

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE JOINT CONSULTATIVE FORUM FOR THE EDUCATION SECTOR HELD IN THE ULIDIA RESOURCE CENTRE ON TUESDAY, 22 MARCH 2005

Present:

Community & Voluntary Sector

Ms Tansy Hutchinson	NICEM (Joint Chair)
Ms Anne Marie O'Kane	Disability Action
Dr Paschal McKeown	MENCAP
Mr James Knox	Rainbow Project
Mr Tomas Muiri	Rainbow Project
Ms Alison Laird	Ulster Unionist Party
Ms Barbara Cunningham	Youthnet

Trade Unions

Mr Tommy Wright	N I Public Service Alliance
Mr Mike Graves	Ulster Teachers' Union

Equality Authorities

Ms Brenda Campbell	Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
Ms Edel Teague	N I Human Rights Commission

Public Authorities

Mr John Curran	Inter-Board Services Manager (Joint Chair)
Ms Helen Leith	Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
Mrs Linda McGowan	Equalities Manager, B E L B
Mr Robin Harper	Chief Administrative Officer, N E E L B
Mr Nicky McBride	Assistant Senior Education Officer, S E E & L B
Mrs Caroline Stewart	Senior Legal Advisor, Education & Library Boards' Solicitors
Mr Terry Heron	Chief Finance Officer, S E & L B
Mr Stan McIvor	Assistant Finance Officer, W E & L B
Mrs Patricia Weir	Chief Executive, Staff Commission
Ms Deirdre Vaughn	Senior Principal Officer, Staff Commission (Secretary)

1. Welcome and Introduction

Tansy Hutchinson (Joint Chair) welcomed everyone to the special meeting of the Joint Consultative Forum (the Forum). She explained that at the first meeting of the Forum's Steering Group the issue of the Boards' current under-funding difficulties and the new common funding formula for schools had been discussed. It had been agreed that when the five Education and Library Boards had received their budgets and formulated their proposals a special meeting of the Forum would be convened.

John Curran (Joint Chair) said that it had been anticipated when the meeting was being organised that the Boards' Resource Allocation Plans would have been submitted to the Department by the 11 March 2005 and that the Boards' would have received some indication as to whether the plans would be agreed. He pointed out however that this had not been possible. He said that in November 2004, apart from the immediate financial problems facing the Belfast and South Eastern Boards in order to provide the services at the current level there appeared to be a £25 – 30 million deficit. He explained that around 65% of the Boards' budget went directly

to schools and that the remaining £70 million (approximately) was 'centre' money and that this was the area where Boards would be required to achieve savings.

He reported that the position of the Boards was:-

North Eastern and South Eastern Boards had met to consider the proposed cuts and that the board members had, under duress, accepted them. The other three Boards (Belfast, Western and Southern) would be meeting that week to consider their draft Resource Allocation Plans.

He pointed out that unless the Boards had their Resource Allocation Plans approved by the Department by the 1 April 2005 they would not be allowed to spend any money. It was also noted that board members had been advised that if they did not agree their Resource Allocation Plans there was the real risk that they would be removed and replaced by a Department nominee.

John said that the Boards had met with the Trade Union Side to discuss redundancies across all five Boards and said that they were trying to get common ground and avoid compulsory redundancies which was extremely difficult given the current circumstances.

In terms of obtaining the required savings to remain within their budget the Boards were currently looking at their non-statutory functions for example music, school crossing patrols and catering including schools meals and said that under current procedures there would be consultation with the Trade Unions and staff.

John reported that over the Easter period the Boards' equality representatives would be meeting to consider the equality implications of the Boards' financial schemes which were currently being processed.

During the subsequent discussion the following points emerged:-

Community and Voluntary Sector

- representatives from the Ulster Unionist Party had met with the Secretary of State that morning to raise concerns regarding the Boards' financial situation (Ulster Unionist Party);
- NICEM had circulated a recent press release it had issued regarding English as an Additional Language (EAL), the current funding crisis in the Boards and the changes to the 'common funding formula' which they pointed out had not been equality impact assessed. (NICEM);

(The Boards pointed out that changes to the 'common funding formula' meant that the EAL service would no longer be delivered through the Boards and that the majority of the money would now go directly to schools.)

- Section 75 does not apply to schools - NICEM want funding to remain with the Boards for the time being. (NICEM);
- NICEM expressed the view that if EAL provision was not made available there was the potential for legal action under Section 75, the EU Race Directive and the Human Rights Act. (NICEM);

- all policy decisions would require to be equality impact assessed (*Trade Union Side of the Joint Negotiating Council*);
- NICEM wanted it recorded that it felt it was very unfortunate that the Department was not represented at this special meeting of the Forum to hear the views of the community and voluntary sector. This view was seconded by CoSO (*NICEM & CoSO*);
- children with learning difficulties in schools and youth services - a big concern would be that these were 'soft areas'. A number of parents with children of special needs felt that they were being 'got at' – need to better manage the message in the press – came across that children with special needs were the cause of the problem and that they were protected – this is not the case they will also be affected as not everyone is covered under Section 75 (*MENCAP*);
- another important voice may be that of the Children's Commissioner whose counterpart in the Republic of Ireland had commented on a similar matter (*CoSO*);
- NICEM requested the Boards, if possible, to provide comprehensive information regarding the Boards' under-funding situation (*NICEM*);
- The role of the JCF in this context was also raised.

Equality Authorities

- the Equality Commission has received a number of complaints from EAL teachers who have been placed on notice (*Equality Commission*);

Public Authorities

- The Forum was set up to look at how public authorities in the education sector were implementing their equality schemes, the intention was to share information and receive feedback. There was a recognition that there would not always be agreement. The public authorities have a different role to that of the community and voluntary sector and the trade unions.
- With regard to the trade union view that it would expect impact assessments as a result of each and every policy decision, it was highlighted that while there would be proposals put forward which may require to be impact assessed there would be other issues for example reducing inefficiencies or making savings on maintenance work until additional money was available and these may not require to be impact assessed. It was noted also that in this context there was a process to be followed, the outcome of which should not be pre-empted.
- It was stressed that it was critical to get the views and feedback from the community and voluntary sector and trade unions. Members were asked, if possible, to structure their feedback using the key questions from the Boards' screening pro-forma.
- With regard to the issues raised by MENCAP the Boards thanked MENCAP for raising the issue and undertook to ensure that communications were sensitively prepared to make it clear that the problem of under-funding was not that of service-users. It was explained that Board Members did not want to be seen to be making cuts in services to the most

vulnerable people in society. If you feel aggrieved please speak to us in order that we can break down any misunderstanding which may exist.

- › The Youth Service provision was one area where the money was 'ring fenced'. There was a higher uptake of youth service provision in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK. This was due to the enormous amount of work being undertaken in respect of young people. The Best Value Review which was recently conducted on the Youth Service had been very helpful and had provided a basis for lobbying to keep youth provision within the education sector.

Way Forward

It was agreed that, in order to keep the community and voluntary sector and trade unions updated, a leaflet would be prepared setting out the points raised at the special Forum meeting and highlighting that each Board's Resource Allocation Plan was available on its website.

It was also agreed to ask the Department of Education to the next meeting of the Forum to speak to their Equality Scheme - Revised Policy Screening Timetable.

Date of Next Meeting of the Steering Group

It was noted that the next meeting of the Steering Group was scheduled to take place on 21 April 2005.

Date of Next Meeting of the Joint Consultative Forum

It was also noted that the next meeting of the Joint Consultative Forum would take place on 26 May 2005 and would be hosted by the Southern Education & Library Board in Armagh.

It was agreed that the Officers of the Forum could decide if a special meeting of the Forum was necessary.