

NICIE response to the consultation on New Admissions Arrangements for Post-Primary Schools.

June 2005

NICIE welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation document and to demonstrate its support for fundamental change within the transfer process in Northern Ireland. NICIE sees the proposals for reform at post primary as an opportunity for the education sector to contribute towards both social change and reconciliation within our community. In 2004 The 'Costello Report' stated that 'we live in a society still emerging from conflict' and that the 'life-chances of many young people are constrained by social disadvantage'. NICIE holds that the education sector has an intrinsic responsibility to contribute to social change and reconciliation by bringing about reforms at post primary level that reflect the governments vision of 'a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society....founded on partnership, equality and mutual respect.....'. (A Shared Future, March 2005). It is no longer sufficient to have the just the rhetoric, words, laudable though they might be need to be backed with actions.

With this in mind the Council accepts and would reiterate the statement offered in 1.3 that **'it is important to recognise that the new admissions arrangements being described will take effect in an educational landscape which will be quite different to what we are used to today'**. It would point out however that to date the Department of Education has offered little incentive to schools to embrace a new 'educational landscape'. There is widespread concern throughout the integrated sector that lack of incentive to change or, compelling schools to change without offering any encouragement will lead to stagnation of the present post-primary and curricular reviews.

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.

NICIE accepts the principles and objectives laid out in paragraph 2.1 – 2.3 and feels they are appropriately child centred rather than institution focussed. It should be noted however that integrated schools tend to have larger than average catchment areas and consequently there is a need for the Department to either define ‘local’ or acknowledge the unique nature of integrated schools. The objective to ensure parents are better informed to make key decisions for their children is very welcome but in order for this to be realised future arrangements must be transparent and easily understood by parents.

NICIE also supports the concept of complementary criteria amongst schools in a local area but notes there is no indication in the document of how this will be monitored and enforced. NICIE acknowledges however that schools need to be given sufficient flexibility to reflect their local circumstances within their admissions criteria.

Q2. The Department is seeking your views on:

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

(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.

NICIE broadly welcomes the principle of developing and using a pupil profile to help inform decisions about post-primary education. While anything that encourages parents to make contact with potential post-primary schools is to be encouraged NICIE remains concerned that should schools have sight of the pupil profile in advance of transfer then some form of selection may ensue, albeit in a more subtle and less overt fashion than at present. There is concern amongst primary school teachers that pressure will be brought to bear from parents eager to influence what is written in the pupil profile in order to gain a more favourable response from a preferred post-primary school. The proposed use of the pupil profile relies on the honesty and integrity of all parties involved in the transfer process. To ensure fairness and consistency NICIE asks that the Department moves to develop clear guidelines for all primary and post-primary schools relating to the use of pupil profiles as well as the principal/parent interviews, their content and recommendations.

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.

Since the pupil profile is critical to the information/advice being given to parents then it is important that the document is fit for purpose. It remains essential that the initiative to develop a pupil profile is given the time and support necessary to make the document a sufficiently strong platform upon which to base the educational future of a child. NICIE reiterates what was said in its response to 'Education for the 21st Century (the Burns Report).

'It is essential that the development and provision of the pupil profile can be achieved within a realistic and manageable time period. All teachers have a duty to deliver the curriculum within their classes. Time spent in administrative tasks detracts from the core teaching function and this can only be to the detriment of pupils. If the pupil profile is to offer a true and comprehensive picture of each child then teachers must be afforded adequate time within contracted hours to do justice to each individuals profile.'

Almost 3 years on from 'Burns' and with a target of 2008 for implementation of the pupil profile teachers and principals remain concerned that the pupil profile will be 'parachuted' into schools on top of other changes and without the resources necessary for teachers to implement effective change. If schools are unable to make pupil profiles into a serviceable tool then any information/advice to parents is irrelevant.

As a matter of urgency NICIE asks that pilot schemes are initiated at the earliest possible opportunity or that schools are informed about work to date in the development of the pupil profile by CCEA.

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) NICIE accepts the suggested range of information as being broad and accessible on different levels. It is recommended that all prospectuses and web sites should contain a basic core set of information and that schools should be obliged to keep web sites up-to-date.

(b) NICIE accepts that parent meetings with post-primary schools could potentially assist parents in making a more informed decision. The Council, while reiterating its concerns expressed in Q2 acknowledges that under the new arrangements parents would have the final say regarding any decision relating to the choice of post primary school. In addition NICIE would note the practical difficulties for post primary schools in conducting what might be a huge number of parent ‘discussions’ in a relatively short period of time.

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

NICIE welcomes any supporting information that will help parents make the right decision for their child. Some integrated school principals however have raised concerns about the lack of knowledge and understanding of the integrated sector held by Education and Library Board officers. This can lead to parents being confused about transfer rather than gaining clarity, which is essential if new transfer arrangements are to be successfully 'bedded in'. NICIE asks therefore that the Department support the appointment or allocation of an individual, based at the NICIE offices, to be available to advise parents during the transfer process on post-primary transfer within the integrated sector.

It is important that advice from officers in all education bodies is impartial, honest and in-keeping with the principles and objectives stated in Chapter 2.

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.

NICIE welcomes the statement in 3.15 that if the **‘choice of post-primary school at age 11 need not necessarily be the only or final determinant of a child’s educational pathway until they leave school’**, and accepts that 11 is still a very young age on which to base such a significant decision. In fact it should be noted that under the proposed new timetable for the transfer process, children will only be 10 years old when they receive their pupil profile. It is essential therefore that post-primary education becomes more flexible in order to meet changing needs. In addition it is important that any decision is the parents/pupil’s and not the schools. If the pupil profile is to evolve with the pupil and form the basis on which educational pathways may be determined then serious consideration needs to be given to the structure and determination of the profile at Key Stage 3, especially since many different teachers will be involved in its development. There is an obvious need for thorough and comprehensive training for second level teachers. Furthermore, the concerns over the time necessary to contribute to or complete the pupil profile are as relevant at second level as they are for primary teachers.

Section 3.17 refers to parents and schools seeking ‘independent advice’ from the relevant Education and Library Board, again NICIE would have concerns over the ability of the Education and Library Board’s to offer impartial and up-to-date advice on the integrated sector, especially Grant Maintained Integrated Schools.

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

NICIE broadly welcomes the proposed timetable but offers the following comments;

- in primary schools the month of December is notoriously busy; the preference therefore is to see principal – parent interviews completed by the end of November.
- admissions Appeal Tribunals should be finished by the end of May so that all pupils know their allocated school and can benefit from induction programmes in June.

Q8. The Department is seeking your views on the types of cases which should be considered as compelling individual circumstances (see paragraphs 4.3-4.5).

NICIE welcomes the statements made in paragraph 4.3 – 4.5 especially the inclusion of ‘looked after children’. It would be beneficial to have some clear guidelines regarding the ‘compelling circumstances’ category although the difficulty of providing a definitive list of the type of cases that may be eligible is understood.

Q9. The Department is seeking your views on whether pupils admitted under compelling individual circumstances should be supernumerary to schools' admissions and enrolment numbers (see paragraph 4.6).

Integrated schools are open to all and therefore children identified as having compelling individual circumstances should not be considered as supernumerary. Those children identified throughout the year or after the transfer process has been completed should be considered supernumerary.

Q10. The Department is seeking your views on whether individual Boards of Governors or a Central Panel should consider cases of compelling individual circumstances. If a Central Panel, your views are sought on its size and composition (see paragraph 4.7).

NICIE welcomes the proposed establishment of a Central Panel to consider cases of 'compelling individual circumstances'. It would be important to the integrated sector however that any panel would include members of other governing bodies and that schools would have the right to appeal decisions made by the panel, particularly if a pattern began to emerge with respect to claims for school places.

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

NICIE supports the attendance of children with special needs at mainstream schools and it is well known that integrated schools attract relative high numbers of statemented children - up to 50% more than schools in other sectors.

In keeping with the spirit of inclusion NICIE supports a move to include children with statements of special needs in school admission numbers. The following conditions however are attached to this statement;

- all schools under the new SENDO will have a shared responsibility to cater for children with statements of special need; NICIE therefore supports the setting of a limit for numbers of statemented children, for example, 2-3%. Should schools wish to exceed this percentage that would be acceptable but they should not be compelled to do so.
- the Department must provide the resources/support necessary to allow schools to provide the full educational entitlement for each special needs pupil.

NICIE refers the Department to its recent response (17 May 2005) on the 'Draft Supplementary guidance to support the impact of SENDO....' for additional comments on the inclusion of children with statements of special needs.

It is accepted that children whose statement is determined after the transfer process is completed would have to be considered as supernumerary however there is some concern that this system could be open to abuse from parents who may submit a 'private' statement at the opportune time. In the case of integrated schools it is not appropriate that supernumerary pupils be included in Departmental statistics regarding religious balance.

Q12. The Department is seeking your views on the family-focussed criteria listed and their inclusion within a menu.

NICIE accepts the benefits to be gained from a simplified and streamlined transfer process with agreed admissions criteria for all schools being selected from a menu of options. The Council further accepts that the menu should be consistent with the principles and objectives outlined in Chapter 2 of the consultation document. In relation to paragraph 5.4 NICIE wishes to offer the following comments in respect of the menu of options;

•‘...should be fair and free from any bias or indirect discrimination against particular groups or individuals’.

The nature of integrated education is such that over-subscribed schools must regularly use religious/community background as a means to admit pupils. While paragraph 5.5 acknowledges that **‘integrated schools would continue to sort applications on the basis of religion’** NICIE requests that this is made clear and apparent to all parties involved in the transfer process.

•‘...acknowledge that the schools normally serve local communities.’

NICIE has already indicated its concern over the use of the word ‘local’ in relation to catchment areas (see response to Q1) and reiterates that the Department must clearly acknowledge and accept that that local community for an integrated school may differ significantly from that of schools in other sectors.

•‘...give schools sufficient flexibility to reflect their local circumstances’.

NICIE welcomes flexibility for schools but again challenges the use of ‘local’ as being wholly appropriate for the integrated sector.

NICIE generally welcomes the inclusion of family focussed criteria within a menu but draws attention to the following points;

- it is felt that all siblings should be included as part of the criteria. The exclusion of siblings who formerly attended the school is seen as unfair, particularly to children of ‘second families’ whose parents may wish them to attend the same school as their older brothers or sisters.
- many integrated schools make use of a criterion which gives consideration to those children whose ‘parent is an employee or governor of the school’. NICIE feels that the inclusion of this criterion acknowledges the contribution that individuals make to the school community itself. Integrated schools are unique in that their Boards of Governors contain greater numbers of places for parents than in any other sector thus making this criterion particularly relevant in respect of supporting the ‘family unit’.

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

As a general comment NICIE sees significant overlap between use of what is termed community-based criteria and geographical criteria and believes that one is simply a proxy for the other. The Council however wishes to comment further on community-based criteria on two levels, firstly in respect of the controlled and maintained sectors and secondly specifically in regard to the integrity of the integrated sector.

a) It is felt that the use of feeder primary schools or parish boundaries as criteria will further reduce the potential for young people to attend schools which are traditionally outside of their immediate ‘community’ and this will further consolidate sectoral-based schooling. Rather than promoting the move towards ‘greater sharing’ in education envisioned in ‘A Shared Future’ NICIE believes that the use of these criterion will simply contribute to the maintenance of the status quo.

b) NICIE takes the opposite view regarding the use of feeder primaries as a criterion within the integrated sector and would argue strongly that pupils who are already experiencing a ‘shared education’ at primary level should be entitled to complete their education within an integrated college. This is consistent with the proposals within ‘A Shared Future’ and preserves systemic integrity within the integrated sector. NICIE however does not see integrated colleges as being exclusively for young people who have been at an integrated primary school; it believes that sufficient capacity exists to ensure that young people coming from other types of primary school will have the opportunity to apply for places.

Finally NICIE wishes to state that it has always supported the principle of parental choice and respects the wishes of parents who desire denominational education for their children; the Council feels however that such wishes will be protected under other criteria suggested in this consultation document, most specifically the geographical criteria identified in paragraph 5.11.

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?**

For reasons previously articulated NICIE sees problems in attempting to operate a school-centred catchment for integrated schools. Children regularly travel significant distances to attend integrated schools and this makes it very difficult to effectively identify a realistic catchment area. The problem is compounded by the fact that in order to achieve religious balance integrated schools may have to reach out into communities that may be seen to be beyond the 'traditional' size of catchment that other second level schools might operate. Furthermore NICIE sees particular problems for schools which may be considering transforming to integrated status since any previously designated or traditional catchment area may not be sufficient to draw in the required numbers of pupils to achieve religious balance. Finally there may be issues regarding potential overlap between catchments of integrated schools. This is not necessarily a problem as in some instances the 'target' community may be different for each school.

An example of this may be where a newly transformed school is seeking to attract Catholic children within the catchment of a GMI school over-subscribed with children from that same community. NICIE's view is that careful consideration needs to be given to the needs of individual integrated schools before any attempt is made to determine catchment areas.

In regard to the child-centred catchment NICIE would again have concerns about how catchment boundaries would be measured and drawn up. It is difficult to see, at this stage how integrated schools would be able to provide 'clear maps' to parents in regard to this. It is also impossible for integrated schools to guarantee 'priority' to any child even within an agreed catchment since entry to the school must be predicated upon the school's ability to maintain religious balance.

While NICIE has concerns about the use of geographical criteria on a number of levels it supports the concept that a school serves the local community and can promote local community cohesion. It is unfortunate in Northern Ireland however that our society is divided to such an extent that the expression 'community cohesion' must be seen in the context of separate rather than mixed communities.

While the Department acknowledges that geographical criteria must not be allowed to create artificial areas of exclusivity, NICIE feels that more must be done to combat this than merely allocating a percentage limit for places allocated under these criteria. Greater consideration must be given, by all education partners to ensuring that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are given realistic opportunities under the new arrangements and that all schools are supported to a level that allows them to deliver a quality education for every pupil.

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.**

NICIE supports the use of random selection as a tie breaker criterion based on alphabetical order of surname. It is suggested that a small working party comprising all the education partners might be brought together to agree guidelines on how this might be carried out in order to ensure consistency and fairness across all schools.

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

The removal, some years ago of 'first preference' as an admissions criterion has resulted in many young people being turned away from integrated schools despite their parents desire to have this type of education for their children. NICIE requests that the Department review this decision in light of the new arrangements and feels that re-introduction of this criterion is in the interests of parental/pupil choice.

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

At the present time, because of concerns relating to the determination of catchment area NICIE would support option 3, i.e. optional categories and compulsory order.

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

NICIE welcomes the suggestion that the new arrangements could enable the appeal process to be conducted during the months of May and June but would push for all appeals to be determined by the end of May to allow children to avail of post-primary induction programmes.

Other issues

A number of integrated schools currently attract pupils from across the border and NICIE asks that a more flexible approach be accepted towards these pupils whose parents may be working and paying tax in Northern Ireland and especially where the children have completed their primary education in an integrated setting.

Equality considerations

The current system in Northern Ireland dictates that for the purposes of achieving religious balance parents choosing an integrated school must designate their children as either Catholic or Protestant. It is well documented that a significant proportion of people, although they themselves may have a perceived religious/community background, chose to designate their children as 'other' i.e. as neither being brought up in the Catholic or Protestant faith. The Department of Education, while accepting people from other *faiths* does not recognise these more local others and as such disadvantages these individuals in respect of their right to integrated education as they are not accepted as making a contribution towards religious diversity within the school.

