

## **Written evidence submitted by The Governing Bodies Association NI (GBA), relating to the funding and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland inquiry (FPC0029)**

1. The Governing Bodies Association NI (GBA) is the sectoral body representing Northern Ireland's voluntary grammar schools. The GBA provides advice and support for members as well as representing their views to politicians, policy makers, media and other education stakeholders.
2. Established over 75 years ago, the GBA has a proud tradition of building cross-community links in education.

### **Voluntary Grammar Schools**

3. There are 50 voluntary grammar schools in Northern Ireland, which are amongst the largest in the education estate. With delegated responsibilities and greater control of their budgets, voluntary grammar schools are widely recognised to be amongst the most successful and efficient in the education sector from a financial management perspective. GBA member schools are focused on delivering cost efficiency and value for money through the prudent and productive use of resources, while delivering excellence in education.
4. Our member schools are renowned for their quality learning and teaching environments which provide a world-class education for approximately one-third<sup>1</sup> of all post primary pupils in Northern Ireland.
5. The enduring success of schools in the voluntary sector attests to sound financial management of budgets and good governance, overseen by committed school governors all of whom serve on an entirely voluntary basis.
6. Each school offers a wide variety of curricular and extra-curricular activities, which combined with pastoral support, enables our young people to reach their full potential.

### **Inquiry into Education Funding 2018**

7. In September 2018 the GBA submitted evidence<sup>2</sup> to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Inquiry into Education Funding in Northern Ireland. Almost five years later, the Northern Ireland Assembly is again in abeyance and the position of education funding has

---

<sup>1</sup> [Annual enrolments at schools and in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland 2022/23 | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk)

<sup>2</sup> [GBA Written Evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Inquiry 'Education Funding in Northern Ireland'](#)

deteriorated further since. The GBA is again making the call for long term, sustainable education funding arrangements in Northern Ireland which will meet the needs of children and young people both now and in the future.

8. Our 2018 submission highlighted the budgetary pressures across all Northern Ireland Departments and the difficulties which have been exacerbated by the lack of an Executive or Assembly, as well as the limitations of successive one-year budget allocations. These conditions remain the same; however, the consequences of annual budget allocations have been severe.
9. Key recommendations from the previous NIAC inquiry included *future budget allocations to the Department of Education rise not only in line with inflation, but in proportion to the number of pupils in the school system in order to reflect increasing pupil numbers and the associated demand for additional staff.*
10. The GBA recognises that the capacity to manage budgetary pressures has been intensified by the absence of local democratic institutions and an accountable Executive. However, for too long schools have had to rely on short term annual budgets and in-year allocations which simply cannot support school development planning or sufficient investment in our education system.
11. The implication of the rolling annual budget was previously noted by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee *in the absence of an Assembly the education budget has been set on a rolling annual basis, with the consequence that schools and sectoral bodies have not been able to plan for the future of education. This has been an obstacle to investment and improvement in children's education. We recognise the UK Government's reservations about setting long-term budgets while there is the prospect of the Assembly being restored. However, we believe that it is not in the long-term interests of education for the current uncertainty to continue.*

#### **Inquiry into Public Sector Funding 2023-24**

12. As previously stated, the GBA is deeply concerned about levels of education funding and the consequences for children and young people and the wider education system. In the absence of devolved institutions and accountable Ministers, the Association welcomes the Committee's focus on public sector funding in Northern Ireland. The education budget for 2023-24 is a cause of huge concern and presents probably the most significant challenge the system has ever faced. The consequences of this approach to funding education will not just be felt within the current financial year but will reverberate for years to come unless Ministers can now step forward to take the difficult political decisions that are required to put public expenditure in Northern Ireland on a long-term sustainable footing.

#### **The impact of a lack of a functioning Executive on budgetary management and strategic decision-making across Northern Ireland Departments**

13. The GBA welcomes the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's call for evidence regarding the funding of public services in Northern Ireland and is pleased to have the opportunity to contribute. Given our remit and membership our comments will focus largely on the education budget.
14. Reduced funding of many public services other than education will impact on learning. Educational attainment is directly impacted by life experiences beyond school. Appropriate interventions with children and young people by organisations funded through non-educational sources, including Health or the Department for Communities, can greatly benefit the learners receiving such support. Reduction or removal of that support will negatively influence the educational experience provided right across our education service, from pre-natal services to Higher Education. This will be particularly true for learners with additional needs and those from areas of social and economic disadvantage. These 'efficiencies' are also likely to increase the gap between higher and lower achievers.
15. The precarious nature of education funding in Northern Ireland has been consistently highlighted by the Chief Executives of the key education bodies. Our most recent intervention collectively called for sustainable and sufficient education funding. In our letter to the Secretary of State we advised that *"the current generation of children have already been adversely affected as a result of the pandemic. Schools face additional challenges as they support mental wellbeing and recovery of learning. These challenges will be compounded by a lack of educational funding, more money needs invested to support learning, yet we are looking at further cuts."*
16. For too many years the education system in Northern Ireland has been funded through annual budgets, monitoring rounds and ear-marked funding. It is disappointing that multi-annual budgets were not able to be agreed before the Assembly was suspended. The 2023-24 budget announcement by the Secretary of State represents the 9<sup>th</sup> successive single annual budget. It is simply not possible to transform and strategically plan in education on this funding model.
17. The Education Authority has indicated that it expects a funding gap of over £200 million in its allocation for the 2023/24 financial year. This will have an inevitable and detrimental impact on the entire education system and there is a real risk that the ability to carry out even the most basic statutory functions will be lost.
18. As things currently stand it is unclear how schools will be able to fund any pay awards that may be made to our key teaching and support staff. In addition, over the past number of weeks, we have been made aware of funding cuts for programmes that support vulnerable students such as Extended Schools, Shared Education, the Engage Programme, Holiday Hunger and pilot Happy Healthy Minds. These cuts have been brought about by the impossible challenges presented for the education budget going forward.
19. The 2023-24 education budget simply does not meet the very significant challenges facing the system. Rising pupil population, numbers of children with Special Educational Needs

increasing year-on-year, an extremely challenged education estate and unfunded pay claims are just some of the many challenges facing the system.

20. It should be acknowledged that budget pressures are not unique to this current year and a restored Assembly and Executive could not provide a solution to funding for education on a longer term sustainable basis unless they are accompanied by decisions and actions to address the underlying shortfalls in the resources available for investment in public services in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it will be imperative that restored institutions develop a vision for education in Northern Ireland which is accompanied by a budget that supports the ambition for the longer term.

### **Challenges facing Voluntary Grammar Schools**

21. As previously noted, the budget for 2023-24 will be a particularly challenging one for all elements of the education system, in Northern Ireland. The Boards of Governors of voluntary grammar schools are the managing authorities of their school and are responsible and accountable for the management of their schools' finances. They are facing unprecedented levels of financial stress due to the wider budgetary pressures and uncertainties around issues such as the funding of pay awards for their teaching and support staff. Other immediate pressures include:
- School canteens – rising food inflation, energy as well as equipment costs mean that school canteens are under more pressure than ever to provide pupils with high quality food. The last increase in the for free school meals occurred in 2017 when the level increased from £2.75 to £2.80. Since then, food inflation has dramatically transformed the costs borne by schools' catering services.
  - Substitute teacher costs – schools can only reclaim costs to a maximum of M3 level on the pay scale and as a result have to cover any additional cost themselves. Given the well-recorded and sustained scarcity of substitute teachers, notably those qualified to provide quality teaching for examination classes, schools have had no option but to hire teachers at the higher level.
  - Capital Fees – have remained at the same level of £140.00 since November 2008.
  - Classification of Schools as Non-Departmental Public Bodies has restricted the ability of many schools in our sector to borrow to finance long term capital projects to safeguard and develop the schools' estate.

Whilst the GBA acknowledges our engagement with local officials on these matters, it is no substitute for engaging with accountable Ministers who have authority to take the political decisions required.

### **The effectiveness of the Barnett formula in calculating the amount of money the UK Government makes available to support public services in Northern Ireland for providing essential services.**

22. In the Autumn Statement, the Chancellor stated, "*providing our children with a good education is not just an economic mission, it's a moral mission*" and advised that an

additional funding package of £2.3 billion will be made available to schools in England. Jeremy Hunt committed that in *“difficult economic circumstances we are investing more in the public service that defines all our futures”*. However, schools in Northern Ireland are not starting from a position equal to that of their English counterparts.

23. The Institute for Fiscal Studies reported in 2021 that Northern Ireland has the lowest spend per pupil in the whole of the UK<sup>3</sup>.

2021-22 Spend Per Pupil (IFS estimates)			
Scotland	England	Wales	Northern Ireland
£7600	£6700	£6600	£6400

24. The Institute for Fiscal Studies Report<sup>4</sup> published in April 2023 indicated while that spending had shown signs of recovery recently across the UK, it reported *“in Northern Ireland, there is more uncertainty, with no agreement reached on teacher pay levels stretching back to 2021 and signals of budget cuts for next year”*. So, any apparent recovery in funding will be short term in nature and the disparity in funding between Northern Ireland and Great Britain will continue.
25. Northern Ireland is now facing an unprecedented public spending crisis. It is increasingly clear that the current level of funding is insufficient to deliver public services effectively. We therefore face the prospect of a continuing deterioration in the basic quality of public services provided here compared with GB, Ireland, and the rest of Europe. The only alternative is to address the difficult political decisions required to put the provision of funding for these services on a sustainable basis for the longer term. Ultimately more money is required to sustain public services and political decisions are now required to determine how this should happen.

May 2023

---

<sup>3</sup> *School spending per pupil highest in Scotland, lowest in Northern Ireland*. October 2021, Institute for Fiscal Studies

<https://ifs.org.uk/news/school-spending-pupil-highest-scotland-lowest-northern-ireland>

<sup>4</sup> *How does school spending per pupil differ across the UK?* April 2023, Institute for Fiscal Studies  
<https://ifs.org.uk/publications/how-does-school-spending-pupil-differ-across-uk>