

Strategic Advisory Group

Minutes of 8th Meeting of Strategic Advisory Group

Dunadry Hotel – 18 April 2005

Present:

Chairperson
Members

SIB

DEL Observer

Secretariat

Apologies

Chairman's Introduction

1. The Chairman welcomed members to the 7th meeting of the Group and to from the Strategic Investment Board for the discussion on the item on Procurement and Delivery of the Schools Estate. The Chairman reminded members of the publication of the RPA proposals, the forthcoming election and the issue of guidance to schools about new 6th forms.

Minutes of previous meeting

2. The minutes were agreed.

Procurement and Delivery of the Schools Estate

3. gave a presentation outlining the PWC report and the issues on which the Department was currently consulting. Members were generally supportive of the need for a strategic approach to procurement and delivery. The main points raised in discussion are set out on Annex A.

Entitlement Framework and Capital Projects

4. outlined the aims of the questionnaire which has issued to schools included the capital programme. The responses will help the Department to give further consideration, in conjunction with the relevant school authorities, to the likelihood of schools being able to offer access to number of courses required under the Entitlement Framework. Members welcomed the approach being taken – detailed comments are set out in Annex B.

Specialist schools

5. advised members that the Minister had announced that specialist schools would be piloted from January 2006 and outlined an approach to select the 10 schools to be included and concerns which had been expressed by education partners. Members were asked for advice on the alternative methods of selectiing schools and on the composition of a selection panel.

6. Members expressed a number of concerns including confusion about the objectives of the pilot and about schools having to raise private sector sponsorship. Members comments are set out in Annex C.

7. Members considered that the pilot should be an open invitation and that the selection panel should be independent (option 3 of paper 8.4)

8. The Chairman thanked members for their contributions.

Chairperson_____ Date_____

ANNEX A

Procurement and Delivery of the Schools Estate

Discussion

General points

- Welcome strategic approach and focus on efficiency.
- Need for Inter-Departmental dialogue esp between DE and DEL, DHSSPS, DSD and DoE in a joined up service.
- How will the PwC report link with RPA particularly with the emphasis on schools as community resources?
- Schedules of Accommodation and Building Handbook will need to be reviewed.
- Present system loses learning and experience.
- The PwC recommendations may create unnecessary bureaucracy.
- Need for strong areas of challenge, eg impact of SENDO, health and safety legislation etc and a method of resolving these.
- System will need to adapt to new, faster procurement timetable.
- “Shared Future” must be borne in mind.
- Investment sometimes needed to realise savings.
- What will be the future role of rural schools? This needs to be examined.
- Some schools, eg VG may feel they are losing flexibility or existing local arrangements that work well.
- May raise PPP debate again.
- It needs to be clear that the PwC report deals with the totality of procurement in the schools estate, not just PPP projects.
- Central procurement works on some levels but not on others.
- Better quality schools, maintained to a higher standard will cost more.

Strategic Planning issues

- Central procurement good idea in itself, although not always the best way to use resources efficiently.
- How accurate are our population forecasts? There will be an element of risk in any forecast.

- **Patterns of enrolment will change.**
- **Remaining need for higher level strategic planning.**
- **Need to retain flexibility – can't eliminate all surplus places.**
- **Trustees would welcome chance to plan on strategic level.**

Local involvement

- **At what point do we consult the school about a project; when this works well it leads to sense of ownership.**
- **How decentralised should budgets be eg at school level?**
- **What will the role of the Trustees and the BoGs be?**
- **Trustees have a duty to the building and to the pupils who are there.**
- **Level of school involvement in PPP projects not always ideal.**

Schools as community resources

- **Benefits of the schools estate for the entire community are central part of the proposed process.**
- **Many primary schools already function as community resources, with links particularly with the health sector.**
- **Affordability is a key issue; improving school as resources will require money.**
- **Opportunity to remedy existing difficulties esp in out of hours use of school facilities.**
- **Important that communities continue to see local role of schools.**
- **US model of schools as community resources works well.**

Entitled to Succeed implications

- **Under "e2s" suitability is central – schools need to be fit for purpose.**
- **There is a tension between planning based on current information and future reality.**
- **Education system needs to be closer to the needs of industry/employers.**
- **Nature of NI requires variety of its schools and the pluralist system inevitably leads to excess school places.**
- **Need to ensure that all schools operate under the same conditions.**
- **Public perception of schools is in conflict with strategic view.**

ANNEX B

The Entitlement Framework and Capital projects

Discussion

- Is the questionnaire linked to e2s as a whole or does it focus on the delivery of the Entitlement framework?
- Decisions based only on the contents of the questionnaire would be arbitrary.
- Important step forward and should not be seen only as a hurdle.
- The questionnaire should be used at as early a stage as possible in the planning process.
- Every decision to build must fit in with future developments.
- Demographics need to be examined as part of decision making process.
- Will 24/27 have a legislative basis?
- Audit of current provision is required.
- Schools aren't aware of what will be required under the EF.

ANNEX C

Specialist Schools

Discussion

Private Sponsorship

- £25K private sponsorship will be an insurmountable hurdle for many schools.
- How do we assess the deal that is done between the school and private sector?
- Links to business through payment in kind would be more valuable.
- Could the Department test the water on private sponsorship on behalf of the pilot schools?
- If schools don't come forward because of problems finding private funding, how will we know?

The application process for the pilot

- Nomination is not possible for non-managing bodies.
- Option 3 should include the Inspectorate and the Specialist Schools Trust.
- ETI involvement should be at the final stage of the decision process, assisting DE.
- Is the need for a spread of school types robust enough reason to turn down a school's strong application? There should be an appeals mechanism built in.
- Could the capital that schools bid for be on a variable scale? ie "Bids are available up to £...."
- It would be useful to have education partners input to the decision making process; they will be aware of relevant local information. They could supply comments on individual applications.
- Criteria should be stressed as positives rather than hurdles to eliminate schools from the process.

- The financial position of many otherwise suitable schools may preclude them under the proposed criteria.
- If it is clear that the purpose of the pilot is to learn and adapt, the education sector will be more open to the concept.
- Financial position of a school should only be used as a tie-breaker. The financial position of a school can be due to a number of circumstances.
- It must be clear exactly what is being piloted.
- Sub criteria should make clear that a spread of school types will be required for the pilot. Decisions will not just be made on the basis of the strength of application.

General

- When previously discussed, the general view of SAG was not in favour of the introduction of specialist schools here.
- Where does the specialist programme fit into the implementation of the new arrangements?
- The combination of school improvement elements and the structural aspects of the model lead to confusion.
- If the preference is for non-grammar schools to become specialists, then this should be explicit.
- There is a contradiction between school improvement and the fostering of collaboration.
- By specifying specialisms you lessen creativity.
- How does it fit with existing school improvement programmes?
- Why include a school if its standards are already rising?
- Grammar schools should not be excluded.
- This is a successful initiative in England that could work here.
- Specialist Schools Trust should be involved.
- Following the conference, the level of interest in the Post-Primary sector here is high.
- Is there scope to focus on “lead” schools in an area to foster co-operation/collaboration? Could schools put forward group applications?
- Seen as something separate from wider e2s programme; a focus on collaboration might address this?

