

Professor George Bain
c/o Elaine Armstrong
Department of Education
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
BANGOR

31 October 2006

Dear Professor Bain,

Thank you for the response to my earlier letter to you and to your kind offer to allow the Advisory Council on Infrastructure Investment (ACII) to meet with you. We would like to take up that offer and I have asked the ACII Secretariat to organise it with your office.

Your letter also asked that we provide written input in advance of the meeting. The following is a brief outline on some views of the ACII. For ease of reference, I have focussed on Paragraph 16 of your Consultation paper and numbered the points there one to nine.

Whilst the remit of the ACII leans heavily towards capital investment, we also have a strong interest in the viability of projects, subsequent to their provision as new pieces of infrastructure. In this context, all of the nine points in Paragraph 16 have been discussed at various times within the ACII.

Overall, the nine points pose a challenging set of questions. The ACII recognises, for example, the challenges and the potential conflicts between aspirations in communities to maintain local schools, particularly in rural locations (Reference point three) and issues of optimisation of resource-use, viability and sustainability (Reference points one, four and five).

A particular concern of the ACII is whether the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland is fostering social cohesion as well as providing the perhaps more obvious and often more easily monitored economic benefits. In relating this to the future programme for the Schools Estate, a key question is whether or not communities are prepared to share resources and facilities across traditional boundaries.

Gauging how far communities are actually prepared to adapt is clearly one of the more difficult challenges for the Bain Review. In making your judgement on this and other issues, you might consider what thoughts and encouragement the ACII could offer. The ACII is a wide ranging social partnership, comprising senior figures from politics, business, the Equality Commission and the voluntary and community sector, together with some independents. On many issues it has been able, as a result of dialogue, to identify common ground across the sectors.

Our earlier letter to you made the point about ensuring that there is enough capacity in the system to deal with pupils from outside Northern Ireland. An issue, from our work in the ACII that has relevance here, is the ongoing need for labour in the Construction Industry, identified in the PricewaterhouseCoopers Report on capacity in the industry. The relative job security, which could come from this need of the Construction Industry, would be likely to encourage longer-term settlement by foreign nationals and their families, rather than the 'migrant labour' with which we are becoming familiar. This factor would be relevant to Reference points one and three in Paragraph 16 of the Consultation paper.

The ACII is also concerned that wastage is avoided in new school building. Our members recently expressed their great concern at the difficulties experienced with the Balmoral Project and they see it as a wake-up call that the future Schools Estate Programme must be based on clear and consistent evidence about future enrolments before expensive commitments are taken on.

It is likely that some communities will be disappointed on occasions when projects are turned down or when previous plans, or 'promises', are changed. Difficult as this might be, in the long-term, it will help to ensure that the money is spent where it properly should be, always remembering of course that investment decisions must take into consideration the full range of social, as well as educational, deliverables expected from a modern Schools Estate and must recognise the pivotal position of many schools in local rural and urban communities.

Affordability has consistently been a concern of the ACII (Reference point seven). Again, there is a need for realism in planning and in managing expectations, and a need for transparency with the public on how its money is being spent, on capital projects and on consequent revenue costs.

The issues of affordability and avoiding wastage of resources are very closely related to the issues (Reference points two, four and eight), which collectively demand that joint aims of any investment programme must be cost-effectiveness and viability in the provision of high quality educational experience and outcomes. To achieve these aims, concurrently, is a major challenge, particularly in Northern Ireland with its difficult history and seemingly incompatible demands but it is one that must be faced as objectively and dispassionately as possible.

The points above, in tandem with those made in our earlier letter to you; represent the main concerns expressed by the ACII relating to the Schools Estate. We look forward to taking a delegation from the ACII to discuss the points further with you.

Yours Sincerely,

John Keanie

Chair