

STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY ON 4 MARCH BY CAITRÍONA RUANE ON AREA BASED PLANNING

On 4 December last year, I set out my vision for the future structure of education in the North.

Ó shin, bhuaill mé le hoideachasóirí, múinteoirí, ceardchumann agus, go háirithe, le tuismitheoirí agus daoine óga a thuigeann go bhfuil níos mó i gceist sa phacáiste leasuithe atá beartaithe ná aistriú go hiarbhunscoileanna.

Since then I have met with educationalists, teachers, Trade Unions and most importantly parents and young people who have not simply reduced the reform package being proposed to the issue of transfer to post primary schools.

There is much more to what we propose than the important question of post-primary transfer. What I have sought to set out is the need for new transfer arrangements within a much wider progressive reform agenda – embracing demographic decline and the delivery of a new expanded curriculum. Central to this is the need for effective area based plans to be brought forward.

This need for area-based planning has found broad support across the educational spectrum. We need to quickly press ahead with this agenda in order to plan and deliver the curriculum to all young people be they rural or urban based, Irish or English speakers. Such planning will ensure school collaboration, and guide future school investment.

This is the way forward in delivering effective modern education. That is what this is all about. The Entitlement Framework is designed to ensure that all young people have access to a much broader choice when it comes to making decisions at 14 and again at 16.

The position, currently, is that choice is far too restricted in too many schools, indeed some young people have as little as 8 subjects to choose from at A-Level. What we are proposing in future is a situation where young people will have a choice of at least 24 courses at key Stage 4 and 27 at post-16, with a balance that ensures at least one third are academic, at least a third vocational or technical and the other third made up of an appropriate combination of the two. Surely nobody in this Assembly is opposed to such a move.

Ach deirim seo: ní thig linn a leithéid de churaclam leathnaithe a sholáthar muna mbíonn scoileanna agus coláistí ag comhobair agus ag roinnt áiseanna agus eolais. Ní bheadh an t-airgead ann lena dhéanamh. Ach cuirfidh pleanáil éifeachtach atá bunaithe sa cheantar ar ár gcumas córas roghanna agus áiméar den chineál a sholáthar.

But let me be clear we cannot deliver such an expanded curriculum without schools and colleges co-operating and sharing facilities and expertise. It would be financially impossible. But through effective area based planning we

can deliver such a system of choices and opportunities. Local expertise, knowledge and energy, including contributions from local educationalists and parents during this consultation process will be key in all of this.

In December I promised to update this Assembly on how we would take forward area-based planning within the post-primary sector. Having briefed the Chair and met with members of the Education Committee this morning and shared my thoughts on this with the Minister at the Department for Employment and Learning, I will now set out how we will organise this process, and carry this work forward.

Given the central role of Educational Skills Authority, the timing of full area-based planning is related to its establishment in April 2009. Full area-based plans covering pre-school, primary and post-primary on the model outlined are not expected to be in place until 2010 at the earliest. It is my intention, however, given the need to address issues of Transfer and offer young people the choice they need at 14, to make the delivery of the Entitlement Framework mandatory from 2013 and consequently to introduce the first election at 14 at this stage.

To meet this timescale, what I am announcing today is a post-primary area-based planning process in advance of full area-based planning which will proceed from next year. This will be used to identify the structural change required for the delivery to every young person of election at 14 and the Entitlement Framework from 2013.

The full area-based planning criteria will be decided through a short consultation process. The main elements in the proposed approach to area-based planning are:

- the central role of Educational Skills Authority in the production of draft area-based plans within a policy framework set by DE;

- the importance of sustainable schools, a new policy on this issue will be published shortly;

- a process including asset management , the development of area plans and strategic investment plans and project appraisal ;

- consultation at an area/sub-area basis involving the sectors and the schools;

- plans will cover all forms of schools

- the contribution of DEL and the FE sector in the process.

For the area-based planning process for the post-primary sector this will be initiated and driven by a representative central group independently chaired.

The group will involve:

- One senior figure drawn from each of the ELBs and CCMS/Trustees, CnaG, GBA, and NICIE;
- A representative of the Trade Unions;
- The Education and Training Inspectorate;
- Representatives of DEL and the Association of NI Colleges;
- An educational expert from the South; and
- A representative from the team that is working to set up ESA.

This central group will be complemented by 5 specific area groups chaired by an independent person and involving a representative from each of the sectors and from FE. It will be the responsibility of these groups to consult with the sectors and the schools and to submit preliminary area-based plans for approval by the central group. In addition, schools in local areas, acting collectively, could bring forward their own proposals to the area-based groups for consideration.

Chun críocha riaracháin, tá na grúpaí bunaithe sa cheantar seo eagraithe ar theorainneacha na mbord oideachais agus leabharlainne atá ann cheana féin, ach, más gá, rachaidh fo-cheantair trasna na dteorainneacha seo.

While, for purposes of administration, these area-based groups are organised using existing ELB boundaries where necessary sub-areas will cross these boundaries.

The approach to boundaries will have to be flexible given that the maintained sector uses diocesan and parish boundaries and that planning needs to take account of the flows of children rather than fixed boundaries.

The Terms of Reference for the central group and the 5 area groups' which we will publish this week will require them to develop plans capable of delivering the most dynamic, vibrant and effective schools to be accessed by transfer at 11 and offering at 14+ the curriculum pathway appropriate to the young person.

The task is to ensure that young people can access the educational pathway most suited to their needs through the flexible organisation of an area's schools and including collaboration with local FE colleges.

The work at central and local levels will take fully into account:

- the existing school structures;
- existing approvals for school capital projects;
- existing sectoral plans for development;
- existing Further Education provision;
- data on existing and projected enrolments;

- data on performance and other aspects of quality;
- progress towards the provision of the Entitlement Framework;
- the impact of and on transport policy;
- opportunities to promote sustainable schools;
- opportunities to promote sharing between schools; and
- opportunities for merger or federations in the development of learning communities.

I will shortly announce the membership of both the central and area-groups, with the chairs being announced before the end of this week.

The Area groups will be asked to report to the central group on progress at regular intervals and to submit final reports to it by the end of October 2008. I expect the central group to submit to the Department complete area based plans to go out to consultation immediately after this date. I want to see the consultation process on the completed area plans finished by January 2009.

Tá mé muiníneach gur céim mhór chun tosaigh na pleananna seo i bpróiseas na pleanála bunaithe sa cheantar; ar ndóigh, rachaidh an próiseas sin thar an earnáil iarbhunscolaíochta go gach earnáil ón bhliain dhá mhíle a naoi.

I am confident that these plans will be a major advance in the overall area-based planning process which will, of course, extend beyond post-primary from 2009.

I have stated many times that this is not a question of advocating “a one size fits all system”. Indeed the delivery of essential curriculum reform and a structured response to demographic decline make the need for area based planning essential.

Each individual school cannot be expected to deliver such expanded choices alone. The delivery of the Entitlement Framework requires an area-level planning of provision in order to succeed and deliver for our young people.

Dealing with the effects of demographic decline also requires an area-based planning response. At the same time as the Entitlement Framework calls for an expansion of post-14 provision, falling pupil numbers are restricting the range of provision that many schools can offer. This restriction is already being felt.

Secondary schools have borne the brunt of falling rolls while the grammar sector has lowered entrance requirements in order to lessen the effects of demographic decline. Even without the need to expand post-14 provision, school viability will require the education sectors in all areas to plan the future of an area’s provision together.

These proposals are about providing greater choice, greater opportunities and greater flexibility for young students. I also expect these plans to be a major step in delivering a modern education service for all young people now and in the decades to come, reversing the tail of educational underachievement

which is the reality for many passing through our current system.

I would encourage all here in the Assembly to play a constructive role in this process as we together shape an education system for the future.

(Please note paragraphs in Irish are immediately repeated in English.)