

Equality Commission response to the proposed Delivery Plan for Programme for Government Indicators 11, 12 and 13 (% school leavers achieving at level 2 or above including English and Maths; gap between % non-FSME school leavers and % FSME school leavers achieving at level 2 or above including English and Maths; % schools found to be good or better)

In January 2016, the Commission set out a number of priorities¹ for delivery via the work of government over the 2016-21 mandate. In our July 2016 response to the Programme for Government Framework consultation, we had specifically sought additional measures / indicators on increasing sharing in education and reducing prejudice based bullying in schools. We had further recommended that gaps in data be addressed, including on grounds of sexual orientation and having dependents.

The following considers the delivery plan content (version downloaded on 1 December 2016) against the key inequalities and policy priorities highlighted by the Commission in January 2016.

We hope that this information, in tandem with our response² to the consultation on the draft PfG, will be of assistance in the further development of the delivery plan.

1. Ensure a move to a system of education which routinely teaches all pupils together via a shared curriculum in shared classes, and where sharing impacts meaningfully and substantively on every learner.

- a. We note that the delivery plan is silent with regard to sharing in education, (although sharing is referenced in the delivery plan for the respect/ reconciliation/ shared space indicators). That plan notes the benefits of sharing and restates the legal duty on the Department with regard to shared education.
- b. The Commission considers that sharing across the education system could better provide learners with shared awareness, understanding and experience of the value and range of diverse cultures, identities and backgrounds in Northern Ireland; while also enabling learners from different cultures / communities to experience a shared society.
- c. Furthermore, sharing can allow pupils to access the full range of the curriculum and may encourage study of wider subjects at a further or higher education college. Pairing more effective schools with less effective schools may also offer the potential to close achievement gaps by improving standards and outcomes for all learners.
- d. The Commission considers that sharing in education has the potential to improve educational access and attainment for pupils from a diverse range of backgrounds and abilities³.

¹ ECNI (2016), Equality Priorities: [Programme for Government and Budget Recommendations](#)

² ECNI (2016), [Response to the Executive's consultation on a draft Programme for Government 2016-21](#)

³ ECNI (2015) [Shared Education](#)

- e. We reiterate our recommendations, as set out above, and call for appropriate actions within a revised delivery plan; and / or clarification of how delivery plan actions will advance these goals.

2. Tackle prejudice based bullying; address gender stereotyping in education; and remove the barriers facing looked after children and young carers.

- a. We note recognition within paragraph 17 of the delivery plan that looked after children may face particular educational and personal challenges to attainment at level 2.
- b. Apart from a reference to environments that are 'healthy and safe', the plan does not however seek to look at the issues which can impact on attendance and attainment and have a long term impact on life chances. There is no explicit mention of the impact of bullying neither generally nor with reference to specific Section 75 categories.
- c. The need to tackle the high incidence of prejudice-based bullying, both within schools and the wider community is a key challenge for Government and has been recognised as such by the international treaty bodies, such as UNCRC Committee, CEDAW Committee, CERD Committee, and the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention on National Minorities.
- d. In the previous mandate, the Department oversaw the introduction of legislation to tackle prejudice based bullying and ensure recording of incidents. We therefore recommend that the delivery plan includes actions which will ensure that the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act and its forthcoming guidance are used to reduce the incidence of bullying – generally and with regards to specific Section 75 categories.
- e. We further recommend that the delivery plan includes actions to address gender stereotyping, and the barriers facing young carers.

3. Address education inequalities, including those experienced by Irish Travellers; those entitled to free school meals, particularly boys, notably Protestants boys; and children / young people with disabilities.

- a. As stated previously, while it is apparent that there are a range of measures within the PfG and delivery plan which have the potential to address educational inequalities, in the main, they are often not targeted at particular equality groups. It is therefore difficult to assess the degree to which some actions will operate to address inequalities experienced by some Section 75 categories.
- b. We welcome that paragraph 6 of the delivery plan states that: 'to tackle those areas of most significant and persistent underachievement, the Executive will focus upon underachievement generally and especially upon addressing the underachievement that arises from socio economic disadvantage.' We recommend that this is also progressed and monitored in relation to each of the Section 75 categories.

- c. We note that the content of paragraph 9, and that which follows it, sets out the basic dimensions of a good quality education, and considers that a focus on particular equality groups, including Travellers, newcomers and boys is warranted.
- d. We note that paragraph 17 recognises the challenges faced by children with disabilities, those with SEN and Newcomers. We would further welcome specific actions ‘to address these barriers with tailored support.’
- e. With regard to boys from a Protestant community background at secondary schools with high levels of FSME, we note the assertion in the delivery plan that they are less likely to attain at Level 2 than any other group. It is however our understanding that Traveller and Roma young people have lower Level 2 attainment levels. We would ask the Department to clarify this point in the delivery plan, and to set out the actions that will be advanced for *each* of the Section 75 groups identified as underachieving.
- f. We welcome that paragraph 30 of the delivery plan recognises the challenge: ‘to ensure that the education system serves our young people, especially those at most risk of underachieving, most effectively and efficiently.’ However, we are concerned by the lack of consideration and actions identified for specific groups within Section 75 categories, and so again recommend that all actions and progressed and monitored with regards to Section 75 categories.
- g. We note that the delivery plan states that ‘the services designed to help newcomer learners, looked after children, and Traveller and Roma children will offer specific interventions and support them to attain.’ The nature, extent and focus of these interventions is not detailed and so it is not clear if these interventions are a continuation of, or addition to, existing interventions. Neither is it clear how these interventions will be monitored and as such if they will have the effect of addressing key inequalities.
- h. In addition, we note that the delivery plan states that ‘not all children have the potential to attain at level 2⁴ (5 GCSEs). It states: ‘There will be children who face particular educational and personal challenges to attainment at this level, including looked after children, children with disabilities, those with special educational needs, and those newcomers who face language barriers. The challenge remains to address these barriers with tailored support so that each child reaches their full potential.’ While accepting that not all *children* have the potential to attain at certain levels, caution will be required to avoid any blanket inference that the *challenges* faced by members of Section 75 *groups* are absolute *barriers* to attainment at a certain level of education. We support the focus in the delivery plan on providing tailored support so that each child reaches their full potential.
- i. We note that the delivery plan actions will seek to: give schools freedom to deliver innovative responses to the needs of individual learners (paragraph 45); support schools to innovate and collaborate as they focus their efforts to tackle underachievement (paragraph 47); encourage high aspiration and expectation

⁴ At paragraph 17

(paragraph 49); and, support more effective engagement with parents to support their children's education (paragraph 52). A commitment in the delivery plans to focus and measure progress for Section 75 groups across these activities would, we believe, drive attainment and deliver the broader individual and societal benefits of education.

4. Mainstream equality in education, including in the curriculum, teacher training and the policies / practices of schools and wider education bodies.

- a. We note that there is no reference in the delivery plan to mainstreaming equality in the curriculum or teacher training, nor to the policies and practices of schools and wider education bodies. The importance of embedding equality of opportunity and good relations within the school curriculum has long been recognised by the Commission. For example, while girls out-perform boys, stereotyping and subject choice contribute to boys being more likely than girls to study Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects in higher education.
- b. We recommend the inclusion of discrete actions to advance this point.

5. We recommend that all relevant PfG measures are tracked for the impact across Section 75 grounds and that gaps in equality data are addressed

- a. In relation to the dashboard of measures, referred to at paragraph 36, we would be grateful for a clear commitment / confirmation that it will also include data disaggregated by Section 75 category.
- b. We welcome the establishment of a new framework for the use of data to inform improvement, for innovation, and for dissemination of good practice in particular in respect of tackling underachievement amongst at risk groups. We recommend that this data is disaggregated across Section 75 categories.
- c. Comprehensive equality data is necessary to shape, refine and evaluate the impact of strategies, programmes and policies. There however remain significant and specific data gaps across a number of themes in education in relation to a number of equality grounds. The absence of data prevents the effective targeting of policy interventions and resources to tackle the inequalities which particular groups may face. We recommend the inclusion of discrete actions to address this point.
- d. Currently there is also a lack of disaggregation in education data in relation to: ethnicity, disability status, dependency status and marital status. Although we recognise that there are some limitations to data disaggregation, we also consider that disaggregation, where possible, would provide greater information to inform the better targeting of policy interventions – for example on how young carers, or children and young people with particular disabilities progress through school. We recommend the inclusion of discrete actions to address this point.