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Belfast Education and Library Board

Response to the Independent Strategic Review of Education

September 2006

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1.0 Introduction and Context

1.1 The Belfast Education and Library Board welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper on the Independent Strategic Review of Education. In so doing the board takes cognisance of ‘A Shared Future - Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland’.

1.2 The Belfast board’s vision is one of helping to create a learning city which provides for children’s and community learning and which commands the support of all communities, including children from other ethnic backgrounds.

1.3 The board has a learning strategy which sets the framework for effective learning for children and young people 0-19. Implicit in that strategy is the recognition that there is a close correlation between effective learning, positive attainment and the learning environment. The strategy is underpinned by a number of principles for effective learning which take place when young people:

- are enabled to develop self-esteem and self-confidence in a secure and caring and appropriate environment;
- are supported by the involvement of parents/guardians in their learning;
- are encouraged to show respect for self, others and the learning environment.

- 1.4 Against the background of demographic downturn, surplus places, declining resources, the changing curriculum and the proposed changes to procurement, it is vital that the planning process ensures that the estate meets the needs of the current and future young people going through the education system.
- 1.5 It is through the provision of modern, purpose-built school accommodation that the board makes real its commitment to raising standards, to further enhancing high quality instructional leadership, management and governance, and to giving each child, irrespective of age, location, background or aptitude, the best possible foundation for, and progression in, education and career development to allow him/her to achieve their full potential. Schools are a key asset and have the potential to be used more effectively by not restricting them to their traditional functions. With services covering all areas from nursery through extended and specialist schools, the entitlement framework and collaborative agreement across schools and communities and with further education they can be a real source of support to young people and their families and so offer the best opportunity for a brighter future through enhanced quality of life.

2.0 Key Issues

The board notes the terms of reference of the review - *‘to examine the funding of the education system, in particular the strategic planning and organisation of the schools’ estate, taking account of curriculum changes, including the wider provision for 14-19 year olds, and also demographic trends’*. The board has been asked specifically to address the following matters in its response:

2.1 Developing Key Mechanisms and Processes for Successful Planning at Local Area Level, as a Framework for Translating into Practice the Concept of Collaborative and Interactive Planning by the Various Sectors

2.1.1 The board believes that there is a need for a coherent planning process which looks at provision in all sectors within the board's area. The present approach to planning school provision is fragmented and leads to schools being established, maintained and serviced by different funding and policy arrangements. Catholic education is governed by CCMS and the trustees, Irish medium provision promoted by Comhairle Na Gaelscolaiochta, controlled provision is managed by education and library boards, integrated provision is promoted by NICIE and voluntary grammar schools by the GBA. These current governance arrangements lead to the fragmentation and sub-optimisation of resources. The board would, therefore, hold the view that there should be a single body/authority responsible for the strategic planning and governance of the entire estate.

2.1.2 To facilitate successful and sectoral planning, there is a need to centralise the large amount of data available to inform and validate the decision and policy making process, including census data, school and education authority statistics, health statistics and other relevant data such as that held by various community, voluntary and statutory agencies.

2.1.3 The Belfast board's current strategic partnering project incorporates the concept of multi-agency provision on a school campus to include wider community provision: youth, adult and further education, health and social services, arts and leisure and community advice. This is a commendable model of provision, linking education, community and other public sector delivered

services. This project is being delivered in partnership with the Strategic Investment Board (SIB).

2.1.4 The board acknowledges that whilst there is a declining school population, there is also an increasing ageing population, and therefore, consideration should be given to the use of current educational facilities by other groups and the wider community.

2.1.5 The board operates the initiative 'Communities in Schools' (CIS). This initiative was established 5 years ago in response to the need for an integrated and cohesive approach to break the cycle of deprivation which exists in the North and West Belfast areas. The initiative encompasses a cluster of 6 post-primary extended schools managed by the board, in partnership with CCMS, and it is one of the priority programmes within the North and West Belfast Health Action Zone. Through the Health Action Zone Council, there are significant linkages to key Departments such as DHSS and DE.

2.1.6 CIS co-ordinates the work of a range of statutory, community, voluntary and business organisations at the schools to support teachers, pupils and their families. It acts as a bridge between the community and the schools, integrating a full range of support services while also making the school the centre of learning communities. CIS is based on a partnership approach and is a vehicle for change within the school, within key organisations and within the community.

2.1.7 An independent evaluation of the initiative has concluded that the impact of CIS has been:

- increased attendance in targeted pupils;

- reduced suspensions in targeted pupils;
- increase in number of targeted pupils with 5 or more GCSE A-C;
- increased returners to sixth form.

The board believes that this is a commendable model of provision which should be replicated across the city.

2.2 Forms and Models of Sharing of Facilities and Resources and of Collaborative Arrangements Among Schools, at Both Primary and Post-primary Levels, Particularly in Relation to New Builds but also in the Context of Existing Provision

2.2.1 Whilst the board accepts the community usage of its schools, it believes that the costs of such usage cannot, and should not, be borne by the education budget alone and proper mechanisms should be developed to ensure an equitable sharing of costs where the premises are used by the community and others.

2.2.2 The board supports the need for shared provision of certain aspects of capital provision. Whilst some examples of good practice do exist in this area, such as the Grove Well-being Centre, these are the exception. There is a need for any new arrangements to take a wider view of public sector investment to ensure that schools can become not only the centre of learning communities but are at the heart of community public sector infrastructure. Furthermore, as the demand for specialist facilities such as multimedia suites, state of the art gymnasiums, swimming pools increases, the targeting of this investment in communities will be an important issue for the public sector. New arrangements must be able to provide “joined-up” solutions to these issues within the context of life long learning.

2.2.3 There are governance issues arising from the development of shared provision. At present, each Board of Governors is responsible for the development of education provision for the pupil population attending a single school. If shared provision is to develop on a greater number of sites this will require new model of governance arrangements to be developed. There are practical issues associated with the sharing of facilities which need to be addressed to ensure that all pupils in an area would have equal access to such provision.

2.3 The Best Combination of Factors that Should be Taken into Account in Estate Planning

2.3.1 The board wishes to place on record its concern about the length of time it takes to rationalise its estate. There are often long delays of up to 3 years between decisions taken by the board about rationalisation and the implementation of those decisions. This delay has a demoralising and detrimental impact on schools and their communities. There are also concerns associated with the reduction/withdrawal of maintenance in the schools pending anticipated closure/amalgamation in the context of health and safety and the economic use of resources. The board believes that DE should urgently review its procedures with a view to achieving a more timely resolution of such issues.

2.3.2 The board also believes that a more strategic approach should be taken in tandem with those government Departments who have responsibility for planning approvals and land acquisition/disposal in order to expedite the process.

- 2.3.3 The board would also welcome a revised policy in relation to the use of surplus land in procuring new facilities, particularly in light of the proposed single procurement authority and the strategic partnership arrangement. If an appropriate mechanism is established, substantial savings could be made in relation to the cost of new-builds.
- 2.3.4 The board strongly recommends that a key outcome of this review should be a specific recommendation on the normal minimum size for a school (recognising the need for both urban and rural considerations) and a sustainable schools' policy against which to assess overall provision. This guidance and policy should be developed by DE. In addition, DE should also produce clear guidance on the calculation of long-term enrolments and update this as policy changes.
- 2.3.5 The board's view is that the following factors should be taken into account in estate planning:
- the sustainability of the local population;
 - the value of existing sites;
 - the condition and suitability of existing provision;
 - the distance to alternative schools;
 - the potential for shared use by the community;
 - the design flexibility to deal with changes in pupil enrolment;
 - equality.
- 2.3.6 In relation to school rationalisation/amalgamations, consideration needs to be given to the associated financial impact of such change including costs associated with community planning and consultations, and redundancies.

2.3.7 The board also wishes to place on record the inflexibility and outdated nature of certain aspects of the DE building handbook. The board, and its principals, has on a number of occasions placed its concerns and dissatisfaction on record with DE. The board welcomes the review of the building handbook, especially if we want the flexibility to future proof schools in an ever-changing educational and technological landscape, and is of the opinion that appropriate board officers and representatives of school principals should be involved in the process to fully obtain the practitioners' viewpoint.

2.4 An Appropriate Level of Surplus Capacity, Allowing for Changes and Parental Choice

2.4.1 Whilst the board acknowledges the need to address surplus capacity in its schools, it also recognises the need to maintain an appropriate level of surplus places in order to accommodate parental choice. The key issue, therefore, is to strike a balance between facilitating parental choice whilst maintaining an economically sustainable estate.

2.4.2 Some of the current spare capacity in the school system could be addressed by examining the potential to reassess the enrolment and admission numbers to schools. At the core of this argument is what constitutes surplus accommodation. DE has traditionally calculated accommodation for schools on the basis of a PTR of 1 : 29. However, the reality in many schools is that LMS funding permits a school to hire a teacher within a ratio of 1 : 20. Consequently, there is a mismatch between the numbers of teachers in a school and rooms available. If a school was to fill to the capacity of its enrolment number it would require additional

accommodation. Cavehill Primary School, a newly built school in Belfast, is a good example of this phenomenon.

2.4.3 DE needs to align the PTR for all its various formulae to allow a proper basis upon which to calculate surplus capacity. The board believes the current methodology to be fatally flawed and therefore a dangerous basis upon which to plan a future strategy.

2.4.4 With regard to the amount of surplus capacity within the estate which is necessary to manage all the variables, it would appear that 10%-15% is not unreasonable.

2.5 How Post-primary and Further Education Provision can Best be Planned Together, Particularly for 14-19 Year Olds, Both to Provide Access to the Curriculum and to Optimise the Use of the Combined Resources of the School and Further Education Sectors

2.5.1 The board advocates the integrated provision of post-primary and FE. Indeed, the board is currently developing such a model in North Belfast as part of its PPP scheme. There are several points to be highlighted in respect of such shared provision.

Firstly, the current FE provision in Belfast operates a centralist strategy. However, the pilot for North Belfast has the potential to demonstrate a decentralised model providing educational support at the point of need. Secondly, there is the issue of who delivers the curriculum (BIFHE lecturers or school teaching staff) and the associated budgetary factors.

2.6 What Could those in Positions of Leadership and Influence do to Promote a Climate Conducive to Integrating Education in Meaningful Ways, to Overcome Barriers to Sharing, and to Help Bring About New Ways of Thinking and Working?

2.6.1 There is a range of stakeholders in positions of leadership and influence, including political representatives, civil servants and NDPBs, governors, head teachers and senior management teams in schools. A collaborative approach between authorities and schools would result in better planning and more streamlined procedures.

2.6.2 Political representatives play a vital role in this process and where reorganisation of the estate has been successful in the past it has been in large measure due to the leadership and influence of the political process. Furthermore, the importance of community audits as part of any future planning cannot be over-emphasised. The growing demand from within communities for a variety of different types of schools should be reflected in the planning process. The Belfast board has attempted to obtain DE support for this within its current reorganisation process without success to date. Any new arrangements must have at their core a community audit process.

3.0 General Issues

3.1 In addition to the specific issues highlighted above, the board strongly believes that there is a need to revise LMS arrangements to reflect the reality of sustaining schools. Schools are mainly funded via pupil numbers. However, staffing costs, and in particular teaching costs, are the largest financial drain on a school budget. In many schools teacher costs account for over 85% of its allocated delegated budget.

3.2 The ethos of LMS is to delegate funds to schools to enable management of resources to be made at local level, thereby ensuring public funding is used as efficiently and effectively as possible. The entire concept, however, is undermined by crippling teacher costs resulting in schools having limited discretion in their budget management and frequently going into deficit.

3.3 The board holds the view that consideration should be given to either:

- removing teacher costs from the LMS budget allocated to schools and manage such costs centrally; or
- schools are allocated ring-fenced funding in their LMS budget to meet actual teacher costs in the context of an agreed PTR.

Conclusion

The Belfast board looks forward to the opportunity for further discussion and consultation on the independent strategic review of education.