



JMB Opening Statement on the School Building Programme and related matters to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills

Introduction

The Joint Managerial Body (JMB) represents the management authorities of almost 380 voluntary secondary schools and we welcome the invitation from the Oireachtas Committee to participate in this discussion on the School Building Programme and related matters.

Any emerging strategy on education must include adequate provision for demographic surges in school population. Equally as important, we need to ensure that the fabric of our school infrastructure is systematically upgraded to enable quality provision for those in our care and that educational opportunity is afforded in an equitable manner.

Projections show that we can expect a continuing increase in enrolments at second level up as far as 2026, of at least 84,000 students at second-level.

A discrepancy exists in the voluntary school sector which has a historical tradition of engagement in education but has suffered from inadequate government investment in refurbishment and replacement of ageing facilities through successive generations.

One impediment to progress in this area is the lack of a comprehensive inventory of the national stock of school accommodation. As outlined in Professor Emer Smyth's 2013 ESRI study on 'Governance and Funding of Voluntary Secondary Schools in Ireland':

'In 1996, a Costs and Funding of Second-Level Schools in Ireland report by the Comptroller and Auditor General on planning of second-level school accommodation noted the lack of a comprehensive current inventory of the overall stock or condition of second-level school accommodation, despite recommendations by the interdepartmental committee in 1988 to compile such information.

Given the likely variation in stock and condition of school buildings, such information is crucial in facilitating greater transparency around school income and expenditure.'

JMB urges that a proper survey might now be conducted and the information disseminated.

We welcome the fact that the Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton, has announced plans for the establishment of forty-two new schools over the next four years (2019 to 2022). This announcement follows nationwide demographic exercises carried out by his Department into the current and future need for primary and post-primary school places across the country. The Department has also committed to monitoring areas where the accommodation of existing schools may need to be expanded in order to meet the needs of

the local population. Approximately 40% of extra school places are to be delivered by extending existing schools.

Nonetheless, there are still questions as to whether this will adequately address the needs that we identify.

Demographic growth and school buildings

JMB has welcomed the publication of the Six Year Plan for major capital investment. Fifty-four voluntary secondary schools are listed on the Plan and each of these can look forward to an extension and refurbishment of existing premises. However, it is imperative that the capital budget for schools be increased substantially. Many voluntary secondary schools have been serving their communities for more than 150 years. Many were built or extended to with no or limited State assistance and are now in need of major refurbishment and extensions.

JMB is concerned that with increasing building costs and lack of sufficient personnel in the School Building Unit, the targets in the Six Year Plan will not be met. There are schools on the list for 2018 that still have not received a Technical Visit from officials in the Building Unit. Other schools that have had a Technical Visit are still waiting for a Schedule of Accommodation and few have received approval to appoint a Design Team

It is the JMB view that schools due to go to construction in 2019-2021 period needed to have Technical Visits immediately with Schedules of Accommodation being issued shortly afterwards. With the time required to design, get statutory approvals and agreement with DES and tendering, it will be a huge task to meet the targets of the Six Year Plan. The appointment of a fully-funded Administrative Assistant for building in schools with projects over a specified size or other appropriate intervention such as funded management body support must also be considered.

There are many voluntary secondary schools who have recently applied for major works but who are not on the Six Year Plan List. These schools and the communities they serve cannot wait until 2022 or 2023 to be assessed for capital investment. A mechanism must be found to have these schools added to the current List and additional funding made available to meet their needs.

There is an increasing demand under the Additional Accommodation Scheme to provide additional classrooms and practical rooms for our schools, and to replace prefab classrooms. Current demand clearly exceeds the level of finance available. In addition, the Additional Accommodation Scheme needs to be expanded to allow for General Purpose/Dining Areas, staffrooms and offices for additional Deputy Principals

Likewise, the budget for Emergency Works is far too low to meet the needs of our schools. As a result, schools are forced into appealing decisions of the Building Unit in order to deal with serious emergency and safety works in their schools.

It was also hoped that Round 3 of the Summer Works Scheme would be announced this year and JMB urges the Department to signal its intentions for 2019 at the earliest opportunity.

In successive programmes for government, the elimination of prefabricated classrooms has been specifically identified as a national priority yet, very little progress has been made so far.

Meanwhile, JMB research indicates that just 50% of our schools have a full-sized P.E. Hall and 72% of PE Halls that do exist were either fully funded or partially funded by the schools themselves. Funding for adequate sports facilities in our schools must be identified as a government priority. In addition, schools require funding for replacement sports equipment which is becoming old and obsolete. We welcome the fact that the 64 schools teaching PE as an examinable Leaving Certificate subject from this year will receive some start-up grant aid, but all schools who wish to introduce the subject from 2020 on should receive similar assistance. In 2010 the Department did have a scheme to grant aid PE in all schools which proved to be very effective and we would urge that such a scheme is now reintroduced. Such equipment can very specialised and costly but there is no scheme in place unless a new sports hall is being built – a very rare occurrence. JMB believes that such funding should be available on an ongoing basis in a similar way to funding for replacement furniture, fittings and fixtures.

National Development Plan

The JMB welcomes the promise of the National Development Plan 2018-2027 and its commitments on school building in the post-primary sector. Ultimately, the key factors in determining access to school and educational outcome are that there are adequate places available and that infrastructure is such as to allow quality provision.

These assurances, allied to existing commitments, are welcome and, if implemented, will serve to alleviate some of the acute difficulty we have in this area.

The commitment of the JMB to substantive upgrading of our infrastructural base is evident not only in our ongoing advocacy with the Department, but also in the resources we assign to this area in supporting our schools and, indeed, assisting officials, especially in the Department's Building Unit. We have funded a designated Building Support Unit in our organisation to assist schools and liaise with the Department as appropriate. An unfortunate aspect of a school's applying for and accessing resources in this sphere is the administrative burden that falls on already over-stretched school management given the exponentially increasing nature of accountability and oversight required, and hence our request for an Administrative Assistant to be provided to schools with building projects over a specified size.

Conclusion

With regard to engagement around these issues, JMB will, of course, continue to work closely with our management colleagues across the sectors and with the Department and its agencies. We are particularly grateful for the courtesy and assistance that has always been afforded us by the officials of the School Building Unit in Tullamore and their commitment to improving facilities in our schools in a progressive and prudent manner. We recognise that the funding deficit that exists needs to be addressed in the broad policy context and that there

needs to be a societal acknowledgement that the impetus for infrastructural investment, so long neglected but so fundamental an issue, warrants even more engagement and financial scaffolding.

John Curtis, JMB General Secretary

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