

Convergence FAQs

1: Is ESA still going to happen?

Following her announcement that ESA would not be established on 1 January 2010 as planned, the Minister has outlined on numerous occasions, her ongoing commitment to the creation of a single education authority for Northern Ireland.

Despite the delay in creating ESA, the objectives of education reform as outlined below remain unchanged and must be achieved.

- Streamlining administration;
- Removing variability in service delivery and
- Improving outcomes through more consistent and focused delivery of key policies.

The financial context in which we are operating is becoming increasingly challenging. Mounting budgetary pressures further reinforce the urgent need for change and the rationalisation of structures in the education sector.

ESA remains the preferred option and the best way to achieve the efficiencies required. Until agreement is reached on the creation of a single authority, the education sector organisations are engaged in a programme of Convergence.

Convergence allows the ELBS to work collaboratively on the regionalisation of a range of services under single management structures, work that can continue to be built upon when ESA is established.

The planned regionalisation of services will also go some way to achieving the efficiencies required and will help ensure a consistent approach to service delivery at a local level across all areas.

[Click here](#) to view the Convergence Delivery Plan (CDP) published in March 2010.

2: What is Convergence?

Under the Convergence model many of the services currently delivered separately by ELBs in their own areas will be reorganised into a series of single, regionally managed services which continue to be delivered at a local level.

Under new single management structures, ELBs will remain accountable to DE with responsibility for the range and quality of services delivered in their areas by locally based staff.

This approach will create a consistent level of service quality and support, reduce bureaucracy, remove duplication and ensure equality of access across all ELB areas.

ESA Directors Designate and the ESA Implementation Team (ESAIT) are currently working with the ELBs and DE to lead this programme of work. ESAIT has been provided with an additional £16m this year to assist organisations with voluntary severance arrangements that are planned in the context of Convergence.

Convergence requires the close collaboration and good will of the education organisations to facilitate the rationalisation of management structures and to ensure the efficient and effective management of education.

3: Are all organisations impacted by Convergence?

The majority of services and the bulk of resources in education administration are currently managed by the ELBs. Therefore changes here can make the most immediate and significant contribution to achieving the goals that have been set for the sector as a whole.

The other education organisations will also be expected to rationalise management structures in order to contribute to efficiency savings in 2010/11.

4: Why is Convergence needed?

Despite the delay in agreeing a date for ESA, the Minister remains committed to achieving the objectives of education reform and improving educational outcomes and equality of access for all.

This must be achieved within the current, challenging financial context where the implications of the recent budgetary announcements are being felt.

The DE budget was reduced by £74m this year. An additional £13m had already been taken out in anticipation of the savings that ESA would achieve.

Convergence is a strategic approach that allows us to take a holistic view of education administration and support, enabling us to reform services in a way that saves money and ensures consistency and equality of provision.

5: What progress has been made?

- The Convergence Delivery Plan (CDP) was published and consulted on with the education organisations and Trade Unions in March. This

was the starting point which outlined the high level plan for Convergence.

- Gavin Boyd and the ESA Directors Designate have since met with the ELB Chairs and CEOs on several occasions to discuss and further develop plans.
- ESA Directors Designate are making steady progress with the development of a series of detailed plans for the regionalised management of services and potential single management structures.
- The plans will continue to evolve over the coming months.
- The Convergence Programme Management Board (PMB) chaired by Séan Hogan and made up of the ELB Chairs has been established to monitor progress on Convergence.
- PMB has now met twice to review and inform progress to date. The group will meet again in September.
- ESA Chair Designate, Séan Hogan has commented on the very constructive engagement at these meetings and noted a real determination to make progress.

6: What are the next steps?

Directors Designate continue to develop their plans and work with the PMB to seek agreement from the ELBs on their proposals.

It is envisaged that a number of plans will be complete by October/November for phased implementation in the following months and years. This will be a carefully managed process ensuring that front line services are not affected.

7: Does Convergence replace the need for ESA?

No. The Minister remains committed to the establishment of ESA. Convergence goes some way to addressing the objectives of education reform however it is not the ideal solution. Convergence cannot achieve the efficiencies that could be realised through the creation of a single education authority.

The establishment of ESA is the agreed policy of the Executive. Work is ongoing to deal with the outstanding issues around the legislation and to agree a way forward.

In light of the current and future budgetary pressures, it is important that we take a strategic approach to delivering efficiencies across the education sector. Convergence is a way of working towards this while we await agreement on the Education and Skills Authority.

8: Will I still be able to avail of voluntary severance arrangements?

It is anticipated that under the Convergence model, the reshaping of services with new regional structures will result in an overall reduction in the number of

posts required in various service areas in order to deliver planned efficiency savings.

Initially Convergence activity will concentrate on the ELBs where the bulk of services and resources are currently focused. The other education organisations do not have the same potential to bring about significant savings as a result of Convergence but will also need to review existing structures in response to current financial pressures.

It is anticipated that voluntary severance will be one of the mechanisms that can be employed to facilitate the change process and DE/ESAIT will work collaboratively with existing employers to bring this about.

Decisions to offer voluntary severance remain the responsibility of employers, consistent with the need to retain skills for business continuity and demonstrate value for money.

All offers of voluntary severance made in the context of RPA and delivery of the Convergence plan will be subject to approval by ESAIT and DE. ESAIT has been provided with an additional £16m to assist the organisations with voluntary severance arrangements this year.

9: Does the Vacancy Control Policy continue to operate?

Vacancy control was first introduced to safeguard the interests of existing staff and ensure their smooth transfer to ESA on the original date of 1 April 2008, while also making every effort to avoid compulsory redundancies.

The ongoing delay in agreeing a date for ESA has led to the operation of the Vacancy Control Policy across the education organisations for longer than was originally planned. Significant numbers of staff have been in temporary contracts or acting up arrangements for long periods.

A review of the Vacancy Control Policy is ongoing on the basis of proposals outlining 3 options for consideration. Views have been sought from employers and TUS. The information is currently being considered by DE

The options being considered reflect the continuing need to safeguard the employment of existing staff going forward and also reducing the need for compulsory redundancy. It is anticipated that an agreed approach will be reached shortly.

Pending the outcome of the review, in order to alleviate some of the current difficulties, recommendations were made to employers to review temporary and fixed term contracts with a view to extending contracts up to 31 August 2011, where resources are available and there is a clear ongoing need for the work to be done.

10: Will Convergence impact the location of my job?

Under the Convergence model, a range of education services will be brought under single management structures; however the focus must remain on quality local delivery to schools and in youth facilities.

The ELBs and other education organisations will continue to deliver their services at a local level under the new management structures.

11: Will there be job losses?

Whilst there will be an overall reduction in the number of posts as a result of Convergence, it is anticipated this can be brought about through the suppression of posts that are already vacant and the implementation of voluntary severance. ESAIT has been provided with £16m of 'Invest to Save' funding to support this process this year.

This money will be used to support the implementation of Convergence plans to reorganise management structures on a regional basis, streamlining how services are delivered across the five boards.