

Our Ref: AD2/30/3

3 March 2006

The Post Primary Support Team
Department of Education
Rathgael House
BANGOR
BT19 7PR

Dear Sirs

DRAFT EDUCATION (N.I.) ORDER

Antrim Borough Council has an intense interest in the educational well being of this and future generations of young people in our Borough. This has been of growing concern especially in light of a recent decision to close Masserene College and a Development Proposal to close St. Malachy's Secondary school.

The Council has been particularly active with The Department of Education, the Controlled, Maintained, Integrated, Further and Higher Education and Irish language educational authorities in exploring a strategic approach to educational provision in the Borough. We therefore welcome a further opportunity to contribute to Government proposals that have the potential to have a profound effect on the social and economic fabric of society in Antrim and the Province in general.

Council would at the outset express its concern that the Education Order in its proposed form does not command the support of the majority of the population of Northern Ireland.

Members are of the view that education is essentially about increasing life opportunities for young people to allow them to fulfil their potential within society and to this end consider that achievement is much more than an academic assessment. The primary consideration therefore is to have in place an educational framework and system that delivers improved societal outcomes for young people through the provision of academic and vocational experiences.

The Draft Order addresses some fundamental strategic issues that Council would wish to comment on: -

Post-Primary Admission Criteria

Council believes that the proposal to substitute the 11+ selection process with a menu of non-academic criteria that embrace areas such as siblings and proximity to a school is unacceptable.

Council is also of the view that a system of 'streaming' or 'setting' coupled with objective performance/achievement data of pupils would be a fairer and more effective way of ensuring informed career choice by pupils and their parents

The Entitlement Framework

The Draft Order proposes to bring into effect legislation that significantly widens the curriculum in all post-primary schools and combines a mix of general and applied courses. Council views this proposal as a positive step in achieving the strategic aim of improved educational outcomes for pupils.

This expansion of the curriculum should be the main driver for the creation of an Integrated Strategic Plan for educational estate across the Province and strategic Human Resource planning to ensure delivery of the curriculum and improved outcomes.

Council take the view that failure to deliver estate and teaching resources in a planned and integrated fashion will lead to a dilution of positive societal outcomes and seriously undermine the current level of educational provision in the Province. Temporary measures, such as mobile classrooms, implemented now can only be viewed as very short term provision.

It must therefore be stressed that the 'Entitlement Framework' has to be developed in a sustainable way and this needs to be addressed urgently within the Antrim area, given the implications of a range of Capital Works decisions that will have to be made over the next 12-18 months. To ignore this now may well prejudice future provision (particularly post-primary) for many years to come

The Secretary of State has referred to an integrated approach to the strategic planning of educational provision recently and Antrim Council would wish to be at the forefront of the strategic planning framework working in collaboration with the educational authorities to achieve this.

The issue which Council has grave misgivings on is that the delivery of the proposed curriculum can be made between Schools, Further Education colleges and other providers resulting in the physical movement of pupils between different campus'. This would expose pupils to additional hazards through a lack of control of them whilst off-site.

As parents place their children in the care of schools, Council is concerned that a proper system and adequate resources are provided to ensure at least the current level of protection for pupils.

Pupil Assessment

Council would be concerned that the introduction of annual assessment after the 1st year of compulsory education will result in education being delivered to meet pre-determined targets rather than for imparting knowledge, understanding, learning and the development of society.

Safeguards and checks and balances need to be introduced to ensure educational values are not sacrificed in the pursuit of targets and that the assessment process is applied impartially within and across educational providers

Council also trust that a full evaluation of the impact on the workload of teaching and ancillary staff has been undertaken to ensure adequate provision is made to support the pupil assessment proposal and that this will be a factor in the Human Resource planning which is a prerequisite to the success of the elements in the Draft Order.

The Draft Order addresses other miscellaneous areas which Council recognise are of significance in the day-to-day management of schools and for this reason would not wish to comment

Council has concentrated its response on the strategic issues which have the potential to enhance the educational experience of young people however it should also be emphasised that there is on-going need to make provision for life-long learning involving all ages in our society. This does not appear to be specifically addressed in the Draft Order.

As stated previously, Council welcomes the invitation to comment on the Draft Order and trust that due consideration is given to its views

Yours faithfully



Chief Executive