

THE SPORTS COUNCIL FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

INDEPENDENT STRATEGIC REVIEW OF EDUCATION 2006

RESPONSE OF THE SPORTS COUNCIL FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

August 2006

GENERAL COMMENTS

1. The Sports Council for Northern Ireland (SCNI) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Independent Strategic Review of Education.
2. In a period of dramatic changes in the public sector, the review rightly focuses on outcomes which develop partnerships, serve individuals and communities and offer value for money.
3. The SCNI has significant experience in working with communities and in developing partnerships with voluntary and statutory organisations as a key mechanism for successful planning at local level. With a focus on development within communities, the SCNI believes that inter-sectoral and inter-agency co-operation is critical. In order to ensure that the schools' estate best serves communities, consultation with a range of local groups is essential at the planning stage. In the context of sport and recreation, this will include local clubs, governing bodies of sport and district councils, all of whose needs are complementary to those of the education sector. It is the view of the SCNI that shared spaces for sport (in this case, shared between schools and communities/local authorities) are essential to maximise sports development, community development and value for money.
4. Meeting the diverse needs of communities and primary and post-primary schools is challenging. This is further compounded in the area of sport and recreation where technology is developing quickly and where technical knowledge is not widespread. It is this area where the SCNI has significant experience and expertise and where there has been some divergence of opinion in recent months. The specifications for both indoor and outdoor sport and recreation facilities as described in the Department of Education's School Building Handbook do not conform with those recommended by the SCNI. Furthermore, the SCNI believes that some of the specifications fail to offer optimum sports development opportunities, challenge best practice in the area of health and safety and are not attractive to adult, community organisations. These are all components critical to ensuring that the school is

central to community life, that there is sustainability and value for money/cost effectiveness. The SCNI believes that it is critical that consultation and collaboration are central to the planning of all new build and refurbishment projects. Indeed, the SCNI would propose that planning and provision at local level should be developed to ensure that a broad range of integrated and co-ordinated facilities is available within a community, to serve all needs.

5. The SCNI, in conjunction with other agencies, is in the process of developing a facilities strategy for sport in Northern Ireland. This is designed to address the perceived sporting facilities deficit, maximise usage, promote good practice in delivery and to ensure that the facilities provided meet the needs of all potential user groups. Fully engaging in this process would benefit both the Department of Education and the wider community.
6. The quality of teaching and learning are at the core of a successful education system. A combination of factors contributes to a successful outcome, including the curriculum, the sites for delivery and the degree to which these are integrated into the needs and opportunities presented in the local community. Whilst the physical education curriculum in schools has evolved in recent years, the need for a "broad and balanced" programme remains. In planning the curriculum and in designing sites for its delivery, the broader community context needs to be considered and, indeed, reflected in the planning and development process. Curriculum planners at school level have traditionally taken into account the opportunities offered to their pupils beyond the confines of their school, particularly in the area of physical education and sport, but this has been less evident in the development of the schools' estate. The range of sport and recreation interests in any community in Northern Ireland is now broader than ever before and there is a need to plan facilities accordingly. This matter must be taken into account in the development of the schools' estate and planning for it should be integrated into all local planning matters.
7. Research carried out by the SCNI has indicated that Northern Ireland is lacking in facilities for sport, compared to other, similar areas of the United Kingdom. This lack of facilities exists both within high performance sport and at local and recreational levels. Ironically, the schools' estate contains significant sport and recreation facilities which are not, in the main, available to the community. SCNI research further reveals that over half of Northern Ireland's schools do not permit community access to their facilities. The level of access allowed by the remaining schools is not clear, but, if planning and provision are to be coherent at a whole-community level, than this anomaly must be addressed. Concerns have been raised before regarding the lack of availability of schools facilities, but, with some facilities becoming redundant due to a reduction in the scale of the schools' estate to match demographic trends, there is the potential to retain the sports

facilities to allow community use, through a policy of integrated development and delivery planning.

8. Much of what has been said above relates to links between schools and the communities they serve, but the development of young people can also be tracked through the education system. Increasing numbers remain in full-time education and the Further Education (FE) sector currently contains over 170,000 students, although this figure may decline as a result of demographic change. Nevertheless, a level of integration between schools and FE is desirable and this applies to provision for sport and recreation as much as to other areas of learning.
9. Provision for physical education, sport and recreation in the FE sector has evolved over the last ten years, with curriculum PE/sport having long-since disappeared from FE students' timetables, but with all of Northern Ireland's 16 FE colleges offering a range of sport-related qualifications. This has a significant physical resource implication and with developments currently in train in the way FE is structured and managed in Northern Ireland, there is an opportunity to consider the sector from a broader, community perspective. This must inevitably include links to post-primary schools and an examination of the holistic educational experience of young people. The opportunity now exists to review provision for sport and recreation in FE and to integrate planning in order to meet the needs of both sectors.
10. Although sport and physical recreation can bridge Northern Ireland's community divisions, the development of sport and physical recreation and their ability to improve communities is hindered by ongoing community tensions. Yet sport reflects the communities within which it exists and often contributes to the continuation of the traditional patterns of segregation and under-representation. The development of integrated education is a way to begin to address these issues and others. The integrated sector has been active and successful in using sport as a means of addressing differences and similarities between communities and there is a degree of willingness within the sports community to contribute positively to this process. Those in positions of leadership and influence should consider the work currently being done both within PE departments in integrated schools and in a number of governing bodies of sport and community organisations to see how sport can be used as a potent tool for community integration. For example, Youth Development Officers of the Ulster Branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) have run successful rugby programmes in maintained primary and post-primary schools across the province and a number of them have now become affiliated to the IRFU.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS ON CONSULTATION PAPER.

11. The Independent Strategic Review of Education consultation paper focuses particularly on the schools' estate, recognising the need for a strategic approach to planning (para 1). Throughout, there is reference to ensuring relevance to local communities (para 4) and this is entirely congruent with SCNI policy and practice. The SCNI would wish to share its expertise and experience in this regard.
12. Recent innovations in the devolution of the building and management of elements of the schools' estate to private companies (para 5), have presented a significant risk of exclusion and/or overcharging when community organisations wish to use the facilities. The school building and management role has been commissioned by the Department of Education exclusively for educational purposes. Community use does not appear to be seen as an educational outcome by the Department, so this is not included in the commissioning specifications. Consequently, funding is not available for the use of the schools' estate for community development purposes. There is an urgent need for a joined-up approach which would ensure that community use is written into the PFI/PPP specifications and the necessary community development funding made available to support that element of the contract.
13. The "... desire to use school facilities as wider community resources" (para 6) is strongly welcomed by the SCNI. As mentioned above, the inaccessible nature of much of the schools' estate has been a cause for concern for some time and making these facilities available could have a significant impact on addressing the sport and recreation facilities deficit in Northern Ireland - subject to such facilities being of an appropriate standard. In addition, the SCNI believes that sharing capital and revenue costs between education and local authorities could achieve improved value for money for both sectors.
14. Paragraph 7 discusses some of the implications of rationalisation, which could include closure. The opening of schools' sporting facilities in order to improve their service to their communities on the one hand would be an advance, but the loss of some facilities due to rationalisation on the other hand would be disappointing. Rationalisation - when it means closure or change of use - should also be addressed in a strategic way which considers how the loss of a school (and its sports facilities) can be ameliorated to give the best residual benefit to its local community. This should include careful consideration of the advantages the sports facilities can offer to local communities.
15. Whilst a range of factors contribute to a "... safe, stimulating and healthy learning environment" (para 8), the quality of the physical environment is amongst the most influential. High quality accommodation, whether it be a classroom, a sports hall, or an

outdoor facility, enhances learning experiences, supports good teaching and delivers discreet messages to children - and, indeed, local communities - regarding the value placed on their education. Poor quality environments compromise all of these matters. As the lead sports development agency in Northern Ireland, the SCNI has considerable expertise and experience in facility development and management and is conscious of the range of impacts that good or bad facilities can have. The SCNI is keen to share this knowledge with those responsible for the further development of the schools' estate in order to create a meaningful "... planning dialogue" (para 9).

16. The Sports Council's Lottery Fund's "Building Sport " programme provides funds to "... modernise and develop sporting facilities and (to) regenerate physical spaces (for sport)". A number of schools has benefited from this programme and many have done so in partnership with community organisations. For example, a project in Newry has the potential to create links between the Abbey Christian Brothers' Grammar School, Newry High School and Newry Olympic Hockey Club. This type of co-operative working is seen as an important way of ensuring value for money and, along with strong sports development planning, of consolidating both efficiency and effectiveness. Paragraph 13 specifically discusses funding matters and the SCNI will continue to work strategically to ensure integrated local provision.

17. Paragraphs 14 to 16 confirm the place of schools within the communities they serve, stressing the need for high quality, relevance and cost-effectiveness. The SCNI is keen to work with education to deliver all of these - through curriculum matters, extra-curricular provision and facilities. Work currently in place includes a number of Building Sport projects (as mentioned above) and an initiative supporting the Fundamental Movement Skills (FMS) programme in primary schools. In addition, efforts continue to be made to support the further development of the Youth Sport programme, possibly within the context of Extended Schools. The FMS programme provides an essential foundation for the Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) concept which has been adopted by the SCNI. FMS and other, complementary, community-based programmes aim to give young people the knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes which will enable them to make informed choices regarding their future involvement in sport and recreation. The Youth Sport programme has had an impressive level of success in providing links between physical education and sport for over ten years. One of the important aspects of this programme has been its potential to link schools to communities through sport. Whilst much remains to be done, the Extended Schools concept offers an important vehicle for further development. In terms of facilities, this type of sports development continuum requires the relevant authorities to be aware of the evolving needs of young people and the programmes in which they

take part. In addition, the requirements of the communities served by the schools must be taken into account.

18. The SCNI has developed a database of all sporting facilities in Northern Ireland and is currently undertaking a needs analysis with a number of key stakeholders. The information produced may be of considerable benefit to the Independent Strategic Review and to any resulting action plans and the SCNI is willing to use the database to work together with those who plan the schools' estate. Other areas of expertise, such as architectural advice and technical sports services, already located within the SCNI, can also be made available to assist with the work which may result from the Review.
19. Partnerships and planning are amongst the key principles underlying the work of the SCNI and the Council believes that outcomes will be compromised if these principles are not observed. This approach is already evident in our work with education bodies and is echoed throughout the Independent Strategic Review consultation paper. The SCNI is committed to working with education and would welcome the opportunity to continue to be considered as a key strategic partner in the development of this critical sector.
20. The further development of the schools' estate is a critical matter for Northern Ireland in general and, from the SCNI's perspective, for sports development in particular. The Council would request that the Review takes note of its comments and would recommend that the matter of sports facilities receives specific attention. The SCNI would be glad to work with the Review in the future, perhaps with other key stakeholders, to examine the needs of the education sector in regard to sport and to further the notion of integrated planning for education and the community.