

Submission to consultation: **‘Vision 2030 - Integrated Education Strategy’**

Pivotal is an independent public policy think tank, based in Belfast. We have completed in-depth research examining integrated education and how it relates to wider questions of division and integration in schools, housing and wider community life. This research includes conducting focus groups and surveys with young people, interviews with practitioners and experts, and policy and literature reviews. Our main reports on these subjects can be found here, starting with the most relevant and recent twin reports:

- 1) [Achieving greater integration in education and housing](#)
- 2) [Achieving greater integration in Northern Ireland: young people’s voices](#)
- 3) [Reconciliation and deprivation: twin challenges for Northern Ireland](#)
- 4) [Youth voices: life, study and work in Northern Ireland](#)
- 5) [Youth solutions: improving education, training and employment in Northern Ireland](#)
- 6) [Youth solutions for building better communities in Northern Ireland](#)

Young people who participated in our research were broadly supportive of greater integration, and recognised the potential societal benefits of integrated education, but they had limited experience of the sector and many of them doubted what it alone could achieve within their own divided communities. There was, however, a consensus that shared youth facilities and groups in the community should be a policy priority. They highlighted the positive impact these shared experiences can have, suggesting that there is a need for a focus on youth services where young people can meet and mix, alongside promoting more integration in schools.

The central conclusion of our research is that there should be a target to significantly increase the proportion of pupils who attend schools with a significant enrolment of pupils from both of the main traditions in NI. This can only be achieved by a growth in both the integrated sector and the amount of mixing and sharing occurring in all models of school. There is evidence of many non-integrated schools that teach a diversity of pupils across the traditional divide, but these schools remain largely geographically clustered, and the exception. We do not see the need to

choose between the integrated sector and supporting more diversity in all schools – instead there is a need for both, if the dial on integration is to be shifted more substantively.

Our research highlighted that for many young people living in single identity areas integration continues to be viewed as a positive long-term aspiration but something for future generations, not for now. We welcome the steps contained within Vision 2030 that envisions how integration could be more strongly developed within schools now, not later.

Pivotal agrees that ‘Vision 2030 - A strategy for Integrated Education’ reaffirms the importance of government support for the sector, integrated education’s potential to contribute to a more shared future for wider society, and the need for data to measure and monitor demand for integrated education and measure progress.

We agree that the strategy and the action plan both aid an overall understanding of the Integrated Education Act, especially in relation to the DE’s responsibility to assess demand for the sector and produce targets to measure if this existing demand is being met. The document also adds to an understanding of many other issues, such as the complexity of measuring demand for integrated education, the need to review the transformation process, the impact of admissions criteria on the sector, and how sustainability of the school estate will be reviewed and incorporated into policy.

The detailed approach specified to reach a better understanding of the demand for integrated education is especially welcomed. The targets and support for annual research are both key. The benchmark data and the importance given to monitoring included in the strategy are also important.

We note, however, that Vision 2030 also reflects how some aspects of the Act, and subsequently DE’s duties and responsibilities, remain ambiguous and unclear. This is not a criticism of these documents, or their intentions, but we believe it is important to recognise that key parts of the Act remain contested and open to different interpretations, and that this weakens the overall effectiveness of this or any strategy.

This is most clear in relation to the implications of the Act’s clause that integrated status is dependent on “reasonable numbers” of Protestant and Catholic pupils. As recent prominent

cases suggest, this clause lacks clarity and points to a wider ongoing debate about the appropriate criteria for integrated status, in an era of changing demographics when demand is uneven across Northern Ireland. The “numbers” criteria also has implications for the review of the ethos of the sector.

We consider that there is also need for further clarity on the duties and responsibilities that flow from the phrase “encouraging, facilitating and supporting” integrated education. Vision 2030 rightly notes the importance of meeting existing demand for integrated education, but is there a responsibility for DE to work towards a growth in demand for the sector? Alternatively, some may argue that it is sufficient to comply with the Act by facilitating better awareness of the sector, facilitating access to the transformation process, supporting the administration of the sector, and encouraging the success of existing schools and those who meet the criteria to transform. In this way, some of the ambiguities of the Act are reflected in the strategy.

Pivotal welcomes Vision 2030’s provision for a review of the attitudes towards transformation within maintained and voluntary schools. Our research highlighted that for the sector to grow substantially more schools from outside the controlled sector will need to transform. There are also implications for choice and community perceptions if, as is the case now, overwhelmingly it is schools seen as ‘traditionally Protestant’ that transform.

Pivotal also welcomes the commitment to work with The Executive Office, other government Departments and their agencies to support ongoing implementation of TBUC and the agenda of a more united and shared society. A firm conclusion from our research is the need to more firmly plan for integration by developing housing and education policies closely together. The dynamic relationship between residential segregation and divisions in school enrolments has the potential to maintain divisions and indeed extend them, despite the intentions of individual Departmental policies.

A joint-up approach to area planning, incorporating shared housing and inclusive schools is required to build a more shared and integrated future. Furthermore, we recommend the incorporation of infrastructure into this agenda, through prioritising more connections between communities, literally building a more united community.

The changing age profile of NI should be central to questions of sustainability, integration and sharing within the school estate. The declining number of school-age children, and the corresponding need for more sustainable schools, increases the urgency of achieving greater integration and sharing.

We recognise the role that shared education plays in this agenda – from multi-school shared activities and resources, through to the potential of more shared campuses. We recommend that participation rates in shared education projects need to be supported, especially in those areas most impacted by division.

New diversity means that for many younger people integration relates primarily to newcomer families and ethnic minority communities. The rising proportion of self-identifying ‘Others’ in NI adds further complexity and suggests that a ‘two communities’ model of measuring integration is outdated. Discussion of integration needs to more fully encompass these changes and should be included within reviews of the integrated sector’s ethos.

Pivotal
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