

Chapter 3

THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

3.1 The Terms of Reference for the Review (see Chapter 1) required the Review Body to undertake a widespread consultation, involving teachers, parents, pupils and educational and business interests, in order to -

- identify the key issues arising from the current selective system of post-primary education; and
- assess the extent to which the current arrangements meet the needs and aspirations of children and parents and the requirements of the economy and society.

Public Consultation Process

3.2 In taking forward the Review, we were committed to an inclusive public consultation. We were determined to ensure that all interests, and not least parents and pupils, had full opportunity to present their views about any aspects of the present and future arrangements. To facilitate and encourage an open public debate, we established a website - www.educationreviewni.gov.uk - which provided information about the progress of the Review and the public response. To a large extent this approach dictated the scope and timetable for the public consultation, which extended from October 2000 to March 2001.

3.3 While the public consultation process was demanding and intensive, it was most helpful and informative in identifying the key issues and in giving us a cross-section of all shades of opinion. There were four elements to the consultation process -

Public Meetings twenty-five public meetings were attended by Members of both the Review Body and our Panel of Education Advisers. These were arranged between November 2000 and January 2001, at venues across Northern Ireland which were selected primarily on the

basis of accessibility by all sections of the local community in the area. The meetings were widely advertised, using local newspapers, television and radio, schools' electronic mailing systems, local libraries and direct mailing to representative bodies. The meetings were attended by over two and a half thousand people (Appendix C).

Meetings with Representative Groups In addition to the public meetings and individual written submissions, we responded positively to all requests for meetings from public bodies and representative groups. Meetings were held with a wide range of organisations, including Boards of Governors, political parties, educational bodies, teachers' and employers' representatives (Appendix D). The Chairman and Secretary also met the Assembly Education Committee on two occasions to discuss progress on the management of the Review.

Open Days To facilitate schools and other organisations which may not have been able to attend the public meetings or to make a written submission within the published timetable for consultation, arrangements were made for a series of Open Days in February 2001, in Armagh, Londonderry and Belfast, at which representative groups had an opportunity to discuss their views with Members of the Review Body. These Open Days proved popular and twenty-eight separate meetings were held over three days. A list of those who took part in the meetings is at Appendix E.

Written Submissions We invited over two and a half thousand organisations, including all schools, Further Education Colleges (FECs), educational bodies, the Churches, political parties, teacher unions, employer bodies, community groups and district councils, to write to us with their views about the post-primary education system. In addition, advertisements were placed in local newspapers inviting views from all other interests. There was an impressive response to this consultation exercise, with over two thousand written submissions received by 31 March 2001. Details of the source of all submissions are at Appendix F.

3.4 The nature and extent of the public consultation process underlines the widespread interest in the future development of our education system. The existence of our website was instrumental in encouraging extensive participation in this debate. During the course of the Review there were over two hundred and twenty thousand hits on the website.

3.5 The detailed analysis of such a large volume of views and submissions was challenging but provided us with a clear picture of the complexities raised by the Review and of the extent of the differences of opinion in the community about the way forward. The results of this analysis are discussed at Chapter 4. As a result of the massive response to the public consultation exercise, we were granted an extension of time by the Minister for Education to complete the Review.

Research and Information Gathering Arrangements

3.6 Research⁽¹⁾ led by Professors Gallagher and Smith, set the scene for the Review and represented a significant body of evidence about the present arrangements. In addition, we took account of a considerable volume of other research material and statistics, and for this we are indebted to the Education Advisers, who have been an important source of advice, guidance and critical analysis. The Advisers worked very closely with the Review Body throughout all stages of the Review.

3.7 Another important source of information was our programme of visits to schools in Northern Ireland. The purpose of the visits was to meet teachers, pupils, senior management and members of Boards of Governors at a cross-section of schools, and to discuss their views about selection, the curriculum and other issues raised by the Review. We are indebted to all those who participated in the discussions during these visits, for their candour and for expressing their views about the educational effectiveness, objectives and ethos of their schools. A list of all schools visited is at Appendix G.

(1) *Gallagher, T., and Smith, A. (2000)., The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland, Main Report. Bangor: Department of Education*

3.8 It was important to investigate the nature and context of the systems operating in a number of other countries, in order to establish whether there were features of those systems which might inform the development of new post-primary arrangements to meet our own needs. To this end, information was collected about the systems operating in other European countries and North America, and study visits were made to Austria, the Netherlands, the Republic of Ireland, and Scotland. A description of the main findings from these visits is outlined at Appendix H.

Education Consultative Forum

3.9 The Education Consultative Forum, which was representative of a very wide cross-section of educational interests, was established by the Department of Education to assist us in our work: its membership is at Appendix I. Specifically, the Forum was asked -

“To provide information, ideas and advice to assist the work of the Review Body in addressing the matters set out in its terms of reference, and in particular to advise on the practical implications of any proposed changes to the post-primary education arrangements.”

The Review Body and the Education Consultative Forum had three plenary meetings, together with a number of bilateral meetings with various members of the Forum. These discussions covered a wide range of key issues, including the main themes arising from the public consultation process, the development of Guiding Principles for the education service, possible alternatives to the Transfer Tests, the operation of Open Enrolment, the relevance of the present common curriculum, and the effectiveness of post-16 provision. Given the status and influence of the organisations and interests represented within the Forum, we were very encouraged by the extent to which there was a broad consensus amongst its members on many of the issues raised by the Review. This was particularly evident in their views about the Guiding Principles for education in the 21st Century. The views and advice gathered from these discussions were of enormous help to us in considering the way forward, and we are most grateful to all members of the Forum for the constructive and imaginative approach they brought to the Review.

3.10 All of the information gathered during the consultation process, from written submissions, meetings, school visits and research into the education systems in other countries, was considered fully by the Review Body, which met on more than forty occasions, either in plenary or in sub-groups. The extensive engagement by so many people in the consultative process affirmed the keen interest of the wider community in the educational issues under review. The public response was invaluable in influencing our thinking and in enhancing our awareness of the practical implications surrounding the Review.