

- conduct an examination of training and guidance provided on the promotion of equality of opportunity for people with disabilities;
- outline the current range of public life positions, if any, for which they are currently responsible;
- explore, in consultation with disability groups, how such positions could be made more accessible to and inclusive of people with disabilities.

A report on this work will be submitted to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, Section 75 consultee groups and to the Education and Skills Authority.

This work will prepare the necessary groundwork for the Education and Skills Authority and facilitate it in meeting its requirement to develop and consult upon a disability action plan within its first six months of operation.

The education authorities would wish to emphasise that they are only seeking an exemption from the legal requirement to produce a disability action plan for the reasons specified above. They will, in the interim, take steps to promote positive attitudes towards disabled persons and encourage their participation in public life.

Draft Good Relations Policy and Strategy

The Education and Library Boards/Staff Commission have developed a draft Good Relations Policy and Strategy which will pave the way for the development of a more comprehensive Good Relations Strategy which can be taken forward by the new Education Skills Authority.

The draft policy and strategy was issued to consultees in June 2006. Six written responses were received and a consultation event took place on 2 November 2006 at which nine organisations were represented.

Changes to the Strategy in the light of the feedback received are currently being considered.

Consultees suggested that, where good practice has been developed, consideration should be given as to how this can be communicated to a wider audience. The redrafted policy and strategy will be made available in due course.

Joint
Consultative
Forum

Education Sector

Quarterly Update

December 2006

Steering Group

The last meeting of the Steering Group was postponed primarily because work on the RPA policy proposals was taking longer than originally anticipated. The Forum Officers met on 21 November and agreed that a meeting of the Forum should take place in January 2007. There are a number of business items on which progress has been made. These are reported on below:

Review of Public Administration (RPA) : Policy Proposals

The Joint Consultative Forum has organised a seminar on the DE policy proposals emerging from the RPA. Further information on the proposals, together with a programme for the seminar, are attached.

New Chief Executive Designate

Gavin Boyd has been appointed Chief Executive Designate of the Education and Skills Authority.

Mr Boyd, who has been Chief Executive of CCEA since 2000, will take up the new role early in the new year. As Chief Executive Designate of the new Authority he will spearhead one of the UK's largest public sector organisations, with a budget of £30 billion.

The new authority will become operational in 2008 and will replace the five Education and Library Boards and the range of other education organisations funded by the Government.

English as an Additional Language (EAL)

The Department of Education is in the final stages of developing a policy for children whose first language is not English and who have significant difficulty with English. This is known as English as an Additional Language (EAL).

The intention of the policy is to assist the promotion of equality of opportunity for children for whom English is an additional language by enabling them to access the Northern Ireland curriculum.

It is anticipated the policy should be finalised by early 2007.

An Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS) incorporating EAL will be established from 1 April 2007. This single regionalised service will use the guidelines from the EAL policy to address the issues surrounding EAL provision and ensure the correct level of EAL support throughout all schools across Northern Ireland.

An interpretation service and translation of documents service will be set up in early 2007 through the EMAS. This will establish access to interpreting services and provide key documents in various languages for teachers, EAL pupils and their parents.

The total allocation for EAL is £3.4m for 2006/07. DE has given Boards earmarked funding of £834k for 2006/07 and schools just over £2.5m through the Common Funding Formula. In addition, £100k has been allocated for interpreting and translation services through the Children and Young People's Funding Package.

The October 2005 census figures indicated that there are now 2,679 EAL children and young people in schools in Northern Ireland, an increase of 623 on the October 2004 census figures.

In 2005/06, out of 703 EAL children and young people in post primary schools, 148 had special educational needs. An analysis of EAL pupils by SEN is only available for post primary schools in 2005/06. In 2006/07, this analysis will be available for both primary and post primary schools. This information will not be ready until mid December 2006.

Revision of Religious Education (RE) Core Syllabus

The EQIA on the RE Core Syllabus has been completed. The Minister has accepted proposals from the four main Churches for a revised core syllabus for religious education (RE). When the new syllabus is introduced from September 2007 it will include Christianity, morality and, for the first time, World Religions. The Department of Education has advised that the EQIA Results document will be issued to those consultees who responded and will be available on its website at www.deni.gov.uk (follow link to 'curriculum and assessment' then 'RE Core Syllabus').

Disability Action Plans

Under the Disability Discrimination (NI) Order 2006, public authorities, when carrying out their functions, must have due regard to the need to:-

- promote positive attitudes towards disabled persons; and
- encourage participation by disabled persons in public life.

The Education Authorities, namely the five Boards, CCMS, Youth Council and the Staff Commission fully recognise the importance of the disability duties proposed under the Order and accept that they have an important contribution to make to ensure people with disabilities enjoy equal respect and full inclusion in society. The education authorities, however, would question whether the effort involved in preparing a disability action plan in the present context and validating it is disproportionate to its impact on promoting positive attitudes towards disabled persons and encouraging participation by disabled persons in public life in Northern Ireland. The effort in preparing and consulting on such a plan when they will only be in existence until 31 March 2008 is, in the view of the education authorities, disproportionate. It is noted that the ESA will be obliged within its first six months of operation to develop and submit its disability action plan to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

For this reason the education authorities have written to the Equality Commission seeking to be exempted from producing such a plan and proposing that in this interim period, they will:

- review measures they have already taken or are in the process of taking to promote positive attitudes towards people with disabilities in public life;