

Strategic Advisory Group

Minutes of 12th Meeting of Strategic Advisory Group

Lagan Valley Island, Lisburn – 8 December 2006

Present:

Chairperson
Members

Secretariat

Apologies

Chairman's Introduction

1. The Chairman welcomed members to the 12th meeting of the Group, and apologised for the late switch in timing, due to the short notice given to DE senior management who were called to appear before the Programme for Government Committee's sub-group on schools admission policy.
2. advised SAG members that will be chairing future meetings of the group, and explained that two earlier SAG meetings had been postponed due to a climate of uncertainty surrounding the post-primary reform process caused by political developments, and pressure on officials to complete the drafting of legislation underpinning the reforms.

Minutes of previous meeting

3. requested that it be placed on record that he continues to be concerned about the affordability of the e2s programme, and an absence of costing evidence. The Chairman agreed to do so, but explained that it continues to be the case that the true cost of the reforms will only become clear as collaborative arrangements develop in each area to reflect local circumstances. In the meantime, the Bain review will provide a fresh context for future cost estimates and bidding strategy under the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Progress on Implementing The E2S Programme

4. The Chairman explained that all aspects of the e2s programme were proceeding, with the exception of the development of new admissions arrangements, which is dependent upon the outcome of political talks.
5. A discussion ensued on aspects of the e2s programme, and some wider education issues. This included the following views expressed by individual members:
 - Concern about political interference overriding the advice of educationalists;
 - A perceived need for SAG to become a more effective advisory forum (see paragraph 7);
 - Concern about ownership and governance issues arising from proposals flowing from the Review of Public Administration. explained that SAG is not the appropriate forum for a discussion on the detail of RPA proposals, and such comments should be referred to the relevant RPA officials within the Department;
 - Concern about the onus placed on parents in using the pupil profile, and a view that the proposals amount to a distrust of receiving schools. explained that DE guidance will advocate that parents should share the pupil profile with a receiving school;
 - Concern that the Department's recently published guidance on the classification of courses as general or applied might restrict access to non-GCSE courses. explained that it is the Department's intention to extend the initial listing to include an even broader range of classifications over time, in response to requests from schools.
 - Building upon CCEA's current role in translating NI course materials into Irish, there may be scope for cross-border collaboration to translate RoI course material, in particular, for vocational courses. This would allow for wider access to courses for pupils wishing to study using the medium of Irish. commented that this aspiration will be facilitated by the gradual movement towards a European-wide qualifications framework.

St Andrews Agreement

6. clarified for members that the ending of the 11+ transfer test in 2008 is a matter of policy, not law. The 2006 Education Order will not leave open the possibility of a 'Do Nothing' option for an incoming Minister in a devolved administration. If there is no political agreement on new admissions arrangements, schools will still need to determine criteria for admissions, but will have to do so in a regulatory vacuum. There is a very limited timeframe available for politicians to agree a way forward.

Future Business for SAG

7. Members discussed the role that SAG might play in advising on new admissions arrangements. explained that at this stage in proceedings, members could advise on an individual basis, but it would be inappropriate for SAG, as a forum chaired by the Department, to put forward detailed proposals to an incoming Assembly.
8. There was general agreement on the need for a more substantive role for SAG, and one which would help to pull together the various strands of the reform programme at a strategic level. A number of areas for future discussion were identified:
 - Follow-up to the Bain review;
 - 14-19 policy;
 - Entitlement Framework – collaboration;
 - Transport arrangements;
 - Teacher training and continuing professional development;
 - Area based management and governance of consortium arrangements;
 - Communication strategy.
9. concluded the meeting with a commitment that DE would put together a more substantive agenda for the next meeting of SAG. Members will be approached about their availability to attend on a selected number of dates early in 2007.