

**Consultation on New Admissions Arrangements for
Post-Primary Schools**

**The North Eastern Education and Library
Board's Response**

June 2005

Q1 The Department is seeking your views on whether the principles and objectives outlined provide a sound basis on which to develop new admissions arrangements

The Principles and Objectives outlined are generally acceptable. However, there are a number of key factors which need to be given urgent consideration.

- There is an increasing need for strategic cooperation and planning to ensure equitable school provision. The demographic downturn needs to be managed at a strategic level if the new arrangements are to be successfully established after 2008. The Boards are well placed to have a central role in taking this forward.
- The NEELB wishes to place on record its concerns regarding the lack of effective communication with the Northern Ireland public about the proposals for the future of post primary education.
- Increasing the awareness and understanding of the new admissions arrangements is crucial. To date the campaign to help inform parents and the wider community has not been effective. This has led to considerable apprehension about the proposed new arrangements, particularly amongst parents.
- Existing transport policy militates against maximising parental preference and may need to be reviewed in the context of the new arrangements. The Board would urge the Department of Education to review the existing arrangements which facilitate parental choice but within a policy framework which minimises exposure to transport costs. The Board would support a range of provision being available within each designated learning community which would afford parents a range of choices (eg controlled, integrated, maintained). Parents exercising a choice beyond schools in a designated learning community would be liable for associated transport costs.
- The reference to “in that area” within the third objective is much too vague.
- The reference in the fourth objective to special educational needs is very general and requires greater definition.

Q2 The Department is seeking your views on:

(a) whether the Pupil Profile should be used in the way described in the Consultation Document:

- The Board would support the development and use of the Pupil Profile.
- It is essential that the Profile is an objective record of a child's educational needs, interests and aspirations and it is used for the intended purpose. Rigorous quality assurance arrangements will be vital to its success.
- There would be some concern that if used as part of the Transfer Procedure the Profile would become a contentious document and potentially result in litigation.
- There will need to be a comprehensive training programme for teachers to support the introduction of the Pupil Profile. An information campaign for parents and the wider community will also be necessary.

(b) whether there are alternative or additional ways in which the Pupil Profile should be used to help parents decide on future post-primary provision for their child

- The role of the Primary 6 teacher as an active participant at the annual parent – teaching meeting to discuss the Pupil Profile needs to be stressed. Furthermore, greater emphasis should be placed on input from pupils if the Profile is to become developmental. The inclusion of information relating to aptitude and interests is also welcomed.
- Consideration should be given to the inclusion of a section where parents could provide additional information (eg activities the school was unaware of) and this would encourage greater ownership of the document by parents.

Q3 The Department is seeking your views on the information/advice which should be available from the primary school to help parents make informed decisions.

- The information identified is sufficient providing the post primary sector makes available all relevant information to enable primary schools to inform parents. The content must be “easily understood by parents” and this will require an effective information and training strategy.

- Concerns have been expressed by primary schools about the pressure that might be exerted on them when preparing the pupil profile. The new arrangements should address this matter.
- At present schools are allowed substitute costs to provide cover for the period of the Transfer interviews. The new proposal requires interviews in P6 to discuss the Pupil Profile and interviews in P7 to nominate preferences. This will result in an increased burden on schools and will have significant resource implications not least additional expenditure on substitute cover to ensure pupils do not suffer.
- The proposals should include consideration of ‘parental responsibility’ and how this is sometimes shared with social services. This may have timescale implications in some cases.
- The Board would advise that greater consideration be given to provision for people with sensory impairments and/or where English is not the first language.
- The integrity of the process will depend on the extent to which primary school principals restrict comments to offering general advice but not recommending specific schools to parents. This is an area where specific guidance within a regulatory framework may be necessary.

Q4 The Department is seeking your views on:

- (a) the range of information outlined in the Consultation Document to help parents make informed decisions;**
- (b) the role of the post-primary school in advising parents; and**
- (c) whether any other information/support should be provided to parents to assist the decision-making process**

- (a) The Board agrees with the information outlined.
- (b) It is unrealistic to require post-primary schools to undertake formal one to one consultations with parents prior to places being allocated. Each post-primary school would have to arrange interviews for all potential preferences with nugatory effect thus creating a massive burden on schools. It could also raise unrealistic parental expectations and possibly lead to an increase in the number of appeals particularly where Principals comment on the suitability of the school for individual pupils.

- (c) There should be a strengthening of information currently available in school prospectuses to assist a parent make preferences.

Q5 The Department is seeking your views on the information/advice which should be available from DE/ELBs to help parents choose the most suitable post-primary school.

- The Board would generally welcome these proposals but would stress that a Helpline and web-based information service would require a considerable investment in staffing and training.
- The format of the current Transfer Booklet should be reviewed in the light of strengthened prospectuses and the development of web-based information.
- Consideration should be given to revising relevant legislation to ensure that all school based information is obtained directly from the school with ELBs/DE providing an overview of the procedure. ELBs would still require admission criteria however the feasibility of only publishing electronically and thus saving printing costs should be examined.
- The Board would be concerned that the new arrangements, particularly in the early years, place a considerable burden on parents to understand the process in addition to informing themselves about the schools they may wish to consider for their children. This highlights yet again the need for a clear communication strategy underpinning the entire proposal for post primary education.

Q6 The Department is seeking your views on what information/advice should be available to assist with choices of educational pathway, during post-primary education

- The proposed role of ELBs in providing independent advice requires clarification. A Board would be in a position to provide information about alternative settings but would not have access to information about a young person's educational development to enable advice regarding suitability to be provided.
- Decisions about a pupils' educational pathway (s) after 11 years of age needs to be underpinned by independent, quality careers advice. The Department should liaise with the Department for Employment and Learning with a view to establishing a Careers Service with a more proactive role in providing careers information and advice to pupils.

Q7 The Department is seeking your views on the broad timetable for the new admissions Process

- **Commentary on Timetable**
- The Admission/Enrolment numbers need agreement by April
- The overlap of appeals and information gathering of admissions criteria place a considerable additional burden on the Transfer Section in each Board.
- There is real concern about the tight deadline for gathering information, publishing and distributing the Transfer Booklet. This would be alleviated if the earlier recommendation for revising the format of the Transfer Booklet was implemented.
- November : The 4 weeks for discussion would only be realisable if the current Transfer Booklet requirements are reviewed and parents have earlier access to strengthened prospectuses and web based information.
- The proposed timetable would be difficult to meet for receipt and processing of Transfer Forms.
- The proposed timetable should include consideration of Compelling Individual Circumstances.
- The proposed June deadline for appeals is welcome. This should facilitate attendance by school representatives and parents.
- At present there is duplication of the letter confirming school acceptance of a pupil. It is suggested that the school issues this letter.
- There is concern about the implications for post primary schools in trying to organise induction activities during May/June not least from the practical point of view of large numbers of additional young people on site when examinations are taking place.

Q8 The Department is seeking your views on the types of cases which should be considered as Compelling Individual Circumstances

- The Board strongly supports the establishment of a Central Panel for Northern Ireland.
- It is recommended that it consist of three members: legal, medical/social and educational background plus clerk. There should be a pool of Panel Members which would serve the 5 Boards but clerked on an individual Board basis.
- Timing is crucial because these cases have to be considered before other applications are processed regardless of whether they are supernumerary or not.

Q9 It is the Board's view that:

- Regular review of enrolment numbers in the context of demographic trends could be one method of addressing downturns strategically. The current practice of review only when considering rebuild is unsatisfactory.
- Pupils admitted under Compelling Individual Circumstances should be supernumerary but only in the year of enrolment.
- The procedure and timing of consideration of these cases has not been addressed in the timetable.
- Consideration should be given to the impact on numbers if supernumerary of: children with statements and children admitted on Appeal.

Q10 The Department is seeking your views on whether individual BOGs or a Central Panel should consider cases of CIC. If a Central Panel, your views are sought on its size and composition.

- It is difficult to envisage that there would be many cases falling within this category. At present the numbers falling within 'special circumstances' is small.
- Such cases could be:
 - those children who have had a serious accident or serious medical condition – possibly deteriorating – during their transfer year.

- those children who are in the process of statutory assessment but who do not yet have a statement at the time transfer/enrolment decisions are being taken.
 - recent family bereavement.
- A Central Panel has the advantages of
 - being independent of school therefore removing from them the possibility of expensive legal challenge.
 - developing expertise in making such decisions is unlikely at school level because of the small numbers.

Q11 The Department is seeking your views on whether pupils with statements of special educational need should continue to be admitted as supernumerary

- Pupils with statements of special educational needs should be admitted as supernumerary otherwise placement would be difficult. An alternative may be to allow schools an additional percentage of places for SEN to ensure a more equitable distribution.
- Currently pupils with statements are placed by May of the P.7 year. It would be feasible to complete all P.7 reviews by September/October, make amendments to statements by November and finalise placements by January which would be in accordance with the proposed transfer procedure.
- It is important that pupils with specific mobility requirements are identified as early as possible to ensure adequate provision can be made.

Q12 The Department is seeking your views on the family – focused criteria listed and their inclusion within a menu

- Sibling at the school – there are sound practical reasons why a family with pupils at a particular school should be given preference and encouraged to keep children at one school.
- It is difficult to see any clear justification for giving the eldest child priority over a child whose family had attended the school but because of age gap had left.

- The changing nature of what constitutes a family means the definition of eldest child is proving increasingly difficult to define. If “eldest child” is to remain as a criterion careful definition would be required eg it would be important to ensure that a child is not disadvantaged because an older sibling has a statement.

Q13 The Department is seeking your views on the community based criteria listed, their inclusion within a menu and how they should be defined.

- The Board would be sympathetic to the use of feeder primary schools however this would require more specific guidance from D.E. as to the definition of “feeder primary school”. Furthermore the Department would have to ensure that the use of this criterion complies with equality legislation.
- There are practical difficulties about the use of parish as a criterion. Parish boundaries can be difficult to define. In some cases there is more than one post-primary in a parish and currently the criterion is restricted to one sector only.

Q14 The Department is seeking your views on

(a) the geographical criteria listed, their inclusion within a menu and the most appropriate means of operating them; and

(b) what percentage limit, if any should be set for places allocated by geographical criteria

- The Board would be concerned about the use of “school centred catchment” as it could have the effect of reinforcing social divisions within education. “Child centred” would be preferred as each child would have one nearest suitable school.
- Percentage limits are difficult to apply and likely to result in an increase in appeals due to the non-transparent nature.
- The Board would be in agreement with the proposal that a pupil would be given priority at the school closest to their home, taking account of suitability in terms of denominational, non-denominational, integrated and Irish-medium.

Q15 The Department is seeking your views on:

- (a) the tiebreakers, random selection and proximity from home to school, as a means of admitting pupils down to the last available place;**
- (b) the most appropriate method of operating random selection and/or measuring proximity; and**
- (c) whether schools should be free to use different methods of operating random selection or proximity.**

- The Board considers a standard ‘tie breaker’ used across N.I. to be the best option.
- Random selection by surname would be the preferred option for reasons stated in 5.14. Distance is contentious and expensive if an independent body is to measure and is likely to lead to delay decisions for schools.

Q16 The Department is seeking your views in any other criteria that you believe should be included in the menu bearing in mind the principles and objectives outlined in Chapter 2.

- If the eldest child is used as a criterion it is essential that a child with an elder sibling who has a statement is not penalised.
- D.E. needs to give more consideration to the issue of children moving into N.I. from outside the U.K., particularly if they are not EU nationals as they will not readily meet the criteria listed.

Q17 The Department is seeking your views on the possible options for the menu

A key objective of the new arrangements is to have a transparent system which is manageable and easily understood. At present parents are confused about how the criteria are defined and applied. The Board is very supportive of the menu approach but would also be sympathetic to giving the flexibility to schools wishing to reflect local circumstances.

- The Board considers that getting this right is central to the success of the new Transfer Arrangements.

- If the system is to meet the needs of all children and provide choice as well as build on existing strengths then a certain degree of flexibility is required.
- There would be reservations about Option 4 and while each of the options have advantages and disadvantages on balance the Board would express sympathy for Option 2.

Q18 The Department is seeking your views on whether the process for appealing the decisions of BOGs not to admit a child to the school should be altered in any way

- It is the Board's view that a review of the appeals procedure should take place after the new arrangements have been established.

Other Issues

None.

Do you think any of the issues contained in the Consultation Document would have any adverse implications for any of the Section 75 categories?

Yes criterion using feeder primary schools.