



**Sinn Fein Response to
New Admissions Arrangements for Post-Primary Schools
Consultation Document 2005**

Sinn Fein welcomes this debate, however we note that the Costello Proposals are not substantially included in the discussion and question the omission. If the opening statement of the introduction is to hold true: “school admissions arrangements should work for the benefit of children,” then the Localised Partnership Solutions (LPSs) should have been factored into the discussion. The LPSs concept is a step in the right direction of ensuring that all schools gain the reputation of being a ‘good school’ that a parent would be confident in to meet the needs of his/her child, either as single institution or in partnership with one or more local educational institutions.

We agree with your observation, “...it is clear that parents do not consider that all schools are ‘good enough’...” This flags up two questions:

1. What range of criteria do parents apply to judging a school as ‘good enough’?
2. To what extent will LPSs as a model of Post Primary Provision, meet the range of parental criteria for judging individual schools as ‘good schools’?

In her 2002-2004 Chief Inspector’s Report, Marion Matchett alludes to LPSs under Page 5 Section entitled: ‘A time of change for all’. Consulting her colleague inspectors about the need for greater coherence in all young people’s experiences, they have advised the innovation of: “...piloting an approach to inspection centered on education and training in a particular geographical area, to determine its effectiveness and appropriateness. We will be evaluating the extent to which such provision meets the needs of young people, employers and the community. We will want to know how effective are the current strategies for 14-19 provisions in raising achievement, widening access and increasing participation in education and training.”

At the date of writing this response (June 2005), Sinn Fein would highlight the contradictions implicit in NIO proposals to dramatically reduce educational budgets until 2008 and the Page 1 comment that the task is one of, “...ensuring that we maintain-and indeed enhance-the range of educational opportunities available to pupils.” The discussion will dominate three life transitions for a child:

1. Leaving Primary School;
2. Thinking clearly about future career prospects by the end of Key Stage Three.
3. Post statutory school life.

With this in mind Sinn Fein contends that “...the primary means of ensuring that parental choice is ‘informed choice’” i.e.: The pupil Profile, must be an objective, transparent and accountable document. Most importantly, it must never be governed to any degree by a Primary School Senior Manager’s subjective perceptions of various second level institutions. We are very pleased to see the unequivocal statement that ‘the profile will be a tool to help parents choose ... not for post-primary schools to choose which children to admit in the event of their school being oversubscribed’. We would strongly urge the Department to maintain this position, any dilution of which would simply lead to the reintroduction of the 11 plus by the back door.

On Page 3 we have a brief acknowledgement of the Entitlement Framework and how academic and vocational education must be represented. Once again Sinn Fein would argue that this is a further opportunity to celebrate and value equally vocational educational achievements.

The Department of Employment and Learning Skills Strategy Task Force Report (April 2005):

‘A study of the N. Ireland Labour Market for Construction Skills’ is a further example of how our society needs to embrace every “...strategy to meet the skills needs of the N. Ireland

economy...in order to assist in the targeting the allocation of education and training resources.” (See Preface, Page 111).

At this point it is also vital to note that Education, Skills and Training together constitute one of the seven domains in the calculation of the N. Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures 2005 outlined in the May 2005 report of the N. Ireland Statistics and Research Agency within the Department of Finance and Personnel. The change process envisaged in these measures focuses on Local Government Districts and in turn the electoral wards (base communities), which make up an LGD.

Page 4, Section 1.10 of ‘New Admissions Arrangements for Post Primary Schools’ refers to the need for schools and F.E. institutions to co-operate and collaborate. The latter will be an important element of LPSs. The “synchronised timetabling etc...” recognised as a need by the Department of Education for this to succeed, will require resourcing in the initial planning and preparation phases. Whenever it moves into the actual phase of progression and implementation, the further resource of experienced personnel from the schools must be financed. The latter individuals are essential to accompany pupils/students to Further Education Institutions to deal with relationship matters vis-à-vis the new adults in the young people’s lives and their encounters with other peers from various schools. Under LPSs, partners will be able to pool personnel for this important task.

The concept of ‘specialist schools’ energises creative thinking with one caveat: No special school must be cul-de-saced into becoming an institution of single level ability. To do so would rob any institution of the opportunities to take the fear out of difference and celebrate diversity. Sinn Fein notes the profile of over subscribed schools as outlined in Table 3, Page 45:

1. 67 were Grammar schools and 47 All Ability;
2. Those which were over 60% plus oversubscribed included 3 Grammar and 7 All Ability;
3. Most interestingly the top three schools with 90-100% over subscription were All Ability schools.
4. This augurs extremely well for ending selection and the concept of LPSs catering for all skills, talents and intelligences possessed by our young people.

Moving on to Chapter 2, Page 7, Sinn Fein recognises the attempts to make children and parents paramount via the rationale expressed in 2.2 and 2.3. However, we call for the removal of the qualifying term “normally” from the final bullet point of 2.2 because it is our contention “...that schools serve local communities,” see our Policy ‘Educate that you might be free’ in relation to ‘Learning Neighbourhoods’. We also feel that the final clause of bullet point three of 2.3 clashes somewhat with the primacy of the child as expressed in the first bullet point of 2.2. Giving “...each...some priority...” dilutes the LPS aura of the opening bullet point three of 2.3 i.e. “ensure as far as possible that the admissions criteria of schools in a local area are complementary,...”.

In answer to the question raised at the end of Chapter 2, Sinn Fein would reiterate that no principle or objective should result in a school population reflecting pupil profiles at either end of the academic spectrum only.

On Page 9, Chapter 3 we return to the concept of choosing the “right” school. Sinn Fein considers the pupil profile as key and would argue that perceived intelligence is just one component in the formulae of decision-making. Furthermore, a school, which is part of a LPSs model, will provide greater fluidity and expand the parameters of choice for parents and pupils. Local Partnership Solutions, participating institutions embracing All-Ability will have varying “tracks” of learning pace to encourage individuals to motivate themselves, increase their value of learning and stabilise the teaching/learning relationships. Unremitting “hot housing” is neither physically or psychologically desirable for children nor young people.

On Page 10, Section 3.5.1 pupils and parents are promised that the Pupil Profile, "...will be suitably "quality assured" and consistent across schools and between pupils;" Sinn Fein's position is that the personnel and mechanisms for the quality assurance are crucial to:

1. Sustain minimum workloads for teachers;
2. Instill confidence in parents, pupils and civic society.

The final bullet point of 3.5.1 also highlights the issue of instilling confidence in the procedures through resourcing personnel with time and in-service training. It is a similar scenario for the Key Stage Three personnel.

Such critical insights are further distorted by current under funding and threats to education budgets up until 2008. This crisis undermines key personnel whose capacity to plan, prepare, progress and evaluate these new procedures is key to such an historic process of change in post-primary education.

The public debate surrounding this post-primary admissions procedure will further fuel the established practice of growing numbers of parents to "shop around" from the beginning of Key Stage Two. Visits to 'Open Nights and Days' would become the norm for unnecessarily angst-ridden parents.

To counter this LPSs providing "broadband menus" in contrast to more "narrow band menus" of single post primary institutions must be the parents' "means of establishing,... which pathway best meets their child's educational needs."

Sinn Fein agrees that the Post Primary school prospectuses are vital communications with parents and children. It is our experience and advice though, that parents and pupils will read in detail the "Marketing Prospectus" of a school. However, the huge detail of the legal statutory prospectus as outlined in the Department of Education writing frame will not be consumed with relish by each and every parent. The latter document presents a demanding collation task for a SMT, HODS and serves the Inspectorate audience mainly.

Staying with the theme of communicating with present and potential pupils and parents brings us on to Web-based information. This requires resources of time, finance and trained personnel to keep the web site updated and engaging. Schools cannot compete with other employers for the dedicated personnel required. Consequently, too many under funded schools suffer from a high turnover valued of ICT technicians because of the low salaries offered. The present funding crisis exacerbates this even further.

Proper discussions with parents as envisaged by the new procedure will also require budget. Hence the core question for Sinn Fein. Why is there absolutely no reference in this consultation document to the extra budgetary resources, which will be required for at least a decade to establish the new procedures in a manner that will instill public confidence.

In relation to the issue of admissions criteria for oversubscribed schools, Sinn Féin is broadly happy with the types of criteria being proposed. However, we have some concerns in relation the use of feeder schools. It is important to ensure that this system is not open to abuse, allowing schools to 'cherry pick' schools in order to maintain their current academic profile. We also share the Department's concern that geographical criteria should not create artificial areas of exclusivity, and would urge robust measures to be put in place to ensure that this is not the case. In reference to tiebreakers, if proximity to school is used as the criterion, there would need to be a standardized formula for measuring this.