

12 December 2006

STATEMENT FROM EDUCATION MINISTER, MARIA EAGLE MP TO ALL SCHOOLS, IN RESPONSE TO THE INDEPENDENT STRATEGIC REVIEW OF EDUCATION

Last week, Sir George Bain and his team published the Independent Strategic Review of Education. Their recommendations lay the foundation for a radical new future for Northern Ireland's education system, based on sharing and learning together, with quality education at its heart.

I am very grateful to Sir George for the considerable effort that went into this Review. I believe that future generations will recognise it as a huge milestone in Northern Ireland's journey to a peaceful and prosperous future.

The implementation of its recommendations will embed quality in Northern Ireland's education system. It will provide every child access to the full curriculum, taught in modern facilities, and give new opportunities for young people from different communities to learn together.

This is an ambitious target; it will require hard work over a number of years and some difficult decisions.

But Northern Ireland's parents should expect no less for their children, and the education sector has a duty and responsibility to make it a reality.

That is why the Government is accepting the broad direction of Sir George's recommendations. Some of the recommendations do require further detailed thought and consultation. Government will be publishing an implementation plan early in the New Year, setting out how we intend to take forward action on the report. However, there are several areas where work now needs to commence.

A central recommendation of the Review is that the education system should move quickly to a system of area based planning, so that we can tackle

effectively the problems of over-provision and lack of co-ordination created by the current system. I have asked the Department of Education to establish a working group consisting of the relevant sector groups to examine how best to progress the area based approach.

The Review explained clearly that Northern Ireland has too many schools. It was equally clear that the guiding principle in any school rationalisation programme should be the quality of education provided by any school, with which I fully concur. I am accepting the Review's recommended minimum enrolment thresholds at which schools should be reviewed. I have asked the Department of Education to consult with the education authorities early in the New Year on a policy for sustainable schools, taking account of A Shared Future and the Review report.

However, this is not an agenda to close small schools. I want to reassure all schools that the approach to new thresholds needs to be and will be planned carefully and with the educational interests of pupils remaining paramount.

It is clear from the Review that proposals for funding of future capital projects for the rebuilding of schools must be considered in the context of area-based planning.

We must also consider capital projects, which have been previously announced for funding and for which planning is underway. It will be important to review the sizes of these projects. This exercise will be undertaken quickly: we do not wish to introduce unnecessary delays or uncertainty to projects, but we must take account of the new context through which there may be greater potential benefits from a different approach.

The Review recognises the distinctive contribution of integrated schools in the fostering of a shared future for Northern Ireland. It also highlights the broad range of other approaches to integrating education. It calls on Government to provide tangible support to schools that are actively engaged in sharing with other schools, or schools that are developing an inclusive environment in

recognition of the diversity of their pupils' religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The Government will be examining this issue carefully in the coming weeks in deciding how best to respond. As an early response, following last week's Pre Budget Report by the Chancellor, the Secretary of State has signalled that Government is ready to provide capital investment to develop a shared future in Northern Ireland's schools.

In regard to Irish Medium education, we agree fully with Sir George that it is a suitable time now to take forward a broad review of policy for this area. This review will, of course, involve the sector, and I will publish the full terms of reference for this review later this week.

I accept the findings of the Review that the funding provided for education here must reflect and be responsive to the changing nature of school provision in an environment that supports sharing and collaboration.

For that reason, we will review the factors that make up the LMS common funding formula to make sure that they are as responsive as possible to the cost-drivers in an effectively planned and delivered education system.

We will also consult with school governors and principals on the scope for delegating further spending decisions to schools, recognising the value in allowing governors and principals to take spending decisions at local level, within the budgets allocated to them.

Once again, I want to thank Sir George and the Review team for their report. Everyone involved in educating Northern Ireland's young people has a duty to rise to the challenges the Review sets. The Department of Education will work closely with all parts of the education sector and also of course take the views of political parties in the coming weeks and months to ensure that the educational, economic and community benefits which should follow from the Review can be realised. The Government will give a further response to the review in the New Year, but it is important at this stage to outline how we plan to proceed.