

MINUTES OF THE STRATEGIC PLANNING AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT FORUM held 11 January 2012 at the Staff Commission, Forestview, Belfast

In attendance: John McGrath, DE
La'Verne Montgomery, DE
Gavin Boyd, ESAIT
Barry Mulholland, WELB
David Cargo, BELB
Shane McCurdy, NEELB
Micheál Ó Duibh, CnaG
Noreen Campbell, NICIE
Jim Clarke, CCMS
Gerry Murphy, INTO
Seamus Searson, NASUWT
Paddy Mackel, NIPSA
Peter McMurray, GMB
Avril Hall-Callaghan, UTU
Anne Millis, ATL
Raymond McFeeters, NAHT
Andrena Murray, DE
Trevor Connolly, DE
Dorothy Angus, DE
Irene Murphy, DE

Apologies: Paul Sweeney, DE
Tony Murphy, SELB
Stanton Sloan, SEELB
Eamonn Coy, GMB
Mark Langhammer, ATL
Sean Maguire, ASPECT
Anne Speed, UNISON
Fern Turner, NAHT

John McGrath opened the meeting by welcoming all Members including the ELB Chief Executives who were attending for the first time. He explained that Paul Sweeney had been called away at short notice to a meeting in Stormont Castle and would be unable to chair the meeting.

Minutes of Previous Meeting

Paddy Mackel asked that the minutes of the meeting held 14 December 2011 be amended. Under the section of Viability Audit it was recorded that, *'It was acknowledged that there is an unsustainable school estate, hence the need for a planned process of rationalisation'*. Paddy asked that the minutes be amended to read, *'It was acknowledged that, given the current budget allocation, it was the Department's view that there is an unsustainable school estate, hence the need for a planned process of rationalisation'*. It was agreed that the Minutes would be amended to reflect this change.

No other amendments were required.

Budget Update

Trevor Connolly, Director of Finance, gave a presentation to Members on the detail of the budget and how figures have been arrived at and an outline of the challenges that lie ahead. The floor was then opened for comments/questions and the following points were made:

- teachers/non teachers pay for years 2013-14 and 2014-15 were the projection of likely costs that took account of the pay freeze in the first 2 years;
- some of the figures included in the presentation are time bound as part of the Budget 2010 process and will have to be amended as they are historic figures;
- the outcome of the budget for DE was very challenging but the bids were made and the budget was what was provided by Treasury;
- the reduction in the ASB and AWPU is based on the cash available and does not include the impact of inflation;
- it was thought that it may not be advisable to re-negotiate PPP contracts as they were obtained using a very competitive loan rate;
- the bid of £3.7m for utilities in January Monitoring was thought to be low but this was based on the bids that were logged at the time.

John McGrath made it clear that he was happy to engage further on budget issues and would consider any suggestions made on how the process could be improved and any ideas on how the budget could be better utilised. Any money put into the system should raise standards and it is important that the focus is on clearer outputs.

SEN Review Update

Dorothy Angus, Access Inclusion and Well-Being Director and Irene Murphy gave a presentation to Members to promote some understanding of departmental thinking and the Minister's emerging thoughts on the Review. It was emphasised that the information detailed in the presentation has not been provided to the Education Committee nor has it been made public. The floor was then opened for comments/questions:

- Clarification was provided that a detailed breakdown of responses by respondent grouping would be available when the summary of responses is published.
- Assurances were given that the Irish medium sector had been involved throughout the capacity building process and that the SEN Resource

File is being produced in Irish with sector specific examples of good practice.

- Clarification was sought on whether the Review addressed issues relating to health sector personnel working with IM SEN children. It was clarified that the proposed co-ordinated support plan would apply to children with complex and/or multiple education needs or complex and/or multiple education and health needs.
- Clarification was sought and provided that the SEN framework covers SEN children aged 0-19, but does not encompass the needs of children who have left school or are below age 19 in the FE sector.
- Several questions were asked about whether primary legislation would be needed if the proposals go ahead. It is envisaged that amendments to both primary and secondary legislation may be needed along with a revised statutory code of practice.
- In response to questions on funding it was stressed that, despite the current economic situation, the Minister has made a decision to protect the funding available for SEN. The consultation responses reflected a different range of views on how SEN funding should be allocated.
- Issues were raised around how the proposals would ensure equity in relation to assessment of pupil needs by schools and how teacher skills could become more consistent. It is recognised that while all schools may not currently have the skills required to teach all SEN pupils, the capacity building programme and the comprehensive SEN resource file available in every school is a major factor in bringing all schools up to the standard of the best.
- Barriers to learning were explained as any factor that might influence a child's capacity to learn. These could comprise children who are newcomers, travellers, looked after, school age mothers or those with SEN or disability.
- Clarification was provided that the SEN early years pilots would not cover every pre-school setting. A formal evaluation, however, would make recommendations for how SEN provision in early years can best be provided.
- It was agreed that early identification and appropriate interventions are key to addressing the barriers to learning faced by many children.

Any Other Business

Funding

The Minister has been consistently highlighting the need for more funding in Education. The Minister of Finance has announced that a substantial amount

of funding will be made available to education over the budget period. It is not known what the amount of funding will be and whilst the funding will not alleviate the need for redundancies it will mitigate it. The new funding will not have any impact on the viability audit.

Department of Employment & Learning

It has been reported in the Media that OFMDFM have suggested DEL should be abolished with its functions being principally divided between education and enterprise. DE officials were not aware of this proposal. If it does happen, it could have implications for staff but this will be addressed at the Forum once a decision has been made.

Common Funding Formula Review

The next stage is that the Minister will finalise his thoughts on the way forward and will look at the structure. John McGrath advised members that he would welcome input from the Forum and if required, he would arrange for the officials responsible for the Review to come to the Forum and address/engage with the Members.

Programme of Work

It was suggested that there should be sub-groups, where necessary, to look at specific areas of work, possible areas suggested were morale within the education system and the workforce issues coming out of the Minister's Autumn Statement.

It was agreed that DE would contact Members with propositions for consideration on possible sub-groups and would ask for nominations for membership of these sub-groups.

Next Meeting

A further meeting has been scheduled for either 7 February or 21 February to engage around the outcome of the viability audit. Members will be advised of the actual date as soon as possible.

ACTION POINTS	BY
Minutes to be amended	Secretariat
Members to be contacted with propositions for sub-groups and for nominations for membership of sub-groups	Secretariat
Members to be advised of date of next meeting in February	Secretariat

