

The Programme for Government 2016/2020

Building a Better Future for All the Young People of Northern Ireland

A Perspective from the Council for Catholic Maintained School

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) has responded to and commented upon each of the Assembly's previous Programmes for Government (PfG). It is understood that, in a departure from previous practice, the next PfG will be agreed in advance of the running of the D'Hondt process for determining which party will provide the Minister to lead each Department. This arrangement allows all those with a strategic interest in the content of the PfG to state their positions so as to influence the high level policy agenda for the next Assembly term from a more strategic and structural position. The document is the Council's contribution to that process.
- 1.2 The Council has long recognised and stated publicly that education should not be an end in itself; that it is at the centre of creating an inclusive and fair society at peace with itself through a high waged, flexible and productive economy which recognises global, national, regional and local opportunities for our young people. Education, like any Department of government, cannot achieve its core objectives by acting in isolation from other Departments, their Non-Departmental Public Bodies, community and voluntary providers and employers. Although the PfG will be influenced by global markets, UK Government policies and the extent and nature of the 'Block Grant', it will set the priorities for Northern Ireland for the next Assembly mandate.
- 1.3 The Council believes that the current PfG is short-termist, populist and lacking in any significant systemic structural ambitions to address deep-rooted problems such as poverty, social exclusion, dependency on welfare, over-reliance on employment in the public sector, deficits in skills and aspirations for the 'professions' to provide employment. Northern Ireland has a low-wage, public sector dependent economy and a cultural aversion to risk taking. The 2010-14 Programme was essentially 'silo' driven with a focus on financial and 'target' accountability and little beyond encouragement to promote collaborative working or shared outcomes. The Department of Education targets focussed on quantifiable measures such as five GCSE grades at A* to C including English and Maths which, in the Council's view, may have had the effect of narrowing the focus of the curriculum and constraining a broader vision for education as a shaper of and contributor to society and the economy. These are weaknesses which, it is hoped, can be avoided in the next PfG.
- 1.4 This document is intended to provide a strategic overview of how this Council would like to see the next PfG developed with education at its centre, not as an end in itself but as a partner in a collaboration with other Departments and stakeholders to achieve shared outcomes which will positively shape and influence our society and economy through long-term, coherent structural change. This requires a 'whole of Government' approach in

recognition of the fact that key policy matters such as low educational attainment, poor health, poverty, social capacity and economic cohesion are inter-related and cannot be resolved by Departments or their agencies working independently.

1.5 The next two sections will give a brief commentary on some of the limitations of the current system, first across government, and then within the education service. Along the way the Council pose some questions to be addressed and some suggestions for improvement. The final section makes a number of high level proposals for the shaping of a new, inclusive vision for Northern Ireland through a PfG framed and funded to achieve prosperity for our future.

2.0 Scoping the Social and Economic Challenges

2.1 This section is intended to give a brief overview of the broad social and economic challenges which the Council believes Northern Ireland faces at this time and to link these, as appropriate, to the involvement of or impact on our education system. In some instances there may be a positive connection but in others the opposite may be the case. The strong message from the Assembly over the current mandate is to re-build and re-balance the economy. However, this cannot be achieved in a single term. The concern is that the foundations have still not been laid to achieve this long term and complex objective. The Council considers that the potential for the education system to influence this essential objective has not been fully understood and therefore not fully utilised in the past because of a discordant policy environment and an excessive focus on a qualifications system which assesses knowledge and understanding rather than a broader range of skills.

2.2 The preparatory work for the next PfG must include an objective, evidence informed analysis of:

- Why Northern Ireland has such a wide social differentiation;
- Why, despite high achievement in many aspects of our education system, there is a long tail of underachievement;
- Why our economy is so fragile, is characterised by;
 - an over-dependence on the public sector;
 - a comparatively low waged private sector;
 - comparatively low productivity;
 - such high levels of economic inactivity;
 - a community that is so welfare dependant; and
 - comparatively low levels of entrepreneurship, innovation, research and development.

In short there has to be an honesty about the key indicators and a determination to tackle deficits robustly but within the context of a coherent plan through the next PfG.

2.3 There have been many fine words, platitudes and promises of inclusion, equality and opportunity but the realities seldom match the rhetoric. The impact of austerity has undoubtedly constrained progress but its most severe effects are still ahead and this will

have both a direct curb on both our standards of living and our spending power leading to serious pressure on the resources needed to reshape our society and economy. The levels of poverty, including child poverty, are growing, social mobility is narrowing, public spending, including on welfare, is being cut even in those areas such as schools, higher and further education, training, and research and development and access to some strands of meaningful employment is going to be further inhibited by proposed public sector job cuts. These are the overt challenges but there are others.

- 2.4 The Council regularly engages with employers, their representatives and with community and voluntary bodies working within socially deprived communities. From their different perspectives there is a shared recognition of the reservoir of talent which we have in Northern Ireland that is not supported appropriately to play a full and inclusive role in our society and economy. It may be difficult, therefore, to understand that, according to the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, there is a skills shortage. There are jobs – but only for those who have the necessary skills.
- 2.5 The Council has been briefed by the CBI on its ‘Step Change’ Report. While education cannot be a utilitarian service, neither can it ignore the aspirational and motivational power of a future career or, more likely, careers. Indeed, one of the challenges for our schools is to instil aspiration in our young people and channel that into the motivation to learn and to succeed. That report makes several recommendations with which the Council concurs including a call for schools and colleges to look beyond academic qualifications to the fostering of behaviours and attitudes which society and employers value even more. Similarly there is a need to move away from some elements of the ‘traditional’ curriculum and for high level vocational courses equivalent to ‘A’ Levels to be developed and made more available to young people of all abilities in all of our post-primary schools. Many of these extend the STEM offer, which is regarded as one, but not the only, critical element of future economic prosperity. The CBI wants more interaction between industry and education and more guaranteed access to work experience. The basic message is that the axis between employment and education needs to be much stronger with schools having access to high level data on emerging skills needs as an indicator of the kind of curriculum offer which will provide career opportunities at a global, national, regional and local level. The Ulster University publication, The Northern Ireland Skill Barometer “Skills on Demand” uses defensible evidence to forecast the emerging skills needs for Northern Ireland to 2025. The ‘Entitlement Framework’ with a minimum of 24 courses at post 14 and 27 courses at post 16 is intended only as a minimum. A modern curriculum offer needs to be much broader through a more tightly organised ‘interdependence’ between schools working collaboratively in Area Learning Communities to offer a much extended range of courses and provisions which facilitate wider learning opportunities – the attitudes and behaviours - which are also life skills – and a practical means of promoting sharing in education. Schools need to work more closely with further education and training providers to extend even further the curriculum offer to motivate learning and develop skills. This can happen only when our education system takes away the ‘competitive’ element between schools, introduces more co-operation and collaboration, and has different approaches to determining what constitutes a good education.

- 2.6 The Skills Barometer gives a detailed analysis of the nature and level of skills needed over the next ten years. It identifies the growth sectors and the subjects/courses and skills likely to be in demand. While many shortages are at degree or higher level, the largest deficit is in the Level 3 to 5 range which includes 'A' Levels, or vocational equivalents, and foundation degrees, HND or HNC courses and apprenticeships. Latest figures indicate that in 2009 about 22% of jobs in Northern Ireland were at the National Qualifications Level (NQF) Level 2 or below. That figure in 2015 has reduced to 16%. The trend is clear – better educational outcomes are required. The skill deficit is greatest in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) related courses (including IT and computing) where there is the highest potential employment growth. This contrasts with those subject/course areas where there is an over-supply such as social studies, medical related subjects and education. Some of the skill needs can be catered for in the workplace, and employers will need to provide more in-work training, but many of these skills could be facilitated through changes in the school curriculum and a more structured relationship in the 16-19 phase between the re-structured Department of Education and the new Department for the Economy. Across all phases from primary to post-graduate, however, there is a need to engage with and exploit the potential of digitization including the introduction of coding into primary schools.
- 2.7 The Council has frequently promoted the case for multi-agency collaboration with education to identify and ameliorate potential social, health, learning or environmental deficits early in the life of a child or as soon as possible after diagnosis of a problem. The next PfG will really need to take this matter seriously by producing a long-term, structured and sustainable strategy to prevent the exclusion of significant numbers of our young people from the opportunity to contribute to and benefit from our growth potential. Northern Ireland schools are still experiencing the effects of demographic decline and this is now working through to the workforce. That reduction coupled with the high levels of economic inactivity and the numbers of high achieving young people who leave Northern Ireland after 'A' Levels or graduation is going to create a shortage of both the number of workers needed to drive our economy towards even the average level of UK employment and the desired skills mix. In such circumstances the benefits of reduced Corporation Tax and the expected inward investment may not bring the anticipated outcomes. There is going to be a continuing reliance on the migrant population to make up the short fall. The next PfG must, therefore, invest in including those in our community who face greater challenges to succeed than others. Catholic Maintained schools have made some progress in this regard but more can and must be done by collaborative working across government and associated bodies through such strategies as a duty to collaborate and an outcomes focused PfG. More too can and must be done to make work pay for the parents of young and school aged children through more creative support for the costs of child care as a means of getting parents back into the workplace. These are challenges to leadership at all levels of Government and public service where there is a need to train, nurture and mentor that leadership. It also requires the embracing of digitisation and e-learning to support more collaborative working.

3.0 The Educational Challenges

- 3.1 The Council believes that Northern Ireland will not prosper if its education system is not high achieving, flexible, dynamic and fit for purpose. Similarly the education system will not fully exploit its potential unless its purpose, objectives and targets are integral to the PfG and aligned with those of other Departments and relevant service providers in key aspects of its provision. To optimise the potential and value of education there must be a full appreciation at a political, economic and civic level of the transformational power of education. There must also be an acknowledgement that vested interests, narrow philosophical and political positions should not impede tackling structural inadequacies or a higher level emphasis on education as the key driver to an inclusive society and a prosperous economy in Northern Ireland. In this regard seriously addressing all the characteristics which contribute to educational underachievement is a key priority.
- 3.2 An objective and realistic analysis is required of the structure, performance and outcomes of our education system and the policies and strategies which have brought us to where we are currently. On international comparisons Northern Ireland is a high achiever in literacy and numeracy in the primary phase. That same research, however, reveals that by year seven pupils are being turned off these subjects. Could this be a response to an over emphasis on assessment and an excessive focus on these subjects at the expenses of the broader aspects of the Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum? Should more time be given to creativity and promoting the thinking skills and personal qualities which employers consider to be so important and which are statutory cores of the Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum? Why is it that the international success of our primary schools contrasts with, at best, the average performance at post-primary? Why is it that performance at GCSE is not maintained at 'A' level or equivalent? Why is it that, despite academic selection, Northern Ireland is behind the Republic of Ireland, England and Scotland in the average performance of the top ten percent of its pupils in the Organisation for Economic, Co-operation and Development (OECD) sponsored Performance in Student Assessments (PISA) research? Why is it that the gap between the highest and lowest achievers in developed countries is amongst the widest in the UK and, within the UK, is widest in Northern Ireland? There has to be an open challenge to the hard facts about our education system; not an assumption of excellence, complacency or a denial of the evidence.
- 3.3 There is also an obvious need to look at the conditions which have created this position alongside an analysis as to how other countries and regions have overtaken us and made their education systems more responsive to changing social and economic demands in the modern world. Some of these characteristics may be beyond education but are influential in changing the education offer. This is why the Council believes it is important to consider education within the broader context of an agenda for change within the PfG to positively shape our society and economy for the future.
- 3.4 The Department of Education's five corporate goals contain two as priorities. The first, 'Raising Standards', has had some success in terms of the measurable performance targets, largely because it was under the control and influence of schools themselves. The second, 'Closing the Gap', has, however, not shown similar progress primarily because it is a systemic issue which requires multi-faceted policy change. Some schools may be able to make

marginal adjustments to close the gap within that school but if the system and network of schools, their size, their curriculum offer and their social profiles are different then it becomes a system matter where the balance of power and policy coherence are critical factors. This is an issue across all sectors of education and rather than 'closing the gap' seems to be creating further inequalities in our system and which, taken in the round, is not conducive to creating an inclusive and fair society in which all young people can have a stake. The Council wishes to ensure that the next PfG can avoid social and economic differentials and produce a more coherent and interdependent range of outcomes which reflect the inter-relatedness of government through the pursuit of shared outcomes. This requires a radical re-think of both legislation and core policies.

- 3.5 The Council assumes that the Department of Education will produce a new Corporate Plan for Education. It is probable, however, that the two overarching goals of 'Raising Standards for All' and 'Closing the Performance Gap, Increasing Access and Equality' will be retained in some form. As stated at 3.4, raising standards can be addressed to some extent through school improvement. The range of influences towards closing the performance gap, increasing access and improving equality is very much in the hands of the PfG and then the relevant Ministers and Departments. Funding strategies must support policies so that high level outcomes can be achieved. Funding is not and should not be an end in itself – it should be the primer for the delivery of the essential outcomes. Similarly it is important that the measures used to determine the effectiveness of schools need to move away from narrow and limited targets to a broader range of qualitative, policy informed elements which encourage continuous improvement.
- 3.6 Closing the achievement gap is not an issue for schools alone. It is deeply embedded in our social structure and has remained stubbornly unchanged for over forty years. General improvements in living standards have not closed the poverty gap. In many areas a reliance on welfare may appear to be the only or best option for life. Criminality, including paramilitarism, is a life choice for some young people because it appears to offer easily obtained and generous rewards. Education is an option which some will embrace but for many others it is not the preferred option. This is a societal challenge which the PfG will have to urgently address. Some schools have reached out to a broader range of supports and services to involve parents, wider family and the community generally to effect improvements but this ad-hoc strategy is often funded through short-term initiatives and projects which are seldom mainstreamed, often disconnected and when removed leave a residue of resentment. Such short-term initiatives should be ended and the funds channelled into the mainstream as one contributor towards mitigating the reduction in the Block Grant. The need for a structured long-term multi-departmental/agency approach to tackling poverty and its effects is an essential element of a new deal in the next PfG. The PfG must institute an outcomes based approach to delivery through a 'duty to collaborate' across government Departments. An outcomes focussed PfG will require cross-departmental collaboration for a long-term, adequately resourced early intervention and service connected strategy which could create the conditions to reduce poverty and its attendant repercussions. The PfG should encourage active participation in education, with proportionate support to parents and families and actively promote increased inclusion in

society by those who are or who regard themselves as marginalised by showing the benefits of education as a gateway to participation in and outcomes for all in our society. As the Educational and Training Inspectorate (ETI) report in 2013 on Full Service Schools pointed out, schools alone cannot meet all the increasingly complex needs of learners and their families. The Full Service Extended Schools and Full Service Community Network across North and West Belfast provide models that have been successful in co-ordinating the delivery of services to support the diverse needs of learners and their families. The significant improvement in outcomes for pupils, especially the most vulnerable, within these areas shows the benefits of developing educational and community networks throughout the learning journey.

- 3.7 The recent report by the Equality Commission, 'Education Inequalities in Northern Ireland' provided a strategic overview of the differential impacts of inequalities in education and their influences into adulthood. This research re-states many characteristics which have been known for many years but the simple fact is that these characteristics have not been challenged robustly. It does not, however, tell us why this has been allowed to continue. For this society to prosper educational disadvantage and the structures, policies and legislation that encourage or tolerate it must be addressed as a core objective of the next PfG. The data used to determine disadvantage is often cited to favour the Catholic community because of the higher levels of measurable deprivation. Despite this higher level of deprivation the Catholic school sector out performs other sectors. This does not mean that Catholic schools are immune from low or underperformance and many continue to need considerable support. However, the Catholic community generally has a more positive view of education and its advantages and, in that respect, has a higher 'social capital' when it considers education. That differential must be taken into the calculations in the allocation of resources and support so that there is no reason for party political disagreement on resources as a defence for not tackling the problem.
- 3.8 A risk for all sections of our community is that if the promise of education to provide high waged, high quality and sustainable employment commensurate with educational achievement is not realised then the currency of education will be devalued. It is imperative, therefore, that there is a much greater alignment between the skills, attitudes and behaviours required for young people to flourish in a fast changing employment market and the curriculum on offer in our schools which shows that not only that work does pay but education does too.
- 3.9 The Council considers that the curriculum offer is in need of a radical overhaul to reflect the emerging opportunities of the skills based Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum and the details emerging from the 'Skills Barometer' and other reports and analyses. These wider employability skills which employers require include good communication, problem solving, critical thinking, team working and people management. Many Catholic Maintained Schools reflect these in their ethos and values but there is a need to do much more. The curriculum in our schools needs to be amended to ensure there is space for these skills in the curriculum of tomorrow. In too many schools the narrowing of the curriculum, particularly at post-16, is driven by the narrowness of the entry requirements of the Higher Education

institutions which are also in need of change. It is regrettable that the Certificate of Personnel Effectiveness (COPE) is not more widely recognised as one means of promoting these skills. There is a strengthening case too for a 16-19 offer which maintains English, Maths and possibly IT as core elements for all young people throughout that phase. Along with this should be opportunities for action research; project based work; and practical experience to encourage entrepreneurship, innovation and experimentation, in or out of school, to develop these personal, creative and thinking skills and that understanding of work which employers value and which good schools see as skills for life. The next PfG should be bold enough to depart from a narrowing 'A' Level type qualifications system to a more expansive baccalaureate type approach embracing the vocational and the traditional academic.

- 3.10 The Council acknowledges and welcomes the improvements in outcomes for pupils in its schools. It also recognises the generally high quality of our teachers and school leaders. However, it also recognises that our schools are not always delivering for all pupils, are not always offering the curriculum, qualifications and the broader skills mix which young people will need to play an active and valued role in our society. In some cases this is a symptom of a system in need of renewal. Improvements in the quality and outcomes of the schools systems are not enough if these do not translate into fulfilling the promise of education to provide a better future life for our young people and a better society for all of us. This context suggests that there is a need to consider how the teaching force can accommodate these changes at both the initial stage and through continuous professional development. There is a clear need to invest in the teaching force which should include a review of its terms and conditions of service which, like the legislation, is almost thirty years old. There is also a need to look at how teachers are recruited to implement the changed curriculum. While higher education participation rates increase so too do the number of our most able young people going to higher education outside Northern Ireland. That figure has increased by almost 4% over the past ten years. Many do so because there are insufficient places here to meet the demand, others go to access courses not available here or because they see better career opportunities elsewhere. This and a further exiting at the post graduate stage, a lower uptake of narrow STEM courses in Northern Ireland compared to other UK regions, suggests that we are a net exporter of our talent and that we are slower to embrace the potential economic benefits of STEM. These characteristics must change if our education system is going to become the driver of change on our society and economy. It makes no sense to exclude any young people from educational opportunities or to reduce funding for further and higher education when there is a supply shortage and a proven demand.
- 3.11 The Council has fully supported Area Planning but does not believe that it has at its disposal sufficient legislative tools to fully realise its potential. There is a growing acceptance that area planning is not primarily about the removal of surplus places but is really about expanding access to the curriculum. The experience of area planning over the past four years has exposed, perhaps more vividly than any other area of activity, the inherent weaknesses of our education system. Most of the legislation governing education goes back to the 1986 Order and the 1989 Education Reform Order. Is it realistic to expect a modern, flexible and responsive system to work efficiently on a legislative base which is almost thirty

years old? The Northern Ireland system is biased towards the interests of schools rather than towards ensuring that all schools are there to meet the needs of children and young people. Our system, particularly at post-primary, is founded on a governance model of independence and narrow accountability. The Board of Governors legislative role is to manage that one school to which its members have been appointed. It has no obligation in law to young people in the community not enrolled in that school, to other schools or to the system of schools. In short there is no specific legislation to support the more expansive concept of area planning. Boards of Governors have the right to set admissions criteria independently without reference to pupils living in the area of the school or to other schools in the immediate vicinity, to refuse to admit a pupil or to exclude them without any residual responsibility, to decide which, if any, other school it will co-operate with in an area learning community. The less popular schools tend to have spare accommodation and are required to admit any pupil and can, in effect, become an 'at risk' school as a consequence of current policies. These and other powers invested in individual schools not only constrain but actively prevent the closing of the gap. Most of our post-primary schools avoid or limit collaboration with the Further Education sector and with Training Organisations. There is a Sustainable Schools policy which is not aligned with the funding policies leading to schools with a limited curricular offer being financially sustainable. There are too few delivery structures and governance models thereby preventing, for example, the possibility of a number of different school buildings becoming a single institution led by a single Board of Governors and an executive principal. There is a clear need to revise the legislative base of our system and to create the possibility of a broader more flexible and potentially more economically efficient spectrum of delivery and governance models to promote inclusion, extend curriculum access, exploit shared education, share best practice and substantially raise standards in those skills required for 21st century learning and living.

4.0 Proposals for the Programme for Government 2016-2020

4.1 The Council encourages the politicians and civil servants charged with drafting the next PfG to take account of the analysis and perspectives outlined in this document. There is no disputing the critical importance of education as a fundamental necessity to any nation's prosperity, social stability and capacity to inherit the future. The PfG has to embrace and promote this.

4.2 Below is a list of high level actions which the Council regards as key elements of a PfG which can transform Northern Ireland by placing education at its centre:

- (i) Recognition that education is a universal service which is central to social and economic prosperity; it is not an end itself or a service suited to short-term target driven measures;
- (ii) Producing an outcomes focussed PfG with integrated strategies and policies rather than 'silo' focussed accountability;
- (iii) Providing a legislative duty to collaborate across all Government Departments and their agencies;

- (iv) Devising a strategy to grow the economy by establishing an integrated process to counter exclusion and ensure connectivity between the investment strategy, the needs of local employers and all essential service providers;
- (v) A review of public management to recognise the importance of leadership, digitisation and systems to support collaborative working across government to achieve socially and economically important outcomes;
- (vi) Devising of a formally constructed and integrated early years and an early intervention strategy to bring together the proposed Children’s Act, a Child Care strategy, a Child Poverty strategy into a single policy framework with a cross-departmental interdisciplinary supported ‘guided journey’ through the 0-19 phase of life to enable the realisation of potential and the prevention of failure;
- (vii) More coherent management of the ‘education journey’ through improved transition arrangements at each change point through more structured and extended ‘Area Learning Communities’ aligned to Area Planning and, where appropriate ‘Full Service’ provision;
- (viii) An end to short-term ‘projects’ and ‘initiatives’ and the implementation, after robust evaluation, of evidenced-based programmes which are appropriately targeted and properly resourced;
- (ix) A review of the qualifications system to reflect the broader skills needs as identified on the ‘Skills Barometer’ and in other reports and analyses and to recognise the broader, or so called ‘soft’, skills for life;
- (x) A new Education Order to provide legislation which:
 - facilitates coherent policies to guarantee that the child, not the school, is at the centre of policy;
 - ensures that the curriculum is flexible and responsive to emerging skills needs;
 - ensures that funding supports policies to deliver high level outcomes;
 - considers a ‘pupil premium’ type approach to the school funding formula to facilitate early and sustained intervention;
 - provides a broader range of governance and delivery models and develops a system of accountable autonomy to raise and maintain standards in all schools and improve outcomes for young people;
 - provides for a broader policy informed range of measures to determine school effectiveness;
 - Provides for all young people to have the option to remain at school, or other agreed provision, to 18/19 and require the school in which they are enrolled to be responsible for ensuring access to suitable courses/provision;
 - provides specific legislation for a more expansive form of Area Planning linked to the Capital building programme to include more formal arrangements for Area Learning Communities to increase curricular access and choice;
 - renews our system of qualifications to embrace the broader range of skills.
- (xi) A reformed careers advice service aimed, in the first instance, at the leadership in schools, further and higher education providers and employers as trainers in terms of their offer which should be influenced by the ‘Skills Barometer’ and other labour market data;

- (xii) Require a commitment from employers to clearly articulate their skill needs, employ recruitment strategies to test these and to engage more fully with the education service to provide work experience and in-work development;
 - (xiii) A sustained communication programme led by Government to help change the culture amongst young people, their parents and wider society with respect to future career expectations and aspirations and the benefits of education to future choices.
 - (xiv) A funding regime for schools, colleges, universities and training organisations which provides the resources to meet the skills demands of a growing economy in line with the high level priorities of an outcomes focussed PfG..
- 4.3 The Council is of course cognisant that there will be less finance available in the next funding cycle. That fact alone makes the case for change even more pressing and necessary because a more collaborative system of service provision will be more efficient and will yield more targeted outcomes which will deliver more productive longer term benefits across government. There is ample research evidence from across the world that early intervention to prevent failure over time saves money by at least seven times the input. There are many ways in which the Executive could review policies, save money or generate income to fund a new vision.
- 4.4 If education is to be at the centre of this new vision it has to be clear in its broader social and economic obligations. It must also be given access to the support of other Departments and related bodies in pursuit of agreed high level outcomes across government. In the early years of life a child and her or his family should be able to rely on appropriate interventions from Health, Social Services, Social Development and Justice. This collaboration need to continue as required through that 'guided journey' to limit the prospect of anyone failing to reach their potential to play a full part in society and the economy. As the child moves into the post-primary phase the services of the Department of Education and Department for the Economy become increasingly important as the 'information and support' for careers development and life chances emerge. Such a network of inter-related support and guidance is a real and achievable possibility under an outcomes focussed PfG.
- 4.5 The Council recognises that these proposals are somewhat embryonic, challenging and disparate but believes that they provide a rationale for and a means towards the fundamental social and economic structural changes needed to make Northern Ireland an inclusive and prosperous society through a productive and high skilled economy and with our education system at the centre as a conduit and a driver; not as an end in itself.
- 4.6 There are challenges to society and the economy which cannot be ignored. Our society is unequal, exclusive and tolerant of differentials which inhibit the utilization of all talents and resources. Our economy is underdeveloped, unbalanced and evidently in need of reform. The next PfG can be that catalyst for that reform but only if it is visionary, coherent and ambitious. There is opportunity which must be grasped.