

Opening Statement – Joint Committee 3 October 2023

Thank you Chairman.

By way of introductions - my name is Hubert Loftus and I am Head of the Department's Planning & Building Unit. I am joined by three of my management team - Aine Cusack and Murty Hanly who are Principal Officers and Mark Kelly, Technical Manager.

I am also joined by colleagues from our Special Education Division in the Department – Martina Mannion, Head of Special Education and Inclusion and also Martin McLoughlin Principal Officer.

I would like to thank the Committee for inviting the Department officials to provide a briefing on our current and future plans for school infrastructure including the specific topics referred to by the Committee in its invitation. In order to assist the discussions today I have provided an Appendix to my statement dealing with the specific topics raised by the Committee.

I will use the opportunity of the opening statement to provide a high level overview on our work which may also assist the Committee in our discussions today.

We have done a lot of work over the last 5 years reviewing and streamlining our systems, processes and procedures so that we are better positioned to deliver on the ambitions set out in the National Development Plan which is the key guide for our work and direction of travel. The strategic initiatives and reforms we have put in place (and continue to do so) are focused on enabling us to plan and deliver in a more strategic and coordinated manner.

The National Development Plan sets out the national priorities for the school building programme. Key priorities under the National Development Plan 2021 to 2030 include:

- Continuing to cater for additional capacity requirements.
- Provision of accommodation for special classes with a particular emphasis on ramping up provision at post-primary level to facilitate a smooth transition from primary level.
- Delivering on the Climate Action agenda and integrating, where possible, the modernisation of existing school infrastructure.
- Strengthening asset management and maintenance regime across schools.

We have a strong track record of delivery. During the period 2018 to 2022, nearly 900 school building projects were completed. We have a variety of delivery mechanisms including our Design & Build Programme, Employer led Design Programmes, Devolved Programmes and Modular Accommodation Programme. Across all of our programmes there is a strong emphasis on the use of modern methods of construction which is consistent with the Government's overall direction of travel in this area.

Through Project Ireland 2040, we are investing in excess of €5 billion over the period 2021 to 2025 to add capacity and develop and upgrade school facilities across the country for the almost one million students and over 100,000 staff that learn and work in our schools every day. We are conscious of the strong support from Government for investment in education including through supplementary funding in addition to NDP allocations.

We continue to have a strong pipeline of projects for delivery under the school building programme involving circa 300 projects at construction in 2023 which include over 40 new school buildings. These 300 projects at construction in 2023 involve a total State investment of over €1bn. There are also 72 projects currently at the tender process including a further 27 new school buildings. All of these new school buildings are flagship projects in their area and transform the education infrastructure for those school communities.

In addition, in excess of 35,000m² of additional capacity is being provided at schools across the country through our modular programme – equivalent in size terms to more than 3 new 1,000 student post-primary schools.

The Department uses its Geographical Information System (GIS) and works closely with key stakeholders such as NCSE, Patron bodies, Local Authorities, individual schools etc. to plan for additional capacity requirements across the school system to ensure there are a sufficient number of school places in a town or area for all children.

In this regard, it is very important that enrolments are aligned with existing capacity across schools to the greatest extent possible. The Department's Planning and Building Unit liaises closely with relevant Patrons to ensure a strategic and coordinated approach is taken to managing enrolments and maximising existing capacity both at individual school level and across a town or area.

Good coordination between schools in managing enrolment processes is very important. This helps to ensure that duplicate applications are identified at an early stage and any net additional accommodation requirements are identified early so that accommodation solutions can be put in place.

All of this work is supporting and facilitating over 960,000 primary and post-primary students in our school system including over 15,500 children from Ukraine and just over 26,000 children with additional needs enrolled in close to 3,000 special classes and in our 130 special schools.

Our planning for additional capacity requirements for September 2024 and September 2025 is well advanced. It is envisaged that these capacity requirements will be primarily managed through the completion of the circa. 300 school building projects that are currently at construction and supplemented with additional capacity provided as part of the modular accommodation programme.

Looking beyond 2025 our approach will be to continue to ensure we manage the pipeline of existing projects so that we target and prioritise areas that are under greatest pressure in order to keep pace with housing rollout. Delivery continues to be managed in a challenging construction sector environment.

The climate action agenda is also central to the Department's strategic planning. We have the very challenging target of a 51% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and net zero by 2050. This means optimising the use of our existing building stock and school sites, moving towards fully decarbonised solutions in cases where new projects are essential, and maximising the opportunities for active travel and use of public transport.

I am conscious that there is a special education dimension to some of the topics that the Committee wish to discuss today. Both my colleague Martina Mannion and I would like to reassure the Committee that the Department is working closely with the NCSE to plan strategically for special class requirements at primary and post primary level. This is making a real difference for parents of children with additional needs and we place a very strong emphasis on maximising the opportunities for integration and inclusion. There are now close to 3,000 special classes at our primary and post-primary schools. Given the scale of needs, we envisage that all post-primary schools will have an average of at least 4 special classes over time.

As already indicated, I have included an appendix to my opening statement which sets out the high level position in relation to each of the specific topics that the Committee wishes to discuss at our meeting today. I hope the Committee finds this helpful and that it will help in dealing with any issues of concern for Committee members.

Appendix 1. Current and Future Plans of the School Building Unit

1. New School Building for the Holy Family School for the Deaf, Cabra, Dublin

Key Points:

- This project involves an extension to the existing school at St. Joseph's Campus, Navan Road, Cabra including the refurbishment & demolition of existing buildings, construction of a new build extension and all associated site works. The building project will physically bring the school together on this one site.
- The school's September 2023 enrolment is 129 pupils. The building project will facilitate future growth at the school.
- A revised brief was approved for this project in Q4 of 2022 and provides for the construction of two new separate extensions (Phase 1 of 2,012m² and Phase 2 of 871m²) and the refurbishment of 1,960m² of the existing school building.
- A phased delivery is proposed for the project to facilitate the continued operation of the school throughout construction, including decant of the existing building as required to allow for renovation works and to avoid the requirement for temporary accommodation, which can add significant costs to the project.
- This large scale major project was devolved for delivery to the National Development Finance Agency (NDFA) and will be delivered as part a bundle of school projects.
- The NDFA have received tenders for the appointment of project managers and design teams in respect of schools including Holy Family School for the Deaf and it is expected the outcome of this procurement will be finalised towards the end of Q4 2023.
- Due to the unique special needs nature of this project, extensive consultation between the Department, Board of Management, the end users (principal,

teachers and support staff) took place as part of the development of the project brief and will be strong focus for the design team throughout the design development and construction stages.

2. Progress in providing ASD units in Primary Schools

4. Conversion of existing accommodation for autism classes

Key Points:

- Special Education Needs (SEN) accommodation is a standard feature of new school buildings and extensions.
- Approach is to maximise opportunities for provision in existing buildings.
- Ongoing strategic planning is supporting identification of accommodation needs and opportunities through national inventory of school capacity.
- Accommodation provided includes significant ancillary facilities: a sustainable and pragmatic approach is adopted in delivering purpose designed SEN facilities within existing or modular accommodation.
- Very positive feedback on reconfiguration of existing accommodation: promotes inclusion, facilitates earlier delivery, and supports climate goals.
- Accelerated delivery achieved via modular accommodation framework where there is no existing accommodation capacity – PM supports assist school authorities with delivery of same.
- School building designs incorporate the provisions of Universal Design and accessibility generally as part of project delivery.
- Recent strategic initiatives to support SEN provision include:
 - Use of GIS to support planning (recently shortlisted for a Civil Service Excellence and Innovation Award)
 - Future proofing through inclusion of SEN accommodation in building projects
 - Modular Accommodation Framework

- Expanded planning exemptions
 - Project Manager support for accelerated delivery
 - Simplified application process for reconfiguration
 - Strategic engagement involving Department, NSCE, and relevant stakeholders.
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- The vast majority of children with special educational needs continue to be educated in mainstream classes and are supported through the provision of Special Education Teachers and SNAs.
 - In the last few years, there has been a very significant increase in the number of children and young people being diagnosed with special educational needs; particularly in the area of autism. This in turn leads to a growing number of children needing a special class or special school placement
 - The Department of Education engage intensely with the NCSE in relation to the forward planning of new special classes and additional special school places. This work involves a detailed review of statistical data in relation to forecasting demand, an analysis of existing school accommodation capacity and a particular focus on the provision of special classes at post-primary level.
 - These initiatives are bearing fruit with almost 1,300 new special classes sanctioned over the last 4 years. The NCSE have sanctioned 389 new special classes for this 2023/2024 school year, with new classes sanctioned in every county.
 - 5 new special schools have been established over recent years and 2 further new special schools are being provided for this school year in Dublin and Cork. Capacity has also been expanded in a number of other special schools.
 - Looking forward the Department and the NCSE have begun preparatory work in relation to planning for the provision of further new special class and special school places for the 2024/25 school year and beyond.

3. New and Replacement Secondary Schools

Key Points:

- New schools are established in response to demographic growth, where the requirement for additional places cannot be met within existing capacity or by expanding existing schools
- At a national level enrolments at post primary level were projected to peak in 2024, though this does not account for Ukrainian enrolments
- It is expected that some areas will experience continued growth beyond the national trend, particularly linked with large volumes of residential development in an area

5. General overview of new modular builds and their intended duration

Key Points:

- Modern methods of construction (MMC) are an increasingly important feature of the construction landscape in Ireland. The Department of Education's modular programme for accelerated delivery of school places is part of this.
- A combination of factors, including demographic growth, the need to align school place provision with housing developments, increased demand for Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision and the accommodation of children from Ukraine, means that significant levels of additional school accommodation are required within tight timeframes.
- MMC can help boost productivity and efficiency of school accommodation delivery and increase the environmental sustainability of additional school accommodation. The ability to build offsite minimises the risk posed by construction activity in a live school environment, while factory precision and strict quality control processes help deliver consistently robust buildings which are easy to manage and maintain.

- The Department operates a modular framework consisting of 13 providers and a separate sustainable timber modular framework consisting of 3 providers.
- The Department has worked with modular providers to develop standardised layouts for school projects. These layouts are subject to regular review. The layout to be implemented for a specific project will depend on the needs of the school.
- Today's modular buildings represent a significant improvement from earlier forms of prefabricated construction. Since 31 December 2018, all new buildings, including modular buildings, are required to meet the Near Zero Energy Building (NZEB) standard, which ensures high levels of energy efficiency, thermal performance and sustainability. Internal walls of modular units must be robust, durable and have a fire safe finish. External walls must be robust, durable and impact resistant, as well as having low maintenance and weather resistant properties.
- While the intended lifespan of individual units may currently vary, modular units are increasingly designed and manufactured for a projected lifespan of up to 60 years. The Department of Education is currently updating its technical guidance documents to reflect the changes and possibilities of MMC in Ireland.
- In addition to the current circa 300 traditional projects that are at construction the Department's modular programme will provide a key response to meeting additional school place requirements for September 2024 and September 2025. Modular accommodation provides high quality, durable and sustainable accommodation for schools.
- Our approach aligns with the broader Government approach which supports MMC as a key and growing component of the construction sector.

6. Sports facilities, halls and multi-purpose rooms

Key Points:

- GP rooms and PE halls are provided with the construction of all new primary and post primary schools, respectively.
- Design Guidelines for all new schools provide for outdoor multi use games areas (hard play areas) and the level of play space provided varies with the size of school and site constraints. For example a new 1,000 pupil post-primary school could be provided with 6 ball courts and a 200m² secure hard and soft special play area.
- PE Labs form part of the overall suite of PE accommodation provided as part of new post primary school buildings and large scale extensions at post primary schools. They are 130m² PE Spaces designed to facilitate fitness equipment such as treadmills, indoor spin bikes, linear rowing machines and weight benches.
- Circa 90% of post primary schools have indicated to the Department that they have a PE Hall or have access to a PE Hall. A further 5% of Post Primary schools have building projects in the pipeline that will deliver a PE Hall.
- At primary level, circa 70% of schools have indicated to the Department they have a GP Room or have access to a GP room. A further 2.5% have a project in the pipeline which will deliver a GP room.
- The policy of the Department is to support the use of school premises and facilities for community, recreational and education-related purposes. This includes PE halls and sports facilities that are part of school premises.
- Progress will continue to be made on PE Hall and GP Room provision as part of rollout of new schools and large-scale projects in existing pipeline.

7. Department of Education involvement in school car parking and traffic management solutions

Key Points:

- Traffic management plans for schools are prepared as part of the planning and design phase for school building projects. The focus of a traffic management plan is to take into account the additional traffic which will be generated on completion of the project.
- The Traffic Management Plan takes into account the Department's Design Guidelines, the national Smart Travel Plan, and the Local Authority requirements. The plan's objective shall be to encourage pedestrian, cycle and bus travel and minimise vehicular traffic to and from the site.

8. Siting of schools in terms of Transport and Mobility Issues (and the siting of schools in relation to transport emissions)

Key Points:

- The designation of new school sites for future development is a function of Local Authorities, in consultation with the Department, as part of the preparation and adoption of County Development Plans
- The Department is conscious of the objectives of the NPF in respect to sustainable communities and compact growth, when engaging with local authorities in respect to the designation and protection of proposed and existing school sites in close proximity with communities it is established to serve
- The Code of Practice for Planning Authorities states that they will "seek to situate new schools within the existing/proposed catchment in a manner that aids ease of access from surrounding areas and encourages sustainable mobility by walking, cycling and public transport."

- The Department's Technical Guidance Documents in relation to sites includes the following:
 - The site should accommodate, where possible, approaches from a number of directions to facilitate and promote diversity of modes of transport thereby reducing vehicular congestion, reducing the need for excessive vehicular infrastructure (roads, parking, set down, etc.) and thereby focusing on land use directly associated with educational function.
 - Consideration should be given to Government policy on Transport. Including the Department of Transport's current transport strategy; the National Transport Authority's publication Tool Kit for School Travel, Smartertravel and An Taisce's Green School Initiative, Safe Routes for Schools

9. Current and Future Climate Action Plans

Key Points:

- The Department's approach to the decarbonisation of the school sector is predicated on establishing a credible phased pathway to zero emissions, and meeting 2030 public sector targets through an evidence based approach, informed by the Department's Energy Research Programme which has been in place from 1997 with fifty four different research strands.
- The Public Sector Climate Action Mandate is driving the public sector climate action agenda and confirms the provision of a dedicated School Sector Climate Action Mandate that best reflects the particular circumstances of schools and minimises the burden on schools where possible. The School Sector Climate Action Mandate will be reviewed and published annually.

- As detailed in the School Sector Technical Climate Action Roadmap 2023 to 2030 published this year, the need for a flexible and tailored approach to the decarbonisation of the school sector to enable the school sector to meet the required targets is critical as there is no one size fits all plan that can be applied to all schools. The principle challenge lies in the area of decarbonisation of heating with renewable heating systems and to improve the energy performance of schools that were built at a time when fuel was plentiful, relatively cheap and technology and material choices were not as advanced as today.
- Renewable heating such as heat pumps have been trialled in schools since 2002. They are not a direct swap-in technology to replace oil boilers (significantly different operating system temperatures) and for 100% replacement require very significant associated fabric upgrades, new and retrofitted mechanical plant and services along with capacity increases and upgrades to electrical network supplies to schools. The School Sector Technical Climate Action Roadmap will be reviewed and published annually.

10. Exact placement of school extension / pre-fab buildings within the footprint of the school grounds and prioritisation / conservation of recreational and sports facilities

Key Points:

- These matters are considered on a case by case basis having regard to the particular circumstances of the individual school site, the position of the existing school building and appropriate location of the extension / modular accommodation
- The overall approach is to focus on the accommodation requirements for the school and to do so on a manner that minimises the impact on the external facilities at the school.

Appendix 2. School Specific Queries

1. Milltown ASD unit

School Name: Scoil Bhríde, Newbridge

Roll Number: 16654N

Project Update

The school applied to the Department in February 2023 for additional accommodation. The Department is engaging with the school in relation to its application in the context of accommodation requirements for September 2024.

2. Rathangan Boys school ASD unit

School Name: Rathangan Boys National School, Rathangan Co Kildare

Roll Number: 15957D

Project Update

The building project for this school is at Stage 2a (developed design).

The school submitted the revised Stage 2a in May 2023, this was reviewed by Department officials. The school are currently preparing additional information sought following the assessment of the revised Stage 2a report.

3. St Patricks School Morristown Newbridge ASD unit

School Name: St Patricks NS, Newbridge Co Kildare

Roll Number: 13328I

Project Update

In Q4 2022, the school submitted a Stage 2b (detailed design) report. Following review, permission was granted to the school to proceed to Stage 3 (tender action).

The school submitted the tender report on 1 September 2023 which is currently being assessed by Department officials.

4. Newbridge/Kildare at Magee barracks

School Name: Curragh Community College

Roll Number: 706600

Project Update

This school is a co-educational post-primary school under the aegis of Kildare Wicklow Education & Training Board (KWETB).

The table below shows the development of enrolments at the school over recent years:

Year	Enrolments
2022/23	196
2021/23	159
2020/21	145
2019/20	136
2018/19	134

The school has been approved a new school building on a new site to allow the school to expand to cater for 1,000 pupils plus 4 SEN Classes. The school will be relocating to a new site in Kildare town (Magee Barracks site). The expanded new school on an 8-acre site will accommodate numbers from Curragh Community College and also cater for increased demographic growth in South Kildare.

There was additional interim accommodation provided for the school at their existing site for the 2023/24 school year through the refurbishment of an existing building on site and the following accommodation was made available:

- 5 general classrooms
- 1 DCG room (XXX design construc)
- 1 GP space
- Office
- Toilets.

The Design Team appointment was ratified in March 2023, and they progressed with Stage 1 (preliminary design) site and design options, presenting the Stage 1 report to the Department and school authorities in June 2023.

The Design Team were authorised to progress to Stage 2a (developed design) of Architectural Planning at the end of June 2023, with the intention to lodge the application for planning permission at the earliest juncture.

The Design Team are currently completing Stage 2a (developed design) of Architectural Planning, where the preferred design option scope and extent of works to be carried out will be established and can be fully cost-planned.

In addition, the Design Team will shortly lodge the planning permission application with the Local Authority. The Design Team are also preparing their applications for a Fire Safety Certificate and Disability Access Certificate with the Local Authority.

Upon receipt, review and approval of the Stage 2a (developed design) submission, and the Local Authority decision in relation to the statutory applications, the Department will advise the design team and project manager in relation to the progression of the project to Stage 2b (detailed design) and the preparation of the tender documents.

More generally, the Department is aware of increasing pressures and demand for additional school places in the Newbridge/ Kildare area. A growth analysis has recently been completed which has found that Kildare Town and Newbridge are estimated to grow by over 3% per annum which is considered high when compared to the average growth calculated around the country.

The Department is working to establish the true extent of any capacity issues through ongoing discussions with the relevant school authorities. In that context, similar to the process adopted in advance of the current academic year, the Department has begun engaging with patron bodies and school authorities in the Newbridge/ Kildare areas, to identify particular capacity requirements for the both the 24/25 school year and forthcoming years which may necessitate further action to that already in train.

The Department is continuing to work to advance the planned and current projects in Newbridge/ Kildare and to ensure sufficient places for both mainstream provision

and for pupils with special education requirements both for the coming academic year and into the future. This includes the new school building for the Curragh Community College, which will provide 1,000 student places as well as four classrooms for students with special educational needs on a site in Kildare town.

5. Portarlinton

School Name: Coláiste Íosagáin

Roll Number: 68068R

Project Update:

The new school building for Coláiste Íosagáin in Portarlinton has recently been approved to progress to Stage 2b (detailed design) of Architectural Planning. This stage requires the Design Team to secure all statutory approvals (Planning Permission, Fire Safety Certification, and Disability Access Certification) and tender documents.

The Design Team will now progress to prepare the application for statutory approvals. The Department will continue to support the design team in preparation of the Stage 2b (detailed design) Submission and ultimately the progression of the project to tender and construction.