

RPA Chairpersons Forum Meeting, 9 April 2008 at Omagh College, Omagh.

Present: Education Minister Caitríona Ruane  
Alderman Roy Beggs (NEELB)  
Fr John Byrne (Vice Chair SELB)  
Pat Carvill (SEELB)  
Colm Cavanagh (NICIE)  
Prof Bernard Cullen (Staff Com)  
Rev Robert Herron (WELB)  
Bishop John McAreavey (CCMS)  
David McKee (CCEA)  
Alistair Orr (Vice Chair GTCNI)  
Maire Young (YCNI)

Will Haire (DE)  
John McGrath (DE)  
Gavin Boyd (ESAIT)

Apologies: Marie Donnell (SELB)  
Aodán Mac Poilin (CnaG)  
Douglas Osler (SEELB)  
Jim Rodgers (BELB)  
Geraldine Tigchelaar (IEF)

In attendance: Fearghal O'Reilly (DE)  
John McCourt (DE)

The meeting commenced 2.15pm

- Will Haire opened the meeting by thanking everyone for coming and explained that the Minister had been delayed during a school visit and would be joining the meeting shortly. Introductions were made.
- The minutes from the previous meetings on 15 November 2007 and 16 January 2008 were agreed.
- Will Haire gave an update on the key issues regarding Transition including where we are at the moment, and what plans are in place for the forthcoming year. He also explained that the Department was aiming to have the First Bill with the Education Committee before the summer. Alderman Beggs questioned why not spring which they had been advised previously and David McKee queried whether this change would have any knock-on effect. Will Haire explained that it was a very complex process and the Department had to ensure that it was done correctly but the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) by 1 April 2009 was still on target.
- Pat Carvill enquired whether the Department was still proceeding with the two Bills approach. Will Haire clarified that they were and that the First Bill would deal with the establishment of ESA and that the Second Bill would cover area

based planning, the important issue of governance of schools, the ownership of the school estate and the Education Advisory Forum (EAF).

- Pat Carvill then asked if both pieces of legislation were required to establish ESA. Will Haire clarified that the First Bill only was required for this.
- Will Haire then stressed the need for all affected organisations to keep a very close eye on their budgets during the transition period and that the Treasury is restricting end of year flexibility for all the Block grant in the North of Ireland.
- The Department would be meeting monthly with the Chief Finance Officers of the Boards and that he would be establishing a Transition Board under Gavin Boyd's direction to ensure that the services that are provided to children remain unaffected during this significant period of change.
- He emphasised that there will be major changes in the education sector over the next couple of years and that there is a need to involve staff in this whole process by communicating and engaging with them.
- Will added that this gives us the opportunity to streamline some of the services that are being provided but that a lot of work is required and it can only be successful if the affected organisations work closely with the Department and ESA Implementation Team (ESAIT).
- Alistair Orr asked about school surpluses and if there is any intention to take that money away from the schools. Will Haire replied explaining that that money is the schools and great work has been done, and will continue, to work with those schools who have surpluses and deficiencies.
- Bishop McAreavey asked if the date for establishing ESA had been underestimated and that if there comes a point when the Department realises that April 2009 is unachievable, will they communicate this? Will replied that if that position arose then they would communicate with the organisations. He added that the reform will last some years after the establishment of ESA. The changes were being made for the better of schools and youth clubs and the £20 million savings had already been budgeted for by year three and if these changes did not go ahead, then that money would have to be found.
- David McKee stated that he thought the money being saved would go to front line services and that he wanted to confirm that if there are no savings, then the £20 million would have to be got from somewhere?
- Will confirmed that this was the case and that the money would have to come out of the Boards and schools budgets. He added that these are the first major changes in the education sector in nearly 40 years and that it is not just about efficiency costs, but also about streamlining structures and providing a better support system for schools.

- Rev Robert Herron asked if the Department was confident by the time ESA is established that none of the affected organisations would have deficits. Will replied that because of the cleaners' job evaluation then two organisations might be affected but that we must work together to ensure that the budgets are managed effectively.
- John McGrath gave an update on financial management for year 2008-2009. He explained that this will be a very tight and difficult incoming financial year. There continues to be restricted access to End Year Flexibility, the likelihood of securing additional resources through the In-Year Monitoring process is minimal and that good work was done in relation to the cleaners' job evaluation awards and because of this there was no impact on schools budgets.
- There has to be harmonisation before the establishment of ESA to ensure that there are no deficits by the end of the financial year. This work will be carried out by the Transition Board. .
- We have to ensure that we work within approved budget allocations and the Department will be working with the Chief Finance Officers of the affected organisations throughout the year to achieve this. The Department also needs to be kept fully informed of any developments which may have financial implications in order to allow us to work together to resolve the issues and which can only be done when we the Department is fully engaged.
- David McKee spoke about the conference ESAIT had held on 4 April and that it was an extremely worthwhile engagement with 200 senior managers from the affected organisations meeting to discuss the changes. He also said that he thought that a lot of work still had to be done to achieve the transformation.
- John McGrath replied that if the changes were not being imposed because of the Review of Public Administration (RPA) the Department would be looking to make changes and the Executive would be expecting this of the Department. He stressed that there is a no do nothing approach.
- Bishop McAreavey asked the Minister about the role of sectoral groups in the EAF and the role they will be playing in ESA once it has been established.
- The Minister said that she had spoken with representatives of Catholic Trustees in relation to sectoral groups and their role and that their interests will be delivered in a way that must be responsive.
- Will Haire added that the system must be responsive to schools needs and that the Education Advisory Forum will provide a better communication process to ensure this.
- Prof Cullen enquired about the terms of reference and membership of the Transitional Board which Will Haire had said was being established.

- Gavin replied that it would be made-up of the Chief Executives of the various organisations along with John McGrath and himself and it was being established to ensure service continuity and that all the affected organisations were moving in the same direction. Gavin added that the first meeting of the Transition Board will be held on Monday 14 April and he asked all the Chairs to urge their Chief Executives to work with them on the Board.
- Alderman Beggs replied that if the Department and ESAIT have evidence that the Chief Executives were not cooperating with them on the Transition Board then they would need to bring this to the attention of the Chairs immediately.
- Gavin Boyd then gave an update on the work ESAIT is currently undertaking and what they have planned for the year ahead. He explained that they have started the communication programme and have issued the first in a series of monthly briefings aimed at communicating progress on all the aspects of the implementation programme and which will be published on ESAIT's website.
- That group consultations with all the relevant trade unions on the way forward have been held and individual meetings with the relevant unions are planned.
- The HR Competency Framework has been agreed and that they will have to ensure that any severance scheme is targeted at the right people and that it is equity and equal.
- The Executive has allocated £50 million to fund the Change Management Strategy and if we are unable to make the savings of £20 million by year three then there will be problems.
- The change is about improving the quality of excellence in our schools and when comparing the percentage of funding that goes directly to the classroom with other countries, then we are lagging behind. Gavin added that there is a major emphasis to support the quality of teaching and learning in our classrooms.
- ESAIT held the first of 18/20 workshops on Friday 4 April which was made-up of 200 delegates from all the affected organisations along with the trade unions in order to engage with affected staff on the best way forward. The feedback from the day has been positive and the full evaluation summary will be published on ESAIT's website but two of the outcomes from the workshop were the need to improve communication and also that staff wish to be involved in the change process.
- Gavin finished his update by saying that he acknowledged that there are difficulties exercising vacancy control but if everybody adheres to it then this will reduce the possibility of compulsory redundancies.

- Will Haire added that this was the first time that senior managers from the affected organisations were able to meet in one forum and that the changes being introduced would also provide staff with the opportunity for career development. Will added that communication with the Boards is key and if they have any ideas on how to improve this process then the Department would very much appreciate them.
- David McKee commented that he thought that it was a very good idea to involve staff by way of the workshops and enquired if it would be the same delegates attending each workshop.
- Gavin replied explaining that each workshop will be based on services or groups of services.
- Prof Cullen stated that he was very encouraged from the feedback that he had heard regarding the workshops but that there was a degree of denial within the affected organisations that these changes would not be happening and that the delays at the Assembly had fuelled these. He also enquired if the setting up of shadow negotiations with the trade unions had been considered.
- Gavin Boyd replied that to a degree shadow systems have been set-up and there is an agreement with the unions to move forward and also a genuine commitment from most unions, to enter into negotiations in good faith.
- Maire Young enquired regarding the Minister of the Environment's announcement on the linkage between youth services and the new local government arrangement.
- The Minister replied that she would cover this during her remarks.
- Colm Cavanagh stated that communication is key and that there is valuable information available on the ESAIT website but had there been any thoughts on producing an electronic newsletter which could be aimed at the schools, teachers and affected organisations.
- Pat Carvill stated that vacancy control was a problem and that each Board had different issues to face but said that if there was any question of the implementation date slipping beyond April 2009 then the existing difficulties would be greatly increased.
- Gavin Boyd replied acknowledging that vacancy control was a problem but by sticking to this now, then the aim is to ensure that compulsory redundancies will not be required. He added that there will not be full harmonisation by April 2009 but that this process will last a number of years but by April 2009 there will be one single point of decision making.
- Will Haire stated that the Minister is looking at the provision of Special Education Needs for children and this is an issue where harmonisation is required but the cooperation of staff within the Boards will be key in the process.

- David McKee enquired if there were not already groups set-up between the Boards to work and agree on different issues.
- Gavin Boyd replied that there were but at times the groups could not come to agreement on issues but now there will be one single point for decision making. Arguments will be listened to carefully and decisions will be made.
- Prof Cullen spoke about vacancy control, the Minister's aim for continued service delivery and said that if anyone had a special case regarding vacancies then they can make a case to the Public Service Commission via the Department.
- Will Haire acknowledged the concerns regarding vacancy control and added that where there is a special need to fill a post then this should be raised at the Transition Board.
- David McKee stated that he thought the idea of an electronic newsletter was a good idea by way of communicating to all affected staff and enquired why the Chief Executives were on the Transition Board.
- Gavin Boyd replied that this was because they were the Accounting Officers for their respective organisations.
- The Minister then briefed the Chairs on a number of issues and explained that change is required but it is not just being done to produce efficiency savings but to also improve the quality of the services that are provided.
- The Minister then gave a brief update on political issues and explained that all parties understand that change is here to stay and compromise will have to be reached on a number of contentious issues in the same way as there was compromise on the number of proposed councils.
- A Ministerial sub-group on children and young people has been set up which will be chaired by the two Junior Ministers and will be looking at the big issues facing young people for example traveller's children and children who are institutionalised. The Minister also stressed the need for the Departments of Education and Health to work very closely together.
- The Minister then emphasised the need to consult and pre-consult with trade unions as their role in this change process is very important.
- That a meeting had been held with the political members of the South Eastern Education Library Board (SEELB) and she would be holding meetings soon with the non political representatives to discuss the possible reconstitution of the Board. The Minister added that she agrees with local, democratic accountability but if the Board is to be re-instated then it would have to work within its budget.
- Alderman Beggs commented that the problem had been no proper corporate training.

- The Minister replied that there were a number of reasons but she hopes that the Board could be reconstituted before the summer.
- The Minister replied to Maire Young's question regarding the Minister of the Environment's announcement on the linkage between youth services and the new local government arrangement. She added that discussions were on-going and that some Councillors believed that it should fall under Local Council's remit. The Minister explained that she did not agree with this and that it should remain in Education but whatever decisions are made have to be made for the benefit of all our children.
- Maire Young replied that youth services belong in the Education family and the sooner agreement is reached on this issue, the better.
- The Minister finished her update by stating that there is a very busy time ahead but equality has to be at the centre of everything and that issues for example the Review of Special Education Needs can not be allowed to be used as political footballs. Agreement has to be made to move forward and all the parties understand this.
- The meeting finished at 3.50pm.

**Please note that the next meeting is scheduled for 25 June 2008 in Derry with a venue and time to be confirmed.**