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**Consultation Paper on New Admissions Arrangements
for Post-Primary Schools :
A Response from the Governing Bodies Association**

1. Background

A delegation of the Association's officers met the then Minister responsible for Education, Barry Gardiner MP and some of his officials on 17 February, 2005.

The purpose of the meeting was to continue discussions about development in post-primary education that had been going on for some time and, more specifically, to enable the Association's officers to make their first comments on the consultation paper, which had been published shortly beforehand.

The GBA delegation argued that the fundamental weakness in the proposed new arrangements was that they would not enable their stated outcome – that parents would be able to secure places for their children at schools suited to their educational needs, interests and aspirations – to be achieved but, worse, were likely to make the achievement of this outcome less, rather than more, likely.

The Minister responded by asking the Association to develop its thinking more fully and to write to him directly with its comments when it had done so.

The views expressed in this paper represent the Association's reply to the Minister's invitation on 17 February. They have been endorsed by an Extraordinary General Meeting of the Association held on 16 June and the Association wishes them to be taken into account alongside other responses made to the consultation paper even though they have not been presented by means of the published response form.

2. The Governing Bodies' Association and Its Members

The Governing Bodies' Association represents and seeks to promote the interests of all of Northern Ireland's voluntary grammar schools and, in particular, the views and opinions of the governing bodies responsible for them.

Its member schools are different in many ways : some are single-sex schools and some are co-educational ; some have boarding and preparatory departments and some are day schools only ; some have particular religious or denominational affiliations and some have none ;

some are large and others are small ; and some are essentially urban schools while others serve primarily rural areas.

They also have certain common characteristics. Whatever differences there may be between them, Northern Ireland's voluntary grammar schools are alike in that they

- focus their provision on young people aged between 11 and 18 ;
- choose to have what the consultation paper calls 'a traditional academic emphasis'
- offer places to pupils on the basis of academic merit and potential ;
- do not generally serve easily defined local communities, normally drawing their pupils from a wide and diverse area ;
- emphasise the importance of a broad and balanced curriculum which includes games, sport, artistic and creative activities and engagement with the world outside the classroom ;
- seek to work closely and collaboratively with others in the wider educational system ;
- seek to attract and enrol pupils from a wide variety of socio-economic, religious, denominational, ethnic and other backgrounds ;
- are proud of the contribution they have made – and continue to make – to the high levels of academic achievement reached by so many of Northern Ireland's young people ;
- value and celebrate their distinctive traditions and histories ; and
- have a strong commitment to the voluntary principle and are convinced that schools do best when they are active learning communities which have the greatest possible room to decide for themselves how they should develop, what they should offer and how they should be organised and led

It is important to add one further point : while the Association seeks to promote and protect the interests of its members, it does so while recognising that the overwhelming need of all Northern Ireland's young people is for good schools and high-quality education, whatever type of school they attend.

The Association and its member schools are neither elitist nor selfish. They want all children and young people to be able to attend good schools and have no desire to see one sector or type of school gain at the expense of any other.

3. The Governing Bodies Association's Vision of the Future of Post-Primary Education in Northern Ireland

The Association recognises that change in education and, more particularly, in the ways in which post-primary schools operate, is not only inevitable but also necessary and desirable.

Those responsible for leading and managing the schools which are members of the Association

- welcome the ending of the current transfer procedure tests ;
- accept the need for a revised and much slimmer Northern Ireland curriculum ;
- broadly welcome the proposals for increased flexibility in the revised curriculum ;
- recognise the need for more emphasis and status to be given to vocational education ;
- are pleased that a scheme for performance review and staff development has been agreed and will operate in schools from September 2005 ;
- support fair funding for all categories of schools ;

- welcome the proposed reform of local administration, but have very serious reservations about specific proposals for the administration of education in the published consultation document ;
- acknowledge the work being done to give schools here a strong platform for using and developing information and communications technology ; and
- are willing to work with others to ensure that children and young people have access to the widest possible range of curricular options, especially at age 16

The Association's vision of the future post-primary education in Northern Ireland is one based on the principles of diversity, high quality, flexibility and openness to further development.

The Association supports the objective for Northern Ireland's education system that was set out in the Costello Group Report : 'to provide high quality flexible post-primary education that develops all young people, enables them to fulfil their potential and prepares them to participate actively in life and work in a diverse and changing world.'

The Association therefore wishes the children and young people of Northern Ireland and their parents to have access to

- as wide a range of different types of school as can reasonably be created and sustained : schools should be encouraged and enabled to develop their own distinctive personalities and provision, to design different curricular pathways and to offer pupils and their parents alternative routes to success and schools which 'choose to have a traditional academic emphasis' (Consultation Document 1.8) must be part of the mixed economy that is needed ;
- single sex and co-educational schools : single sex schools have an important role to play in post-primary education and should be given every opportunity to prosper ;
- schools of a consistently high quality : there is no reason why schools which differ should be regarded as of lower or higher quality than others - the aim must be to ensure that schools are good and that all deserve parental confidence and trust ;
- arrangements for admissions to post-primary schools which ensure as far as possible that each child finds a places in a school 'which will be suited to his or her educational needs, interests and aspirations' (Consultation Document 3.3) ;
- a system which enables them to move easily between schools if or when their needs and aspirations change or which allows schools to work together and with other providers to ensure that the widest possible range of options can be made available : no single set of instructions can ensure that this happens, which is why flexibility and adaptability to change are so critical ;
- schools which are open to further change and development : no one can say now that the current models of schools will be fit for purpose for the next 10 to 15 years or that curriculum pathways will not have to be developed : continuing change is inevitable and, even more than is the case now, schools in future will need to be open to adaptation, re-invention and experimentation and be encouraged and enabled to be so ; and
- arrangements designed to meet the needs of local communities without compelling pupils to attend their nearest schools

4. The Association's Comments on the Proposed New Admissions Arrangements

The comments on the proposed new arrangements that follow reflect the views and values of the Association and the schools which belong to it. They do not seek to deal with every part of the Consultation Document. Rather, they focus on what the Association sees as the main issues.

4.1 Context for new admissions arrangements

The consultation document declares at 1.3 that the new arrangements will 'take effect in an educational landscape which will be quite different to what we are used to today.' It then goes on to refer to

- the proposed introduction of a pupil profile which is described as 'currently being developed by CCEA' (1.4)
- the implementation of the new Northern Ireland curriculum (1.6)
- an entitlement framework which 'will be introduced into all post-primary schools' and which 'will secure access to at least 24 courses for pupils at Key Stage 4 and 27 courses for pupils at post-16' (1.7) and which 'will provide greater flexibility and choice both within and between schools' and 'will end the wide disparity in provision between post-primary schools that exists at present' (1.9)
- the 'need' for schools 'to collaborate with each other and with their local FE College' in order to provide access to 'the full range of courses required under the Entitlement Framework' (1.10)
- the establishment of a pilot for specialist schools 'over the next 5 years' (1.11)
- the issues of over-subscription and the projected decline in the post-primary school-age population by 2010 and 2015 (1.15)

The Association's view is that, while a great deal is promised or proposed in the consultation document, very little of it has yet occurred or even shown signs of imminent arrival.

Given that the introduction of the new arrangements was scheduled not just to take account of but to coincide with these developments, it is impossible to resist the conclusion either (a) that the arrangements will go ahead as scheduled and parents, pupils, primary and post-primary schools will have to make sense of a very different system in an educational landscape that will be very much the same as it is now or (b) that the introduction of the new arrangements should be postponed until these other key developments are at a much higher level of readiness.

The Association takes the view that the importance – and complexity – of these new arrangements are such that it would be irresponsible for government to go ahead with them in the timescale that is envisaged unless the elements that are expected to make up the 'quite different' educational landscape are in place. The educational system stands in serious danger of being over-loaded. A revised curriculum, demographic change, a funding crisis, a common funding formula and the reform of local administration all bring their pressures and demands, and, when the proposals to transform the arrangements for admissions to post-primary schools and added to this change agenda, there is every chance that the system will be dangerously over-stretched.

4.2 Principles and objectives

This Chapter describes the 'key principles and objectives' on which the Department believes the new admissions arrangements should be based. Five principles and six objectives are proposed.

The Association is opposed to the proposal that an acknowledgement at 2.2 'that schools normally serve local communities' should be a principle for new admissions arrangements : it makes unwarranted assumptions and suggests a prejudice against schools which draw their pupils from a wide area and especially those situated in urban areas, where the concept of 'local communities' does not exist.

The Association wants this proposed principle to be dropped.

The Association believes that the importance of seeking to ensure that parents are able to find places for their children in schools suited to their educational needs, interests and aspirations, as set out at 3.3, is so great that this should be added to the objectives proposed for the new admissions arrangements.

4.3 Choosing a post-primary school

This chapter of the Consultation Document

- introduces (at 3.4 and after) the concept of 'informed choice' of post-primary schools by parents ;
- sets out (at 3.5 and after) what parents should have a right to expect in terms of information and advice
- draws attention (at 3.5.1 and after) to the central importance of the proposed new pupil profile ;
- explains (at 3.7 and after) how the process by and through which parents would choose post-primary schools for their children would be expected to operate ; and
- sets out (at 3.18 and after) a possible timetable for the admissions process

It is the Association's view that :

- (a) the concept of 'informed choice' (which in reality means 'informed preference') by parents, while attractive in principle, is neither fully worked out in the Consultation Document nor, more importantly, consistent with the roles proposed for schools and the suggested admissions criteria for use if or when a school is over-subscribed ;*
- (b) while parents' rights to information and advice of various kinds are made clear, there is nothing about the rights of post-primary schools to contribute to the process of decision-making and very little about their possible contributions ;*
- (c) the proposed pupil profile has the potential to make a valuable contribution to the process by and through which parents make decisions about post-primary schools, but so little is said about its contents and use that it is impossible to endorse it as more than a potentially good idea : much more work needs to be done on the shape and content of the proposed profile and, if it is to have real value to parents or other users, it will need to contain objective information about pupils' progress and performance set against the sort of benchmark data that enables parents to know and understand how their children compare with others of the same age ;*
- (d) because the proposals relating to the process by and through which parents would make decisions about post-primary schools are written in language which suggests that it will be entirely a matter for parents to make these decisions and that they*

will consult and take the views of others only if they choose to do, they are utterly incapable of ensuring that parents' decisions will be informed by professional opinion and advice : the role of post-primary schools in relation to the parents' decisions about their children's future needs to be made much stronger if ill-informed and unwise decisions are to be avoided ; and

- (e) *while the Consultation Document appears anxious to see parents make decisions about post-primary schools which are informed by professional guidance and advice from schools, it does nothing to encourage or reward them for doing so : the admissions criteria proposed for use by schools which are over-subscribed give no advantage to parents who make professionally informed decisions and make it just as – if not more - likely that places will be offered to parents who take no advice of any sort*

4.4 Pupils with compelling individual circumstances or statements of special educational need

Chapter 4 of the Consultation Document raises a number of issues relating to such pupils and seeks views on them.

The Association's view is that :

- (a) *provision should be made for pupils with compelling individual circumstances, but the criteria for determining whether or not these circumstances exist should be stringent and applied consistently : children with serious medical illnesses or who are in care or assessed as requiring places in a boarding school are examples ; and*
- (b) *pupils admitted under this category – and pupils with statements of special educational needs – should be supernumerary to a school's admissions and enrolment number*

4.5 Admissions criteria for oversubscribed schools

Chapter 5 explains that the Department has decided that 'a menu of admissions criteria should be drawn up and schools should select from the menu the criteria they would use when oversubscribed' (5.3) and then goes on to propose a set of principles or criteria that this menu should meet (5.4).

It states that the menu should, in addition to being transparent, fair and free

- put the interests of the child at the centre of the process ;
- be based on informed choice by parents and pupils ; and
- acknowledge that schools normally serve local communities

The Association notes that

- (a) *no attempt has been made to determine what 'the interests of the child' might be in any particular case or how they might best be defined ;*

- (b) *there is an assumption that parents and pupils will make decisions based on 'informed choice' without any significant effort being made to ensure that their choices will in fact be informed ;*
- (c) *there is nothing that will make it more – rather than less – likely that the abilities, aspirations and aptitudes of pupils will be appropriately matched to schools ; and*
- (d) *the same careless assumption is made that 'schools normally serve local communities'*

When it comes to the four broad categories of admissions criteria that the Department 'has identified' as those which 'could be included in the menu', Chapter 5 proposes family-focused criteria (5.8), community-based criteria (5.9 and 5.10), geographical criteria (5.11 to 5.13) and tiebreakers (5.14).

It is the Association's view that, rather than being required to choose their admissions criteria from a centrally determined 'menu', post-primary schools should be able to determine their own criteria, as they do now, subject to the approval of the Department of Education.

If, nevertheless, there is to be a 'menu' of approved admissions criteria of the kind described in the Consultation Document, it is, the Association's opinion that

- (a) *the criteria proposed are insufficiently differentiated from each other : it is at best difficult to distinguish between those described as 'community-based criteria' and those referred to as 'geographical criteria' ;*
- (b) *the family-focused criteria are welcome, but insufficient : this set of criteria should also include (i) pupils with siblings who formerly attended the school, (ii) pupils who are children of current permanent employees of the school, (iii) pupils enrolled in recognised feeder schools, (iv) pupils who have particular skills or aptitudes in areas in which the school specialises, (v) pupils whose parents either wish to have or need boarding education and (vi) pupils whose parents have expressed a preference for the particular type (e.g. single sex), ethos (e.g. integrated) or religious affiliation of the school ;*
- (c) *feeder primary schools should not be defined simply or solely in terms of those schools which are in the immediate locality or geographical vicinity of a post-primary school ;*
- (d) *the criteria proposed will not give parents who make decisions about schools which are informed by professional guidance and advice the confidence that their children will be more likely to be offered places in the schools they choose as best suited to their children's needs, for there is no provision for this to be taken into account : unless a child is the eldest in his or her family or has a sibling already at the preferred school, parents will be driven either to limit their preference to the nearest post-primary school, whether they deem it 'suitable' or not, or take the chance that an unpredictable system will provide the child with a place ;*
- (e) *the criteria set out in the Consultation Document, if applied, will not make it more likely that children who have the combination of aspirations, abilities and aptitudes*

which makes a particular post-primary school appropriate for them will be able to secure places in that school : they are just as likely to lead to children who are not well matched to this school being offered places, if their parents apply to it ; and

- (f) *it is likely, if the criteria proposed are applied as they stand, that the post-primary schools which are over-subscribed now will be even more heavily oversubscribed when the transfer procedure tests have gone : there is nothing in these criteria either to encourage those parents who take professional advice when choosing the most appropriate post-primary schools for their children or to deter others from making applications for places in schools in which their children are very unlikely to make progress or have a sense of achievement*

5. The necessary changes

As indicated above, the Governing Bodies Association believes that Northern Ireland's children and young people – and their parents – should be able to express a preference for the kinds of educational pathways which are likely to be the most appropriate and effective for them.

It does not support any kind of 'one-size-fits-all' approach to post-primary education.

It therefore welcomes the statement in the Consultation Document (at 1.7) that post-primary schools 'will be able to reflect their own particular ethos by the weight they give to different aspects of the curriculum.'

This assumes that there will be a range of different types of school and the Document suggests (at 1.3 and 1.11, for example) that this range is expected to become greater. The Association believes that there should be such diversity and, further, that there has to be room in the mixed economy of post-primary schools that it wishes to see, for those which 'choose to have a traditional academic emphasis'. Not all voluntary – or other – grammar schools will make this choice, but they should be free (and feel able) to do so, if they wish.

If, however, there is to be a range of post-primary schools of different kinds and if the statement made at 3.3, that parents should 'feel confident about being able to secure a place for their child in a school which will be suited to his or her educational needs, interests and aspirations', is to become a reality, the arrangements for admissions to post-primary schools set out in the Consultation Document need to be substantially changed.

It is the Association's firm view that, as they currently stand, these arrangements

- *are not fit for purpose ;*
- *will not enable children and schools to be appropriately matched ;*
- *are not likely to enable parents to feel the confidence that the Document says they can and should feel ;*
- *will not make the process of transfer from primary to post-primary school easier and more straightforward ;*
- *will threaten the viability of smaller, predominantly rural, schools ;*
- *take insufficiently into account the fact that there are aspects of the proposals which will bear particularly on the specific circumstances of individual schools ; and*

- *will lead to more appeals, not fewer, and more pressure on parents, pupils and schools, not less*

The Association believes that, if the stated objectives of the proposals outlined in the Consultation Document are to be achieved and the commitment made at 3.3 turned into a reality, the arrangements for admissions to post-primary schools will need to be based on the following

- (a) pupil profiles which have been adequately trialled and tested, are completed to a consistent standard across and within schools and contain objective information and benchmark data about pupils' progress and levels of achievement, taking account of best international practice ;*
- (b) use of the profiles by the principals of primary schools to give parents professional guidance and advice ;*
- (c) clear, precise and accurate information about the curriculum provision made by post-primary schools, the expectations they have of their pupils, their distinctive characteristics and all other matters relating to them which parents should know ;*
- (d) access to the profiles by the principals of potential post-primary schools, to enable them to give prospective parents appropriate professional guidance and advice ;*
- (e) the ability of principals in oversubscribed schools to use the information in the pupil profiles (i) to admit those who are clearly and obviously well-matched to the provision the school makes and the pathways it offers and (ii) not to offer places to those who are clearly and obviously not equipped to make even limited progress and would be demonstrably misplaced in the school ;*
- (f) the entitlement of an oversubscribed post-primary school to apply its admissions criteria in the order which it has determined in order to decide which of the pupils remaining are to be offered places ;*
- (g) a right of appeal to an independent body for those parents who do not accept the decision of a post-primary school not to offer their child a place ; and*
- (h) the extension of the family-focused and other admissions criteria set out in the Consultation Document to include those listed above at 5.4*

6. Conclusions

The Governing Bodies Association recognises that the educational landscape will and should change if Northern Ireland's children and young people are all to be offered opportunities to achieve the best of which they are capable. It is committed to supporting change and development because it is committed to the best interests of the pupils of every kind of school.

Where the Association takes issue with the Department of Education is over how and when the changes are to be introduced, how they are to be managed and led and how they are to be funded and sustained.

There are three main ways in which the arrangements for admissions to post-primary schools could be changed

- (a) by letting market forces decide : at a time when the number of school-aged pupils is declining, competition for them will become sharper and the supposedly more 'popular' schools will succeed, leaving the others to be amalgamated, down-sized or closed ; or
- (b) by imposing the change from the centre, using crude instruments such as the common funding formula, limited resources, the entitlement curriculum, co-operation between schools and FE colleges and the establishment of specialist schools : these are the kinds of levers that can effectively determine what happens ; or
- (c) by working with employing authorities, governing bodies and school leaders to enable, encourage and support the kinds of adaptation, adjustment, voluntary co-operation that will not only promote diversity of provision but also allow local issues and concerns to be taken into account and, more important, give the changes that are made a much better prospect of being worthwhile and permanent

The Governing Bodies Association believes that the third of these is the right one to choose and will work closely with the Department of Education and other relevant bodies if that is the route that is adopted.