthcare Cash Plan

Matters for Information

- PR017/24 Confidential Minutes of Policy & Resources Committee held on 7 December 2023
- PR018/24 Staffing Matters for Information
- PR019/24 2024/25 Rate Estimates
- PR020/24 Financial Report for 8 Months ended 30 November 2023
- PR021/24 Contract and DAC Registers
- PR022/24 Industrial Strike Action

P023/24 Duration of Meeting

The meeting was called for 7.00 pm and ended at 8.25 pm.

Chair _____

Date _____

Annex A – Introductory Remarks from the Chairperson

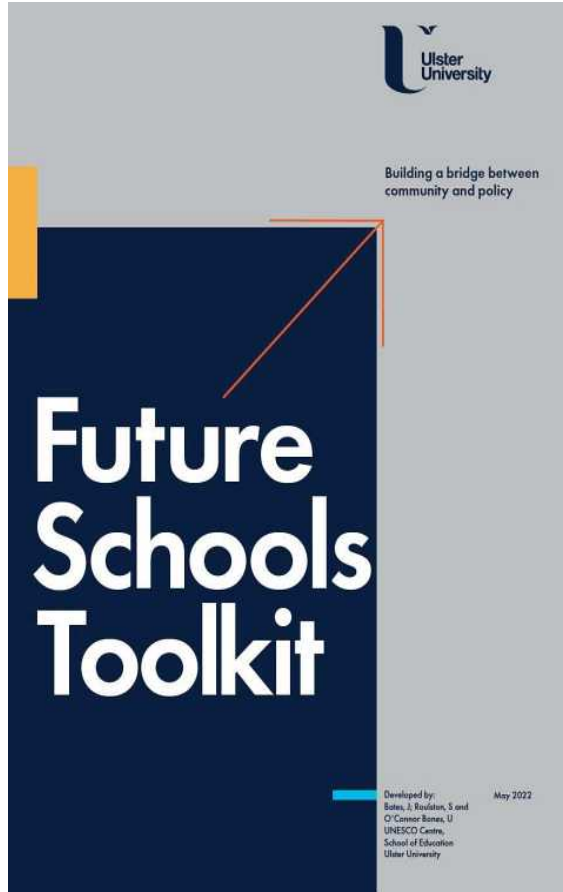
Good evening and welcome to the Council's [Policy & Resources/Environment/Development] Committee in the Chamber, [Dungannon/Magherafelt] and virtually.

I specifically welcome the public watching us through the Live Broadcast. The Live Broadcast will run for the period of our Open Business but will end just before we move into Confidential Business. I let you know before this happens.

Just some housekeeping before we commence. Can I remind you:-

- If you have joined the meeting remotely, please keep your audio on mute unless invited to speak and then turn it off when finished speaking
- Keep your video on at all times, unless you have bandwidth or internet connection issues, where you are advised to try turning your video off
- If you wish to speak please raise your hand in the meeting or on screen and keep raised until observed by an Officer or myself
- Should we need to take a vote this evening I will ask each member to confirm whether they are for or against the proposal or abstaining
- When invited to speak please introduce yourself by name to the meeting
- For any member attending remotely, if you declare an interest in an item, please turn off your video and keep your audio on mute for the duration of the item
- If referring to a specific report please reference the report, page or slide being referred to
- Lastly, I remind the public and press that taking photographs of proceedings or using any means to enable anyone not present to see or hear proceedings, or making a simultaneous oral report of the proceedings are not permitted

Thank you and we will now move to the first item on the agenda - apologies and then roll call of all other Members in attendance.



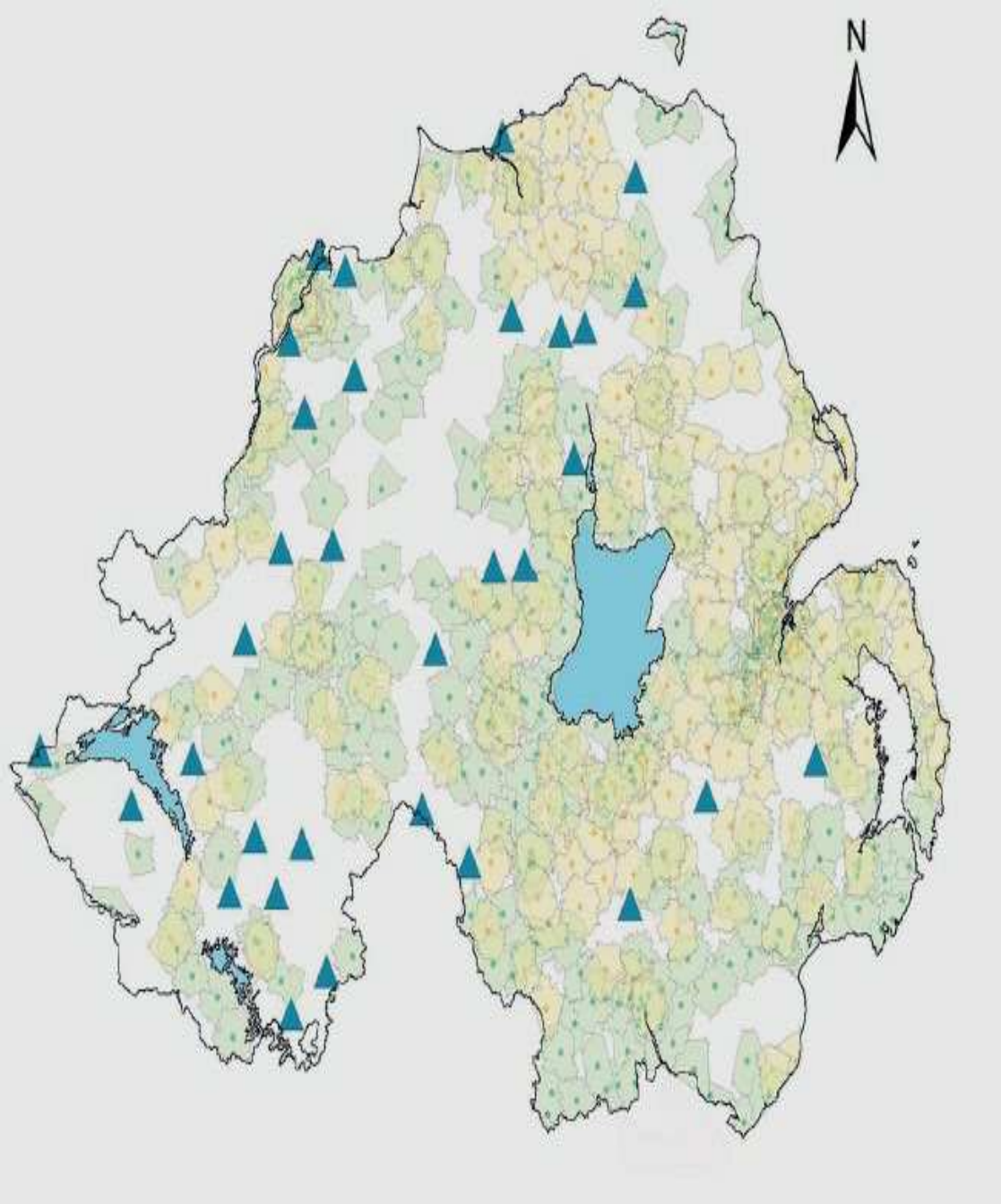
What is the Future Schools Project and its associated toolkit?

- *The Future Schools Project has been undertaken by researchers from the School of Education, Ulster University in a project partnership with the Integrated Education Fund.*
- *The core aim of the Programme is: “To support initiatives that put people at the centre of decision making (regarding the provision of education) in Northern Ireland.”*

Why was the Future Schools Project developed?

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)

- The Future Schools project has been designed to support schools and communities who wish to explore whether there might be a more sustainable approach to primary school provision in their local area.
- 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.
- The duplication of schools in many communities has led to the prevalence of too many small schools across Northern Ireland.
- According to The Sustainable School's Policy, there were 220 rural primary schools (33%) below the minimum thresholds in 2020/21. 21 primary schools had fewer than 30 pupils.
- The Department of Education is currently involved in an Area Planning process to create a network of sustainable schools. This has led to a number of recent school closures.
- The Department of Education has been engaged with the Future Schools Project as it aligns well with their direction of travel for Area Planning.



- A study by Ulster University in 2019 examined the duplication of primary school provision in Northern Ireland.
- This duplication typically occurs when a Controlled school and Maintained school are located close to one another, often in small settlements.
- They identified 32 isolated pairs of primary schools which were of different management types and located less than one mile apart and more than 3 miles from a another school of the same management type.
- In 26 of these pairs, at least one school was not sustainable.
- The study concluded that were the schools to find arrangements to remove duplication and become more sustainable, they would be more likely to avoid closures which would benefit local communities of all backgrounds.

How can the Future Schools Project support communities?

The Project supports school communities who wish to explore whether there might be a more sustainable solution to primary school provision in their geographic area and to provide guidance on how they could move forward with this in practice.



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. The aim is to engage communities to ensure that everyone who lives in the area can have their views heard regarding education preferences.



The Future Schools Project does not seek to pre-determine pathways for specific schools or communities but rather to empower and support them to determine (in conjunction with the EA, CCMS, CSSC Department of Education and other key stakeholders) what option is most likely to lead to a sustainable future.

Future Schools Toolkit

The Future Schools Toolkit

A detailed toolkit has been created as part of the project which highlights three main facets:

1. The first section provides guidance to schools to self-assess and explore their own sustainability by assessing it against the DE Sustainable Schools Policy and other relevant policy documents.
2. The second section provides a mechanism and guidance to support school communities who wish to have a community conversation. This offers communities an opportunity to engage about options for school provision that would provide a sustainable and high-quality education in their local area, particularly where current provision may not meet the sustainable schools' criteria.
3. The final Pathways and Processes section of the Toolkit identifies alternative options that may be available to a community seeking to find a sustainable solution.



Figure 1:
Three-part structure of the
Future Schools Toolkit Process



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How does the Future Schools Project link with the Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland?

- The Review highlights the concerning number of 'non-viable small schools' and recommends a new approach to area planning.
- It recommends 'strict adherence' to the minimum enrolment thresholds of 105/140 in rural/ urban primary schools.
- It recommends the establishment of an Independent Planning Commission which will develop a plan for a new network of schools based on sustainability and jointly managed schools.
- It suggests increasing the number of integrated schools or jointly managed community schools.
- The new model suggests the creation of 99 new or reconfigured jointly managed community primary schools and 22 post primary schools.
- The modelling of this reconfiguration of schools suggests that running costs will reduce by £94 million per annum.
- The review suggests that The Department of Education should encourage this change by allocating £1 billion of capital funding and £135 million over a period of ten years for schools making the transition.

For further information on the Future Schools Project, please contact Fiona McGinn, Future Schools Officer at: fiona@ief.org.uk



For further information on the toolkit, please contact Dr Jessica Bates, Ulster University at: j.bates@ulster.ac.uk

