



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Review of Initial Teacher Education
Infrastructure: Departmental Briefing

26 March 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Review of Initial Teacher Education Infrastructure: Departmental Briefing

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mrs Nuala Kerr	Department for Employment and Learning
Mrs Carol McCabe	Department for Employment and Learning

The Chairperson: I welcome from the Department for Employment and Learning Mrs Nuala Kerr, director of higher education, and Mrs Carol McCabe, head of quality and the initial teacher education branch. Ladies, you are very welcome. Over to you.

Mrs Nuala Kerr (Department for Employment and Learning): Thank you. I am really glad to have this opportunity to update the Committee on the review of the initial teacher education infrastructure. The last time that we were here, we spoke of the appointment of the review panel and the members' international reputation and expertise in working in the field of education, particularly at policy development level. We advised that we had asked for submissions from higher education institutions and interested stakeholders. The intention was that, once those papers had been received, the panel would have a detailed discussion with each institution and with a variety of stakeholders representing the broad range of issues raised in the submissions. In the end, we got over 100 responses. We have prepared a summary of the issues raised in the submissions and are placing it on the Department's website. All the responses were passed to each member of the review panel for their consideration.

One of the panel's first tasks was to provide an overview of the current developments in the field of initial teacher education provision, which represents best practice internationally. We have a copy of that overview paper. That paper and the summary document that I mentioned earlier were provided to all those with whom the panel met in advance of the meetings. The panel held meetings at the end of February. I think that a list of those involved in the meetings has also been provided to the Committee. The panel made use of the submissions provided by the organisations to explore in more detail some of the issues that they raised. The panel's view of the meetings was that they were positive and constructive.

The information gathered from those meetings, together with the submissions, the analysis of international best practice, the findings of the stage one committee and the panel members' own experience will now be brought together as the final report is being prepared. The panel aims to provide its report to the Minister by the summer with the options for consideration. That will form the basis for further dialogue with the initial teacher education (ITE) institutions with a view to finding an agreed way forward. We would like to stress that not only was the panel's view of the meetings positive and constructive but the feedback that we received from those who held the meetings was equally positive. There were very positive comments received about the quality of the overview paper in setting out what the key issues were. Chair, I am happy to take questions.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Nuala. International best practice has been a central plank to the review and the establishment of the international team, but a number of the submissions and your summary of responses refer to the unique circumstances in Northern Ireland. In your view, does the international panel understand or is it aware of the long-term implications of the unique circumstances in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Kerr: I believe that the panel has developed a very good understanding. Some of the members already had some knowledge of Northern Ireland. I will ask Carol to talk a little about that. As they went through the review meetings with each of the institutions, they put on the table the kinds of issues that you are talking about, about what the circumstances are up here that differ. That certainly was a question that we offered consultees to specifically address in their submissions. Some did and some did not. Carol, do you want to say something?

Mrs Carol McCabe (Department for Employment and Learning): The panel was, to varying degrees. Two members of the panel in particular — Professor Gordon Kirk and Professor John Coolahan — are very familiar with Northern Ireland and meet and visit here quite frequently. The rest of the panel members are also familiar and certainly made use of the information in the submissions and the meetings to become very aware of the uniqueness of the Northern Ireland situation and the issues that they need to take account of. So, they were very familiar with it.

The Chairperson: Of the 109 responses, 37 were from schools. Do you have any further information on the breakdown of those schools? Were they from one particular sector or geographical area?

Mrs McCabe: I do not have a breakdown with me. We did not really do a breakdown looking at where they had each come from. We just grouped all of the schools, the individuals and the representative organisations. If the Committee wants, we could probably look at that, but we do not actually have a breakdown of where the schools are from.

The Chairperson: What is the timeline for moving forward?

Mrs Kerr: Our expectation is that the panel will take all of that evidence and information and put together a report for the Minister by the summer. That will form the basis of his discussions going forward with the institutions and key stakeholders about what options the panel put to him and whether they will form the basis of a way forward in dealing with the issues.

The Chairperson: How have the economic assessments of St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College played into the panel's review?

Mrs Kerr: The panel has a copy of the stage one report. Its members are invited to use that as part of the evidence base on which to develop the options that they will wish to put to the Minister.

The Chairperson: I was aware that they had the report as an evidence base. Is anybody presenting it to them or is anybody going through it to explain it to them, such as the commissioners of the report or the Department?

Mrs Kerr: We did not do a presentation to them.

Mrs McCabe: They have the report, and we can answer any questions that they might have about it. The information from stage one is one part of all the other pieces of information that they will consider. It will sit alongside the information that they have gathered from submissions, meetings and everything else. They are very familiar with the content of the stage one report and what it was trying to achieve,

as well as comments in submissions that may also have referred to the stage one report. So, they have quite a bit of information on that.

The Chairperson: I suppose that my basic question is, "Has it been formally presented to them?"

Mrs McCabe: It is part of all the information that they have.

The Chairperson: Not just as a document but as a presentation.

Mrs McCabe: We have not done a presentation to them on the stage one report. They just have it as part of the other information that they have.

Mr P Ramsey: Good morning. We received an overview of the international trends in teacher education from the panel. The entire content was about curriculum, assessment processes, school improvement and pupil achievement. That being the case, why was this not a joint review by the Department of Education, given that the key elements of it were all education based?

Mrs Kerr: In respect of our review, this is an area where, as you know, our Minister has a responsibility for the structures. Looking at those aspects of education was to provide a context for the panel to sit the infrastructure review. So, they looked at the wider perspective and at all those issues and will then focus in on the structural review.

Mr P Ramsey: I cannot understand why the entire content of the overview that we have been given relates to the education of pupils. Was there any discussion with the Department of Education about the review, given the evidence that we have of the content of the review?

Mrs Kerr: We have kept officials in the Department abreast of the developments of the review as it goes along. In fact, we are due to meet them next week again to discuss this stage of the review.

Mrs McCabe: We have drawn attention in the overview paper to exactly what you have described. We have said that the information in the overview paper is the backdrop or the international context for teacher education, and we made it clear, as did the panel, in the paper that it was recognised that it strays into issues and responsibilities that are for the Department of Education. However, it was necessary to provide that as a background to allow the panel to focus its attention on recommendations that are purely about infrastructure issues and within our Minister's responsibility. So, it was broadening out the discussion on teacher education generally and internationally, allowing for discussion about that in meetings and allowing the panel to focus its attention on recommendations about structure.

Mr P Ramsey: I note that your wording strays. My reading of it is that the entire content of the overview refers to pupils' educational attainment, assessment and pupil achievement. I am going to park that, but it is something that we might come back to. Did the chairperson of the panel, Dr Pasi Sahlberg, ask the same question about why it was not a joint review?

Mrs Kerr: When the panel thought about how it would develop the review, it considered all the aspects of it, but it took the educational attainment and issues that you have described as the broad context in which it was working, and it clearly understood that its task was to focus in on the structures.

Mr P Ramsey: Maybe I will ask it again, Chair. If the panel believed that it should be a joint review, what was your response to it?

Mrs Kerr: The terms of reference on which the panel was commissioned to do this work was in terms of the structures, not the wider context. So, that is the basis on which it was invited to take up the project.

Mr P Ramsey: OK. I will ask again, Nuala. Did the chair specifically ask the question, "Why was this not a joint review?"

Mrs Kerr: I am not aware of that specific —

Mrs McCabe: I am not aware of him having done that. I am not sure whether you have something in mind, but the chair and the rest of the panel were always very aware of our Minister and the Department's responsibilities and of the fact that the review was focused on structures. It did, as we said, need to look at the wider international context, but it was doing that only by way of background so that it could then look at what structures were needed.

Mr P Ramsey: OK. Maybe you could reflect on it, and, if there was a question and a response, you can pass that on to us.

Earlier, the Chairperson mentioned international best practice, but I noticed that there was no reference to faith-based international best practice. Is there a reason for that?

Mrs Kerr: The best practice that we are drawing from is international in a broad sweep. You can see that it is a summarised document. Certainly, the panel was aware of the faith-based issues that exist in Northern Ireland, and it was in the context of teaching in the international best practice and drawing those together.

Mr P Ramsey: Similar to where the Chair was moving towards, surely it was in the panel's interest to look at best practice on faith-based institutions, because that is primarily what we are talking about. We have two colleges, St Mary's and Stranmillis, which, principally, are faith-based.

Mrs Kerr: Stranmillis is not a faith-based institution. That is not the purpose for which it was established.

Mr P Ramsey: We can disagree on that. People will articulate an argument that Stranmillis has a very strong faith-based curriculum.

Mrs Kerr: Which faith?

Mr P Ramsey: The University of Notre Dame is one of the leading universities in the world. Were its outputs looked at?

Mrs McCabe: It may well be that the overview paper does not specifically address faith-based education, but the paper is certainly trying to provide information on what is happening in teacher education internationally. The panel has also taken account of all the submissions that have come through. As you will know from the summary, many of those submissions referred to faith-based education and highlighted examples for the panel to pay attention to. They were Belgium, Switzerland and the example that you have given. There were other examples in the submissions that came through. Regardless of whether it was provided in the international overall paper, the panel certainly has taken account of the examples of faith-based education that were provided in submissions and any that came up in discussions during the meetings.

Mr P Ramsey: Carol, they are not part of the papers that we have seen, so maybe those areas could be passed on to us.

Mrs McCabe: Sorry, there may well be reference to it in the summary of responses. I know that there is not in the international paper.

Mr P Ramsey: That is fine.

Overnight, I was looking at the St Mary's website and at how it sees the future as being pluralist and shared but principally faith-based. What was the core message of the submissions from the universities and Stranmillis? We have an organisation, such as St Mary's, which, very strongly, is faith-based. Do you accept that? What were the submissions in relation to how they foresee where a faith-based institution fits?

Mrs Kerr: I am not clear about who "they" is.

Mr P Ramsey: I said universities; the University of Ulster, Stranmillis and the Open University. What was their submission in relation to faith-based institutions?

Mrs McCabe: We have not disclosed or got into discussions about the content of the submissions that we received from individuals, schools and teacher education providers. They were passed to the panel for discussion between the panel and the institutions. If an institution has chosen to make public what it said in its submission, that is fine; that is entirely up to the institution to do that. We have not gone into the detail of any submission with anybody, other than the people who provided the content of the submission.

Mr P Ramsey: Will you be providing those submissions openly at any point in the future?

Mrs McCabe: When we sought the submissions, we advised those who responded that we would be doing a summary report of the issues that were raised. At that time, we did not tell anybody that we would be publishing the full content of their submission. It is not our intention to publish them. We made it known at the outset that we would produce a summary report, which is what we have done, and the summary report focuses on all the issues raised by the submissions. The individual submissions have been given to each member of the panel. However, we did not intend to publish the submissions.

Mr P Ramsey: I do not want to take any more time than the Chair has allowed me, but I find it extraordinary that, in a public review such as this one that is fundamental to the future of St Mary's and Stranmillis, you are not prepared to share that information.

Mrs Kerr: I am sorry, Chair, but there are data protection issues here. When we requested those submissions, we made it clear at that stage that it was not our intention to publish them in detail.

Mr P Ramsey: I do not understand data protection in these circumstances. Data on what?

Mrs Kerr: We believe that it would be possible to identify individuals or individual schools if we published our individual submissions. So, we have reservations about that.

Mr P Ramsey: For the record, I would like to get a legal opinion on why that information is being withheld. I want to get further information.

Mrs McCabe: We may be able to make arrangements for Committee members to see the submissions. As I said, it was not our intention to publish the submissions on our website or to make them public. However, if the Committee needs to see copies of the individual submissions, we can talk to it about that, but we need to make it clear that we may need to do that on a confidential basis, because we never sought permission, if you like, to share the content of those people's submissions. For that reason, we made it quite clear to them that we were summarising the issues that they raised rather than identifying who raised them. I do not think that there would be a difficulty with making some arrangements for the Committee to see the submissions on a confidential basis. It is more about us publishing them on our website.

Mr F McCann: Did the people who made submissions specifically request that their submissions be kept private?

Mrs McCabe: They did not ask that. We wrote to them asking them to sign something that said that, in their submission, they acknowledged that we would make use of the information provided in their submission for a summary report. That is what we asked them. We did not ask them whether they were content to have their submissions disclosed. Therefore, they did not need to give us or not give us permission for that. We made it clear that we were doing a summary report.

Mr P Ramsey: It is bad business, I can tell you.

The Chairperson: The Department is willing to make them available on a confidential basis. If members want to take it up on that, we can pursue it.

Mr P Ramsey: I respect that, but I do not think that it is acceptable that only certain people see a public review. I think that that is unacceptable. I will leave it at that.

The Chairperson: I think that that is for the Department to manage in future consultations.

Mr Douglas: During discussions on 23 October last year, I referred to some excellent examples of faith-based organisations, which goes back to Pat's point, not just in the United Kingdom but in America and other areas. Did the panel of experts that produced this report have literally nothing to say about that? I know that you said that there may be other documents, but I am recording my disappointment that the issue that I raised is not even referred to. That was one of my main points.

Mrs Kerr: I acknowledge the point that you raised. The panel is completely aware of the faith-based issues that exist in Northern Ireland. It has had the opportunity to consider that in the context of international best practice, and it was highlighted to it in a number of the submissions. So, it is certainly aware of that as a consideration.

Mr Douglas: But it did not refer to it in this report, Nuala. It is not mentioned.

Mrs McCabe: You are correct that the international trends paper does not refer to it. However, we have passed to the panel references to the 23 October meeting with the Committee. Those are included in the summary of responses. The transcript from the meeting on 23 October was also separately handed to panel members. Therefore, the panel has been made aware of the references that you made in that meeting. Those may not have featured in the international trends paper, but they are very definitely part of the package of information that the panel is aware of.

Mr Douglas: We had an opportunity to ask questions of Mr Kerlin of Grant Thornton. Will we have the same opportunity to question the present chair of the expert panel, Dr Sahlberg?

Mrs Kerr: If that is the wish of the panel, we will give consideration to it.

Mr Douglas: Definitely. These are the sorts of questions that I would like to ask him.

This goes back to a point that Pat made. Is there a full list of the 109 responses? Only 27 organisations are mentioned here. Can you elaborate on that?

Mrs Kerr: If you wish to see the individual responses, we will share them with you at that stage.

Mr Douglas: The summary provided refers to the unique "political and religious history" of Northern Ireland and the context-specific factors. How does the panel of experts plan to reconcile international trends with the local realities of Northern Ireland? Since the review commenced, we have entered difficult times that will persist for the foreseeable future. We are not back to where we were many years ago, but we have specific circumstances here that many of those countries do not have. How do we reconcile local issues with international best practice?

Mrs Kerr: When the panel concludes, that is a challenge that the Minister will take up. The panel will review international best practice and look at the Northern Ireland context. It will look at the existing structures here and recommend a number of options to the Minister. He will consider them, take them forward and try to reconcile the parameters that you talked about.

Ms McGahan: Thank you for your presentation. Why was the panel not asked to come up with recommendations for change? Does the Minister not want recommendations on that?

Mrs Kerr: The panel will produce a report including a number of potential options for the Minister to consider. He will take those forward when he receives the report.

Ms McGahan: Will there not be any recommendations from the panel? Did the Minister ask the panel to come up with recommendations?

Mrs McCabe: The panel was asked to come up with options. When the Minister receives the report, he and his officials will engage with the sector on the options. From that, something may emerge, but it was always about options.

Ms McGahan: OK. Who has to agree to change, and what organisations will be involved in such an agreement?

Mrs Kerr: The Minister will receive the report with the options that the panel puts to him. He will then take forward discussions. He will want to reach conclusions that are agreeable to the key stakeholders and the institutions themselves. So it will depend on what structures eventually evolve, what conclusions he reaches on foot of the report and the discussions that he has.

Ms McGahan: So all the stakeholders and institutions will be involved in agreement on the way forward.

Mrs Kerr: It depends on the options that are put to the Minister.

Ms McGahan: Do you mean the panel's options?

Mrs Kerr: The panel will put a number of options in the report, and the Minister will consider them. He will decide what he wishes to do on foot of the options that the panel has put to him. Depending on what those options are, he will engage with the relevant parties to reach a conclusion on what is agreeable as the way forward.

Mrs McCabe: That is detailed in the terms of reference. As Nuala said, the Department will then enter into further dialogue with various institutions about agreeing a way forward. It will be about how that works after the Minister receives the report. That will be the next stage.

Ms McGahan: OK.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you for your updates. The First Minister has said:

"It is fundamentally wrong that we segregate our young people on the basis of religion at such a young age."

We had a report yesterday from the Integrated Education Fund, in conjunction with the business community in Northern Ireland, which set out some clear views that an integrated education system would have significant support from the business community in Northern Ireland. Is there an opportunity for the business community to have an input into or engage with this review at any level?

Mrs Kerr: There was an opportunity for anybody to provide input to the review panel. There was a public request for information when we invited submissions.

Mr F McCann: I will pick up on a point that Bronwyn raised. When all is said and done and the options are put forward, does the Department intend to go back and discuss them with St Mary's?

Mrs Kerr: What needs to happen next will depend on what options are put forward. It will depend entirely on the options put to the Minister and how he decides to take those forward. He will wish to conclude the matter on an agreed basis with the relevant institutions.

Mr F McCann: What you are saying probably boils down to no.

Mrs Kerr: My apologies, Chair, but we are not saying no. It depends on what options come forward and how the Minister decides to take those forward. There is no question, at this stage, of our ruling out or in any individual option. It will depend on what the Minister decides to do on foot of the options put to him.

Mr F McCann: Do you also understand that many people believe that this has been a smokescreen from the outset for a move to close St Mary's? Committee members have made clear their feelings about the way the whole thing has been conducted from the outset, but the —

Mrs Kerr: I am aware of that, and I am extremely disappointed that the Committee considers that we are engaged in a smokescreen. Genuine efforts are being made on the part of the Minister, the officials and the panel to consider what is best for the children of Northern Ireland. This is not a smokescreen for any other activity.

Mr Fra McCann: As an elected representative, I am entitled to an opinion. Certainly, the evidence that I have heard at this Committee, not only this morning but in the past, does nothing to lead me in

the direction of believing that the Minister does not have an agenda to close St Mary's at some time in the future. However —

Mrs Kerr: I can only reiterate my —

The Chairperson: I do not think that you and Fra will agree this.

Mr F McCann: No, that is it.

Mrs Kerr: — assurances that that is not our intention.

Mr F McCann: The paper includes a list of institutions that the panel was to meet. Did the panel meet Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta? If not, why not?

Mrs McCabe: No. The list of organisations that the panel met is included in the paper. Many Irish-medium education issues were raised in submissions, and we provided the panel with those. We tried to fit in as many meetings as we could over the days that the panel was here. The list is as you have it. The organisations that you mentioned have not been included, but Irish-medium education was certainly included in the issues that the panel considered.

Mr F McCann: Who did you meet to discuss that?

Mrs McCabe: To discuss?

Mr F McCann: Teacher training in the medium of Irish.

Mrs McCabe: It came up in many of the submissions and in the discussions with the institutions and organisations that the panel met.

Mr F McCann: You have met a number of key people in teacher education. To many, the teaching of Irish is crucial. So the panel went to the bother of meeting other providers but not them. St Mary's is one of the main providers of teacher education: why was it not contacted or met? Is it not important enough to the future of education?

Mrs McCabe: I assure you that the panel considered that absolutely every issue raised in the submissions or discussed in the meetings was important, and Irish-medium education was a key feature in many of the submissions and much of the discussion with the panel. It was very definitely important enough, and it was considered by the panel.

Mr F McCann: I am making the point that three of the four institutions mentioned are involved in teacher training. The panel met some teacher training organisations. I am asking why Irish language teacher training was not afforded the same opportunity to put forward its position.

Mrs Kerr: As Carol said, there were a number of references to Irish language communication in the submissions received. As you said, St Mary's is a key deliverer of Irish language teacher training. It was definitely one of the institutions that the panel met. Our view is that the issue was raised with the panel in a serious and considered manner, and there was an opportunity to meet one of the key players.

Mr F McCann: Are you saying to me that the panel discussed the training of teachers for Irish-medium schools with St Mary's?

Mrs Kerr: I am not in a position to get into the detail of that. I was not present.

Mr F McCann: Can we have whatever information there is on whether that happened?

Mrs McCabe: It is recorded in the summary of responses as an issue raised by many respondents. The panel has considered it. Certainly, one of its key meetings was with St Mary's as well.

Mr F McCann: My understanding, and it is just my understanding, is that that meeting did not take place. I would like to find out whether a meeting took place and whether the whole question of Irish-medium teachers was discussed with St Mary's.

Mrs McCabe: What meeting? Sorry, there was no separate meeting. Other than the list you have, there was no separate meeting.

Mr F McCann: That is the point that I am trying to make.

Mrs McCabe: If you do not have the list, I can provide it. The panel met all the people on the list provided to you. The organisations you mentioned were not included in that. There were many references to Irish-medium education in the responses and meetings. Those are what the panel has taken into account.

Mrs Kerr: The purpose of the meetings with the institutions was for the panel to consider and explore further the issues raised by the various institutions. Opportunities were afforded to all HEIs to raise the issues highlighted in their submission.

Mr F McCann: From where I am sitting, it seems that you discussed with the key institutions all aspects of education. However, no discussion took place with the key provider of Irish-medium education, St Mary's. For many people, a key aspect of education is learning and teaching in the medium of Irish.

The Chairperson: Fra, we have St Mary's and Stranmillis in front of us on 4 June, so you will be able to ask them directly.

Mr Buchanan: There has been quite a bit of debate this morning on the options. When the panel's options are put before the Minister for him to consider, will they come to the Committee? Will we get a view of them and an opportunity to discuss them prior to the Minister making his final decision?

Mrs Kerr: The document will be published in due course. Of course, the Committee will be afforded the opportunity to see the report before it is in the public domain. We have not mapped out the next stage, but, in the normal course of policy development, we talk to the Committee. We have done our best to keep the Committee abreast of what is happening to date and will continue to do so.

Mr Buchanan: Members should be reassured that they will see a copy of the options recommended by the panel to the Minister prior to his making up his mind. If we can get a look at that, it may well reassure some members.

The Chairperson: Nuala, you said that that section has been mapped out. I formally request that, before we go any further, the document be brought to the Committee, whether it is you or the Minister who comes in front of us to explain his options and where he intends to go with this. You can see that there are quite a number of concerns about this area from around the table. We will also forward today's Hansard to the international panel and invite its chair to come before the Committee. He might not want to take up the invitation, but, given today's presentation, for members' sake and for clarity, we will extend it to him. Are members content with that course of action?

Members indicated assent.

Mrs Kerr: Chair, I assure you that the panel will receive a copy of today's Hansard.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much.