

Plans for first mixed Catholic and Protestant school in Northern Ireland approved



Northern Ireland's first shared education campus for Catholic and Protestant schoolchildren has been granted planning approval.

Up to six schools with 3,700 pupils are expected to be based at a former Army barracks in Omagh, Co Tyrone, Stormont's power-sharing government revealed today. The relic of the region's 30-year conflict is to be transformed into a 126-acre development to educate the next generation together.

Democratic Unionist First Minister Peter Robinson has led calls for an end to the "apartheid" of pupils being taught separately according to their religion.

SDLP Planning Minister Alex Attwood said: "The new campus will be at the forefront of shared education in Omagh and the North."

Northern Ireland Secretary Theresa Villiers this week said renewed efforts should be made to tackle sectarianism which has characterised much of the region's past. The Stormont Executive is still considering a cohesion, sharing and integration strategy.

Schools are already collaborating on a range of subjects in Northern Ireland, encouraged by a mechanism known as area-based planning aimed at making services more efficient.

But more than 92% of children attend either Catholic schools or schools that are mainly attended by Protestant pupils, according to the Ministerial Advisory Group on Shared Education, with many young people bussed to schools based on their religion.

The £100 million-plus redevelopment of the former Lisanelly and St Lucia barracks, straddling the River Strule, will be the first time schools have shared the same site.

Mr Attwood recommended planning approval to the local council today for a development containing up to six schools, including a new special needs centre, sports pitches and car parking.

Schools mentioned in planning documents include Christian Brothers Grammar School, Loreto Grammar, Omagh High, Omagh Academy and Sacred Heart College.

Mr Attwood said: "This is a huge redevelopment scheme which will benefit all of Omagh and the surrounding areas for many years.

"It will create much-needed employment during the development of the site and the construction of the new buildings, and become a model for education for the future."

Sinn Fein Education Minister John O'Dowd, who is considering recommendations on wider shared education policies in Northern Ireland, said: "It will be the largest single investment project ever undertaken in the education sector here and will be a massive boost to the economy and in particular the local construction industry."

Michael Mchugh - The Independent