

## “The Bain Review” – Realities and Perceptions

A small number of sensational headlines in some newspapers following the publication of the “Schools for the Future: Funding, Strategy and Sharing – Report on the Independent Strategic Review of Education” chaired by Sir George Bain in December 2006 and the publication of “A Consultation on Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools” document in January 2007 have led to concern and anxiety among many staff, parents and pupils in schools throughout the Southern Board and Northern Ireland. The message given in these articles suggested that 457 schools throughout Northern Ireland are under threat of closure as a result of the pupil number thresholds set out in the “Bain Review”. This paper sets out to highlight some of the realities contained in the main recommendations from the “Bain Review” and to clarify some of the perceptions arising from that report.

### The “Bain Review” Key Points

- There are 61 recommendations, all of which the Secretary of State, and the Minister for Education, have accepted.
- A summarised version of the main recommendations is listed below :

#### Effectiveness and Efficiency

- ⇒ All schools should be sustainable in terms of the quality of the educational experience of children, enrolment trends, financial position, school leadership and management, accessibility, and the strength of their links to the community.
- ⇒ Regardless of the financial position of a school or the other services it provides, a school is not considered viable if the quality and breadth of the education it provides is less than “satisfactory”.
- ⇒ Minimum (not optimal) enrolments for new primary schools, and for Years 8-12 in new post-primary schools should be (i) Primary: 140 pupils in urban areas, and 105 pupils in rural areas, and (ii) Post-primary: 500 pupils. When the enrolment in an existing school falls below the relevant level, the future of the school should be reviewed.
- ⇒ Minimum (not optimal) enrolment for a new sixth form in an 11-18 school should be 100 pupils. When the enrolment falls below this level in an existing sixth form, the future of the sixth-form provision should be reviewed.

#### Planning: A Strategic Approach

- ⇒ Planning should take place on a area basis across all sectors and management types. Possibility of establishing schools of new management types as a result of cross-sector or cross-community agreement to maintain local educational provision should be explored.
- ⇒ In accordance with *A Shared Future*, proposals for new schools, or re-organisation, or rationalisation of schools should demonstrate that options for collaboration and sharing on a cross-community basis have been considered and fully explored.
- ⇒ The planning of the schools’ estate should harmonise with policy on the curriculum, and with policy in such areas as Extended Schools, special needs provision, youth provision, admissions procedures and criteria, and transport.
- ⇒ The planning of the schools’ estate should be co-ordinated with planning in such fields as health, social services, adult education, youth provision, sports, arts and recreation, and community regeneration and development.
- ⇒ Maximum travel distances and maximum travel times for all pupils should be established.
- ⇒ School design and schedules of accommodation should be amended to take account of such factors as: the changing nature of schools and their functions in local communities; the potential for using new technologies for teaching and learning; the requirement to ensure that the schools’ estate is environmentally sustainable; and the provision of areas within the school that are conducive to social interaction and individual study.
- ⇒ School sports facilities should be made available to outside groups at reasonable cost, with schools and other providers working together to share the provision and maintenance of these facilities.
- ⇒ Planning should take account of policy on Special Educational Needs and Inclusion, including such aspects as accommodation, school based support, and collaboration between all schools, specialist services, and multi disciplinary teams.

#### Collaboration between Schools and Further Education

- ⇒ To ensure that provision is consistent and coherent, and that all young people have access to the same range and high quality of education, the delivery of the 14-19 curriculum should take full account of the defined local areas and involve the collaboration of schools, colleges of further education, and training providers.
- ⇒ The full potential of collaboration – through the innovative use of information technology and movement of staff – should be explored

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### Perspectives on Integration and Collaboration

- ⇒ The Department of Education is committed to facilitating and encouraging a variety of approaches to integrating education within a framework of sustainable schools.
- ⇒ The Department of Education should develop a comprehensive and coherent policy for Irish-medium education.
- ⇒ The Department of Education, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Education and Skills Authority should develop a range of incentives to encourage and support local schools to build on existing levels of shared facilities and staff and to develop their partnership further.

### Some perceptions arising from the “Bain Review”

- **“All rural primary schools with less than 105 pupils, urban primary schools with less than 140 pupils, post-primary schools with less than 500 year 8 – 12 pupils and sixth forms with less than 100 will close.”**

**Not true – All schools which fall within these categories will be reviewed against a range of criteria to see if any action is required. The Department of Education are currently consulting on the use of the following six viability criteria**

- A. **Educational Experience** - Are there indications that the school will not be able to provide a broad and balanced educational experience for the pupils and sustain and realise high standards of educational attainment? Pupils should be able to have a full set of option choices and pursue their chosen subjects to the highest level.
- B. **Stable Enrolment Trends** - Is the enrolment stable or decreasing year on year, increasing surplus capacity and financial difficulties? In a situation of declining enrolments across many areas of Northern Ireland, it is a challenge for schools to sustain their intake levels. Sustainability considers whether the annual changes should raise concerns for the longer term.
- C. **Sound Financial Position** - Is the school expected to sustain financial viability or will it have an ongoing budget deficit?
- D. **Strong Leadership and Management** - Is there evidence of strong leadership and effective management in the school? Absence of effective leadership and management can affect morale and motivation, and contribute to inconsistent standards of attainment and lead to a lack of direction and accountability. Ineffective teaching can reduce learning opportunities and lead to poor academic achievement. It can lead to pupils' disaffection and pupils' poor attendance and behaviour which can in turn disrupt teaching and divert teaching resources, add to the administration burden, and reduce staff motivation.
- E. **Accessibility** - Is the distance to school and the travel time for pupils reasonable? In the absence of a suitable alternative school in the local area should the school be retained? Are there suitable transport arrangements between local schools? The Bain Report recommended that maximum travel distances and times for all pupils should be established to inform siting of new schools. This would need to take account of both the ages of pupils and the needs of the area.
- F. **Strong links with the Community** - Are the links and relationships with parents and the local community strong? Where poor relationships exist, the standing of the school within the community can be affected adversely and subsequently generate negative attitudes towards the school and the value that the community places on education. This must also be viewed in the context of overall provision of places in the local area.

- **“All schools below the threshold will close at the end of the summer term in 2007.”**

**Not true:** As previously outlined not all schools falling below the threshold will close. In the case of those schools that are considered not to be sustainable a number of options will be explored including the potential for amalgamation with other schools either in their own management type or in new management types outside the traditional management arrangement. Other possibilities such as clustering, soft or hard federation will also be explored. In a number of cases closure may be the only option. Whichever option is pursued a period of consultation will take place involving parent, staff, boards of governors and schools in the vicinity. Currently the consultation period lasts at least 5 months and the decision making at least a further 4/5 months.

- **“All capital projects must be compatible with area based planning.”**

**True:** All existing approved and potential future capital projects will have to demonstrate that they are compatible with well developed area plans

- **“Shared Future means only one school management type with loss of ethos and identity for each of the school management type.”**

**Not true:** A *Shared Future* calls for proposals on new schools and re-organisation or rationalisation of schools, to demonstrate that options for collaboration and sharing on a cross-community basis have been considered and explored fully. Peter Hain in response to the “Bain Review” stated in relation to shared future – “*It is not, certainly not about them giving up their important traditions and commitment to their education, but it is about exploring sharing together: sharing facilities (school halls, canteen, sports ground and music equipment) and sharing activities to maximise subjects and strengths together.*”

Opportunities will exist for options such co-location of facilities, sharing of staff and their expertise, resources and subject areas. Opportunities for wrap-around services such as childcare, sports, community and youth facilities will also be explored.

- **“Area-Based Planning will not start until the new Education and Skills Authority is in place.”**

**Not True:** The Secretary of state, Mr Peter Hain in a speech on 23 January 2007 confirmed that “we must immediately move to Area-Based Planning ...we will therefore begin working to draw up and publish these area plans.”

**Notes:** Consultation on the “Sustainable Schools” policy arising from the “Bain Review” concludes on 16 April 2007. Copies of the “Bain Review” and the consultation document on “Sustainable Schools” are available on [www.selb.org](http://www.selb.org) and [www.deni.gov.uk](http://www.deni.gov.uk)