

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

Introduction

- 1.1 As a Group, we count it a privilege, as well as a heavy responsibility, to have been asked to contribute to the resolution of issues of vital importance to the young people in this and future generations. We were conscious of what had gone before and under no illusions about the difficulty of the task. There has been a high level of interest and debate over several years, but little unanimity about the way forward. It is evident that some points of view, though sincerely held, remain far apart.
- 1.2 There is, however, strong agreement that the interests of the pupil should be paramount. We therefore considered it important to establish first what should be a reasonable educational entitlement for each pupil across Northern Ireland at post-primary age, and to build into it sufficient choice and flexibility to take account of each young person's needs, aptitudes, interests and aspirations and to respond to the needs of a fast-changing world.
- 1.3 Only then did we consider the implications this might have for school structures and for the arrangements for transfer from primary to post-primary education. The transfer arrangements will inevitably be a key focus of public attention but have to be seen in the wider context of the range and choice of educational opportunities to which pupils should have access in order to fulfil their potential in a changing world. In short, the transfer arrangements should serve the system rather than drive it.
- 1.4 The aim of this document is to set out as succinctly and clearly as possible the issues we considered and the conclusions we reached. It is not an academic treatise, nor does it attempt to reflect every issue the Group discussed as part of its deliberations.
- 1.5 We were greatly assisted in our work by inputs from a number of organisations and individuals who provided information and presentations to the Group on a wide range of topics. We express our appreciation in particular to those shown in Appendix 1. We also want to pay tribute to the professional expertise and support of the Department's Post Primary Review Team, without which our task would have been much more difficult.

- 1.6 The handling of the Group's advice is entirely a matter for the responsible Minister. However it is the Group's view that what is now needed is a clear and early decision on the future direction of post-primary education in Northern Ireland. A further period of general consultation would merely revisit old arguments. Our proposals for implementation do, however, provide for consultation where it will be most meaningful – in relation to the specific needs of local areas and the potential contribution of individual schools. The Department would also consult in the normal way about any associated policy or legislative changes.
- 1.7 As a result of our work, we concluded that the status quo is not an option. The changes already taking place for demographic reasons alone will have a major impact on future provision. But change must be managed strategically in order to ensure that educational quality is protected and enhanced. The current arrangements serve some well, but do not meet the needs of all pupils. The educational provision on offer is patchy and at times lacking the necessary breadth and choice. Standards are high, but not world class.
- 1.8 Against that background, we did not see our role as providing merely some sort of compromise solution between opposing positions. Rather we believe that our recommendations point the way to a much enriched, flexible and more relevant post-primary education for all our young people. Achieving this will present challenges to all parts of the education service, and a need to work together in a culture of real partnership as never before. We owe our young people no less.

Terms of Reference

- 1.9 The Right Honourable Jane Kennedy MP, the Minister with responsibility for Education, established the Working Group to provide advice on options for future arrangements for post-primary education.

The Group's remit was:

***“To take account of the responses to the consultation on the Burns Report, including the diversity of views on academic selection, and provide advice on options for future arrangements for post-primary education.**”*

The advice should provide for:

- *development of alternative transfer procedures with a view to the current Transfer Tests being withdrawn as soon as practicable;*
- *development of a Pupil Profile to inform parental and pupil choice;*
- *access for all young people to a broader curriculum providing greater choice;*
- *flexible arrangements that can meet the developing needs of young people;*
- *greater cooperation and collaboration among schools and with the further education sector; and*
- *the development of local arrangements that meet local needs, wishes and circumstances.*

The Working Group should also advise on:

- *guiding principles and measurable outcomes for future post-primary arrangements;*
- *criteria for the development and assessment of proposals together with measures to encourage and support their development and implementation; and*
- *outline arrangements for the planning and implementation of future post-primary arrangements.”*

1.10 The Group carefully considered these terms of reference and noted some key points:

Requirement to take account of the responses to the consultation on the Burns Report, including the diversity of views on academic selection.

1.10.1 Throughout the Group’s deliberations, account was taken of the responses to the Burns consultation. The consultation showed broad support for a number of the Burns recommendations including the guiding principles, the Pupil Profile, and the need for better cooperation and collaboration among schools (but not for

Collegiates). There was very strong support for ending the Transfer Tests but, as the remit notes, a diversity of views on academic selection.

- 1.10.2 We recognised that these divergent views on academic selection and the views that the tests should be abolished but academic selection retained would be problematic and not easily reconcilable. We concluded however that these issues could only properly be considered after we had reached a view on curricular entitlement and how this could best be provided in the interests of all pupils.

Plurality of options and possibility of local arrangements.

- 1.10.3 Our remit required us to provide advice on options for future arrangements, and on the development of local arrangements that meet local needs, wishes and circumstances. This provided scope for proposals which could involve different arrangements in individual areas. Our remit did not require us to specify options for a single uniform system across Northern Ireland; rather that schools and their managing authorities at local level could be able to develop arrangements for their areas which meet local needs. Whilst such flexibility is welcomed, we recognised the importance of having some degree of consistency so that young people would have access to the same range and quality of education regardless of where they live. We agreed that the options which we would determine, and any local arrangements brought forward in due course by school managing authorities, would need to be developed within the context of a clear framework that would guarantee an educational entitlement for all pupils.

Requirement to advise on planning and implementation.

- 1.10.4 We welcomed this dimension of the remit because it would provide a crosscheck of the feasibility of our proposals and require us to consider a realistic timeframe for implementation.