

Research and Library Services



Northern Ireland Assembly

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SCHOOL TRANSFER AT AGE 14

Research and Library Service

The Education Minister has highlighted the importance of age 14 in her vision for post primary education in Northern Ireland. This paper provides an overview of the Craigavon two tier school system in which transfer currently occurs at age 14. It highlights the findings of a number of studies into operation of the system and identifies information relating to age of transfer contained in a number of key reports which cover, amongst other things, age of transfer in future post primary arrangements in Northern Ireland.

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Overview

In December 2007, the Education Minister, outlined her vision for the education system in Northern Ireland, including future transfer arrangements. Key to these was an end to academic selection and a move to 'informed election' at age 14.

Within Northern Ireland, transfer at 14 forms part of the two-tier system which has been in operation in Craigavon for over 30 years. The Minister has indicated that whilst there were '...some interesting elements in the Craigavon model' the model that she was proposing would be 'very different' and would not involve academic selection at any age.

The most widely cited study of the Craigavon two tier system concluded in 1998 that, while the system has been a success, the evidence did not suggest that it provided a better alternative to the 11+ system used throughout the rest of Northern Ireland. In particular, the study concluded that evidence did not suggest that the two-tier system provides a better educational experience for less able pupils than the 11+ system.

In 2007, the SELB commissioned a study of the controlled sector of the two tier system system by a group which included the seven school principals in the sector. The report from the group was critical of some of the conclusions drawn from the 1998 research. In particular the group objected to what it described as '...an underplaying of the popularity of the system among parents and to the suggestion that its acceptability was to any significant extent due to the possibility of "opting out" and sending children to schools in neighbouring areas where a different system operates'. The group also argued that the assessment outcomes which were referred to in the 1998 research report were not given sufficient credit, especially in the light of the high percentage of the age cohort transferring to Portadown College and Lurgan College.

In addition to highlighting a number of perceived strengths of the two-tier system, the group identified a number of weaknesses. One of these, namely the level of collaboration between schools, had also been identified in other studies of the system. A second weakness, the group suggested, was the process by which pupils gained a grammar school place. Consideration of 14+ transfer in the context of Northern Ireland as a whole was not within the groups, but the report from the group stated that:

There is a view that, although the arrangements in the Craigavon area have been successful, there is no guarantee that they would be equally so in other areas with very different geographic and demographic features, especially in more heavily populated urban areas and in particular in Greater Belfast. Nevertheless all the Principals are very strongly in favour of the Dickson Plan of two ages of transfer at 11 and 14 for Craigavon, and believe that it might usefully be considered for other broadly similar areas

Consideration of the most appropriate age for transfer has been undertaken as part of a review of post-primary arrangements which has been undertaken during the past decade, under both devolution and direct rule. A number of key documents have been published in this context, including an Assembly Committee report which identified a number of advantages and disadvantages of delayed selection systems.

The Burns and Costello reports which formed part of the review of post primary arrangements supported transfer continuing at age 11 but considered that the first major decision point about learning pathways in a pupil's education should normally be at age 14.

In developing a system to enable this to occur the Costello report recognised that a key underlying problem was that where attractive alternative provision was not available, many parents would seek a grammar school place regardless of their child's individual interests or aptitudes.

The Minister's statement on the future of education, including transfer arrangements, emphasised the role of local area planning and the possibility of a variety of provision which might include:

- access within a 11-19 school;

- transfer to an alternative 11-19 school;

- access through an 11-19 school or a post-14 school which offers the Entitlement Framework in collaboration with other schools in a learning community; or

- a local area may offer general provision in 11-14 schools followed by specialism and diversity in 14+ provision.

The Bain Report which contained recommendations in relation to future required enrolment numbers in primary years, years 8-12, and sixth forms, did not consider all of these forms of school structure. It did, however, identify six key steps to be taken in order to set up and implement the area-based planning strategy. It also called on the Department of Education to specify target dates in relation to each step.

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INTRODUCTION

In December 2007, the Education Minister outlined her vision for the education system in Northern Ireland, including future transfer arrangements. Key to these was an end to academic selection and a move to 'informed election' at age 14. In relation to the latter she stated that:

Making fundamental educational determinations for children at 11 is wrong. Such decisions for most children become irreversible. By moving the point of transition to 14 and by introducing more flexibility and agility into structures, we will make it possible for the transformed educational system to facilitate the deserved and diverse needs of children – reversing the negative demand of slotting children into a system that has historically branded some as failures and others as, potentially, successes.¹

The statement emphasised that local area planning would be key to delivering the vision and that provision might include:

access within a 11-19 school;

transfer to an alternative 11-19 school;

access through an 11-19 school or a post-14 school which offers the Entitlement Framework in collaboration with other schools in a learning community; or

a local area may offer general provision in 11-14 schools followed by specialism and diversity in 14+ provision.

The statement also made clear that an academic pathway would remain and that this would be '...accessed by intelligent, well-informed and mature election and available through modern, organisational flexibility'.² The Minister has also recently made reference to future arrangements containing a grammar stream as large as a school.

Within Northern Ireland, transfer at 14 forms part of the two-tier system which has been in operation in Craigavon for over 30 years. The Minister indicated to the Education Committee, however, that whilst there were '...some interesting elements in the Craigavon model' the model that she was proposing would be very different and would not involve academic selection at any age.³

This paper provides an overview of the two-tier system operating in Craigavon and highlights findings from a number of studies into its operation. The paper also highlights information relating to the issue of age of transfer between schools which is contained in a number of key documents relating to development of future transfer arrangements in Northern Ireland.

¹ Education Minister's statement on future transfer arrangements (4 Dec 2007)
http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/22-postprimaryarrangements-new-arrangements_pg/post_primary_arrangements-whats_new.htm

² As above

³ Education Committee Meeting 31 January 2008

THE CRAIGAVON TWO TIER SYSTEM

Origins

The origins of the two tier system in Craigavon date back to the 1960s and its structure was influenced by the development of education provision in Leicestershire, which was developed under the stewardship of the renowned educationalist Stewart Mason. A key difference between the Leicestershire system and that implemented in Northern Ireland, however, was that in Leicester all pupils transferred at 14 without a selection procedure. A further key difference was that transfer took place at 10+ in Leicestershire, meaning that children were in Junior High school for a four year period rather than the three year cycle which operates in Craigavon. In relation to its origins, a relatively early study of the the two-tier system in Craigavon explained that:

The introduction of the two-tier system referred to as the Dickson Plan, after Mr W.J. Dickson, then Director of Education in Armagh and subsequently Chief Officer of the Southern Board, was an experiment in something new in this province. It was begun at a time when there was growing opposition to selection at 11+. The new system certainly removed the need for selection at that tender age and enabled children to transfer from primary to secondary education without the necessity of a series of public examinations. It also provided an answer to the problems of accommodation and provision for sixth-form work that were beginning to emerge in the secondary (intermediate) schools at that time.⁴

Current Two Tier System and Structure

Introduction of the two-tier system in Craigavon began in 1967 and was completed by 1973. Its operation in general terms is described today in the following way:

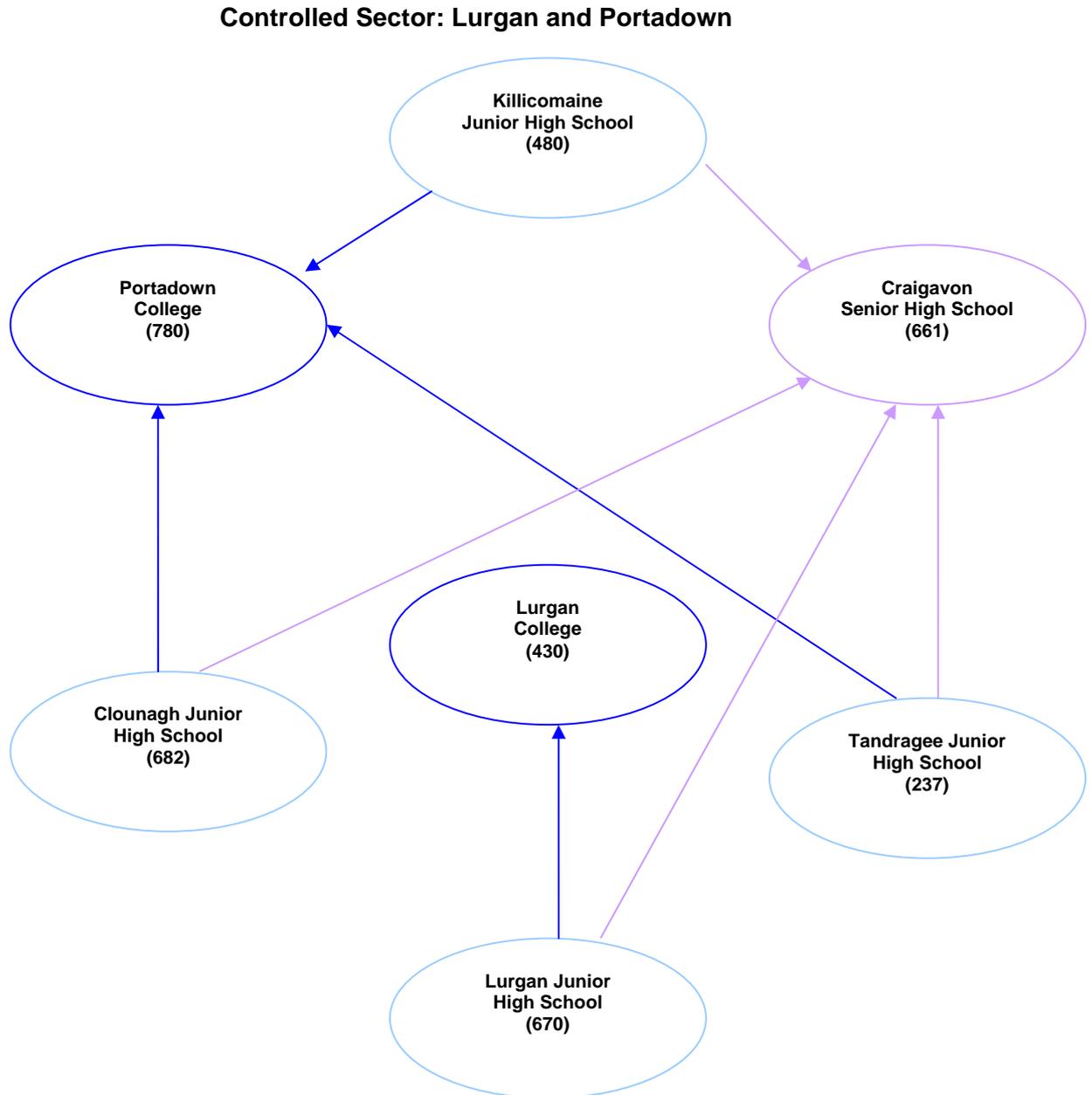
In the two-tier system the majority of pupils in the Craigavon Borough Council area and parts of Armagh City and District Council area transfer at age 11 years to Junior High Schools.⁵ These schools provide a wide range of courses appropriate to the age, ability and aptitude of all pupils. At the end of Key Stage 3 (Age 14 years) after 3 years attendance at Junior High School (Secondary) pupils normally transfer to other schools to complete their compulsory education in Key Stage 4. In the case of St Mary's High School and St Paul's High School those pupils who do not transfer to St Michael's Grammar School remain in the school for a further 2 years and follow appropriate courses which include those leading to GCSE. Pupils are

⁴ McKernan James and Sandy-Thomas M. (1981) Transfer at 14: A Study of the Craigavon Two-Tier System as an Organisational Innovation in Education Northern Ireland Council for Educational Research. Forward p (v)

⁵ Some non-selective schools in Craigavon are not part of the Two-Tier System and retain their pupils beyond the age of 14. Pupils may leave at the age of 16 (end of Year 12) or stay at school until the age of 18 (end of Year 14). The schools are: - Brownlow College (Controlled Integrated) Drumcree College (Catholic Maintained) Lismore Comprehensive Catholic Maintained

selected for admission to Senior High Schools in accordance with the admission criteria established by each individual Board of Governors.⁶

Figure 1



Numbers in brackets relate to enrolment September 2007

The current structure of schools in the controlled sector is set out in Figure 1 above. In this sector, pupils transfer from Primary Schools at age 11 to four Junior High Schools (Clounagh, Killicomaine, Lurgan and Tandragee) on a non-selective basis. All Junior High Schools in the controlled sector band pupils with each band group

⁶ SELB (2008) Guide to Parents
<http://www.selb.org/pupilparent/documents/2008/guide/Introduction.pdf>

having a number of classes within it. Normally each school has three bands with the majority of classes within the first two bands. Pupils in these two bands follow the same curriculum while there may be fewer subjects followed by pupils in the third band. Pupils may be moved from one class/band to another if the standard of their work makes it appropriate. Movement tends to be at Christmas and June of year 8.⁷

All the Controlled Junior High Schools band pupils on the basis of information provided by the Primary Schools formerly attended by the pupils. The performance information may include attainment in the KS2 test and other tests, notably literacy and numeracy. One Junior High School sets a short test before the pupils join the school and information from this is used together with the advice from the Primary Schools.

Commenting on what it regards as criticisms of the system, the SELB has clarified that:

It is not the case that in year 8 a child is placed in a class as determined by his/her achievement and that the classes are in rank order from a class containing the perceived most able to the class of the perceived least able or that pupils move frequently from one class to another.⁸

The SELB has also indicated that, whilst no specific research has been undertaken, year 8 band is not a strong predictor of destination at 14+ with differentiation in year 8 being limited to the identification of those children for whom the Northern Ireland Curriculum presents challenges.⁹

In year 10, based upon continuous assessment and examinations, Junior High Schools rank pupils and then in round-table discussions with the receiving Senior High Schools (Grammar) agree a final pupil ranking which determines which pupils will gain entry. Appeals are heard by the Independent Appeals Tribunal serviced by Board officers.

The current structure and enrolment numbers for the maintained and voluntary grammar school sector is set out in Figure 2 below. The sector consists of two 11-16 schools, which admit pupils on a non-selective basis and one Senior High School (St Michael's Grammar). As has been stated earlier, in the case of St Mary's High School and St Paul's High School, those pupils who do not transfer to St Michael's Grammar School remain in the school for a further 2 years.

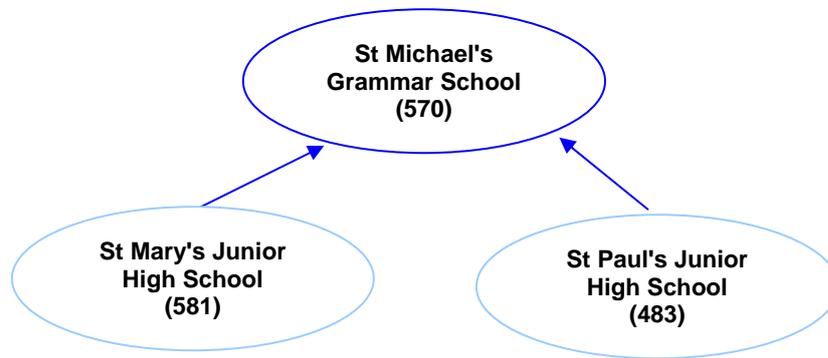
⁷ Personal Communication with SELB 8th Feb 2008

⁸ As above

⁹ As above

Figure 2

Maintained and Voluntary Grammar Sector: Lurgan



Numbers in brackets relate to enrolment September 2007

Perceived Advantages

In a memorandum to the House of Commons Select Committee in 1997, the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) highlighted what it considered to be the advantages of the system.

- in their final year of Primary School pupils complete Key Stage 2 of the Northern Ireland Common Curriculum without any distorting effect which the transfer procedure might have;
- while pupils are initially unstreamed in Junior High Schools, a sifting process takes place in the second and third years to enable more academically inclined pupils to take on a wider range of subjects
- Selection for transfer at 14 is in the first instance a matter for the parents and the pupils. By this time parents have largely assessed the abilities of their children and there is a large element of self-selection at transfer at 14+. The process appears to obviate the damage to pupils' self-esteem caused by 'failure' at 11+;
- for those not selected for transfer to Senior High Schools (Grammar) , Craigavon Senior High School offers a new experience opportunity to develop academically and socially;
- during the three years spent in Junior High Schools, the pupils mature and take on leadership roles in their third year which would otherwise be denied to them in 11-16 or 11-18 school until year 7;
- although Craigavon Senior High is a recent foundation one of the principles on which it was founded was to develop courses in collaboration with the Upper Bann Institute of Further and Higher Education whose campuses it shares in both Lurgan and Portadown;
- the two-tier systems commands the professional confidence of teachers in Primary, Junior High Schools and Senior High Schools.

STUDIES/REPORTS OF CRAIGAVON TWO TIER SYSTEM

The first significant study of the operation of the two-tier system was published in 1981. However, the most influential and widely cited study of the system was published in 1998. Recently, a report from a group established by the SELB has highlighted criticism of some of the conclusions drawn in the 1998 report.

Transfer at 14: A Study of the Craigavon Two-Tier System As An Organisational Innovation in Education.¹⁰

This report was published in 1981 by the Northern Ireland Council for Educational Research. The report made a number of recommendations, at least some of which underlined the enduring influence of Leicestershire model on development of the Craigavon two tier system. Specifically the report recommended that 'In the context of transfer from primary to Junior High at 10+ in Leicestershire, educational policy-makers might give some consideration to the age of transfer from primary to post-primary education'. The report also recommended that 'inter-school liaison be improved where ever possible, particularly between junior and senior high schools' and that there was an 'Urgent need for a reappraisal of the curriculum in the technical college sector'.¹¹

An Evaluation of the Craigavon Two Tier System¹²

The most in depth and widely cited research on the two tier system was completed in 1998. The stated purpose of this research was:

...to compare the experiences of pupils in the two tier system with pupils in the traditional 11+ system used throughout the rest of Northern Ireland. The research focused on the academic performance of pupils and the relative pressures they faced in school, and tried to assess the extent to which schools in the two-tier system were able to take advantage of their position outside the particular pressures created by the 11+ system. In addition, the research tried to assess whether or not less able pupils appeared to gain any benefit in the two-tier system in comparison with the 11+ system.¹³

A research briefing produced by the DENI identified the following key points from the research:

- Past research had indicated that the delayed selection system received a high degree of popular support in the Craigavon area. This research has found nothing to contradict that claim, but has concluded that a significant part of this

¹⁰ McKernan James and Sandy-Thomas M. (1981) Transfer at 14: A Study of the Craigavon Two-Tier System as an Organisational Innovation in Education Northern Ireland Council for Educational Research. Forward p (v)

¹¹ As above pp 105-106

¹² Alexander, J., Daly, P., Gallagher, A., Gray, C., and Sutherland, A. (1998), An evaluation of the Craigavon two-tier system. Research Report No. 12.

¹³ As above p3

popularity is based on the fact that in the Craigavon system there are a wide range of alternatives available to pupils and parents. Furthermore, there is evidence that a significant minority opt to take advantage of these alternatives.

- Comparing the attainment levels of pupils in the Craigavon system with pupils in the rest of Northern Ireland is difficult, precisely because there is so much pupil movement within and out of the two-tier schools. It would appear that a higher proportion of pupils in the Craigavon area obtain places in grammar schools, although popular estimates may be exaggerated. The three senior high/grammar schools in the area achieve creditable levels of performance which may, in fact, be even better if they do indeed include a larger proportion of the age cohort in their intake.
- There is some evidence, however, that pupils who are not selected at age 14 years are less well served by the Craigavon system, particularly in the controlled sector. The Southern Education and Library Board has taken steps in recent years to address this problem and there is already some evidence of improvement.
- The delayed selection system which operates in the Craigavon area might have provided an opportunity for schools to develop new and innovative approaches to the curriculum, inter-school cohesion and co-operation, and such areas as vocational education. While there is evidence that some of these possibilities are being realised, perhaps a little more might have been expected.
- While the delayed selection system which operates in the Craigavon area has been a success, the researchers have concluded that the evidence of this study does not suggest that it provides a better alternative to the 11+ system used throughout the rest of Northern Ireland. In particular, the evidence does not suggest that the two-tier system provides a better educational experience for less able pupils than the 11+ system.¹⁴

Report of a Study of the Controlled Sector of the Craigavon Two Tier System

In early 2007, the Southern Education and Library Board initiated a review of the two tier system in the controlled sector in order to inform its future development. The group was chaired by Dr T.W. Mulryne and consisted of the Principals of the seven schools comprising the controlled element of the two tier system. Whilst it was serviced by the SELB, the group was described as being '...entirely independent of the Board'.

In terms of the conclusions which it had reached, the report stated that the group was confident that these were 'robust'. It did, however, recognise the need for further research, particularly if consideration of the operation of the

¹⁴ DENI (1998) Research Briefing 6/98 An Evaluation of the Craigavon Two-Tier System pp1-2

system was to be used in debate on the future of post primary education in Northern Ireland. In addition, the report noted that whilst the group had access to a wide range of population and outcome statistics, it had not attempted to carry out statistical analysis similar to that upon which the 1998 report was based.

In relation to the 1998 study, the report indicated that the School Principals on the group were very critical of some of its conclusions and stated that:

Many who were closely involved in the Craigavon system at the time of the Research Report and the subsequent DENI Research Briefing felt that some of the interpretations of the evidence were unjustifiably negative. In particular there was an objection to what was seen as an underplaying of the popularity of the system among parents and to the suggestion that its acceptability was to any significant extent due to the possibility of 'opting out' and sending children to schools in neighbouring areas where a different system operates. Furthermore there was disquiet even then at a lack of recognition of the establishment of Craigavon Senior High School as an integral part of the system.

The assessment outcomes which were referred to in the Research Report were not, in the view of those involved, given sufficient credit, especially in the light of the high percentage of the age cohort transferring to Portadown College and Lurgan College (14 – 18 grammar schools). More recent evidence of outcomes from Craigavon Senior High School (perhaps not available when the research was undertaken, but to hand when the Research Report was written) was, it was felt, ignored.¹⁵

Addressing the issue of transfer at 14, the principals on the group identified the following as strengths of the system:

- The size of the system, facilitating close links between primary schools and junior high schools, and between junior high schools and senior high schools;
- The absence of perceived adverse effects on the upper primary years (Key Stage 2) caused by preparation for the 11+ transfer tests;
- The lack of any significant number of appeals against 14+ placements, partly because of the number of places made available in the selective Senior High Schools (Colleges), and partly because at that age pupils themselves have a clearer idea of the shape their education should take;
- An atmosphere of good discipline and a 'more adult' environment due to the later entry to the senior high schools;
- The opportunity given to all pupils by the fresh start at 14, leading to enhanced motivation;
- A fairer selection process for entry to the grammar schools because of the knowledge of the pupils in the junior high schools;

¹⁵ SELB (2008) Report of a Study of the Controlled Sector of the Craigavon Two Tier System

- The standards achieved at both GCSE and A level.¹⁶

In spite of these strengths, the report expressed caution against generalising from the operation of the two tier system in Craigavon to wider application throughout Northern Ireland. Noting that consideration of 14+ transfer in the context of Northern Ireland as a whole was not within its remit, the report stated that:

There is a view that, although the arrangements in the Craigavon area have been successful, there is no guarantee that they would be equally so in other areas with very different geographic and demographic features, especially in more heavily populated urban areas and in particular in Greater Belfast. Nevertheless all the Principals are very strongly in favour of the Dickson Plan of two ages of transfer at 11 and 14 for Craigavon, and believe that it might usefully be considered for other broadly similar areas.¹⁷

In addition to the perceived strengths set out in the report, it also highlighted a number of potential weaknesses. One of these was the level of collaboration between schools and the report concluded that whilst this existed between the Craigavon Controlled schools '...more could be done and more imaginative schemes contemplated'. The report also recommended that 'Further work should be undertaken on possible cross-sectoral collaboration, especially post-16'.¹⁸

A further weakness related to the process by which pupils obtain a grammar school place. The report expressed concern that the criteria for obtaining places were not identical across the junior high schools. The report explained that, as the criteria upon which access was based were 'norm-referenced' rather than 'criterion referenced',¹⁹ they could give rise to justifiable grounds for appeal. The report noted, therefore, that it may be that common tests would have to be set. Alternatively, the report suggests use might be made of the new pupil profiles/progress files, especially if they contain objective data built up over a number of years.²⁰

POST PRIMARY REVIEW DOCUMENTS AND AGE OF TRANSFER

In recent years, a number of significant policy documents have been published addressing the future of post-primary education in Northern Ireland. Some of this work has been undertaken during periods of the operation of first Assembly mandate

¹⁶ As above pp 9-10

¹⁷ As above

¹⁸ As above p17

¹⁹ 'Making a judgement in assessment is a process in which evidence is compared with some standard. The standard might be what other pupils (of the same age or experience) can do. This is *norm-referencing* and the judgement will depend on what others do as well as what the individual being assessed does. In *criterion-referencing* the standard is a description of certain kinds of performance and the judgement does not depend on what others do, but only on how the individual's performance matches up to the criterion.' Harlen W (2007) *The Quality of Learning: Assessment Alternatives for Primary Education* (Research Survey 3/4) <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Education/documents/2007/11/01/assessment.pdf>

²⁰ SELB (2008) Report of a Study of the Controlled Sector of the Craigavon Two Tier System p 10

and includes a review by the Assembly Education Committee. Reports have often been wide ranging, but this paper focuses on identifying information from these reports which is particularly relevant to the question of transfer at age 14.

THE BURNS REPORT

In September 2000, the then Minister for Education, Martin McGuinness, announced the appointment of an independent Review Body to examine the selective system of education in Northern Ireland. The Review Body on Post-Primary Education was chaired by Gerry Burns and comprised members from educational, professional and business backgrounds. A Panel of Education Advisers was also appointed to assist the Review Body in its work. In October 2001, the Review Body published a report for consultation (the Burns Report).²¹ Commenting on the age of transfer the Burns report noted that:

To a large extent the views expressed represented people's experience in their own area. A majority of people put forward reasons why transfer should continue at age eleven. Some put forward views in favour of transfer at age twelve, while those with experience of junior high schools in the Craigavon area argued for a two-tier system with a second, selective, transfer at age fourteen. In overall terms, there was no strong view that the age of transfer to post-primary education should change. Many made the point that age fourteen should be a key stage for pupils' choice of curricular pathway.²²

However, citing the 1998 research the report stated that:

From the evidence and views obtained from the consultation process and in our visits to schools, we acknowledge that the delayed selection arrangements operated in the Craigavon area avoid some of the problems of selection at age eleven arising from the Transfer Tests. In particular, selection in the Craigavon system is based largely on school work rather than on one or two external tests. However, we consider that this system also displays differences in the relative status of the grammar and secondary schools and may not best serve the needs of the least able pupils.²³

The report, which rejected selection at either age 11 or 14,²⁴ addressed the wider issue of age of transfer in the following terms:

We were asked also to consider whether eleven remains the most appropriate age for transfer from primary to post-primary education. There were those who advocated transfer at age twelve, largely on the basis of greater maturity (and ability to cope with the change), although some also made the point that this should be linked to a wider reorganisation of early years education, with the commencement of primary education being delayed to age six, in line with arrangements which operate in other

²¹ The Burns Report - Education for the 21st Century: Report by the Post-Primary Review Body was published for consultation in October 2001.

http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/22-postprimaryarrangements-new-arrangements_pg/resources/22-ppa-research_and_reports_pg/22-ppa-rap-br_pg.htm

²² As above para 4.9

²³ As above para 7.10

²⁴ As above para 7.27

European countries. Our Terms of Reference did not extend this far, but in any event we were not persuaded that there is sufficient evidence of significant educational advantage in raising the age of transfer at this stage. Such a change, in the absence of a compensating change in the commencement age for primary education, would increase primary school enrolments by some twenty-five thousand pupils, at the expense of the post-primary sector, and would have considerable staffing, resource and accommodation implications for both primary and post-primary schools. This could only properly be considered in the context of a holistic review of the arrangements for pre-school and early years education.

*We have concluded, therefore, that for the purposes of the future development of post-primary education, transfer should continue to take place at age eleven.*²⁵

A consultation exercise was undertaken by DENI on the Burns report, including on the proposal for no change in the age of transfer from primary to post-primary education. A report summarising responses to this consultation stated in relation the age of transfer that:

Not all respondents commented on this issue. However, of those that did comment, a majority of Education Partners, a majority of schools, IoD, a majority of political parties and almost all community groups considered that transfer should continue to take place at age 11.²⁶

Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education Report on the Review of Post-Primary Education in Northern Ireland.

In order to enable it to carry out an informed assessment of the recommendations of the Review Body when they were announced, the Committee for Education undertook an inquiry into post-primary education in Northern Ireland.²⁷ The review covered a number of key issues including the advantages and disadvantages of delayed selection systems, in relation to which it stated:

Many submissions drew attention to the alternative forms of school organisation operating in many European countries. These combine features of the bi-partite and all-ability systems outlined above. In the Northern Ireland context such systems might involve all pupils attending local 11-14 schools and then subsequently transferring to 14-18 institutions. The 14-18 institutions could be either: (a) all-ability multi-pathway organisations based in the existing grammar or secondary schools; or (b) separate bi-partite

²⁵ As above paras 9.9 - 9.10

²⁶ DENI (2002) Review of Post-Primary Education - Report on Responses to Consultation. para 3.18 <http://www.deni.gov.uk/22-ppa-rcbrresponsestoconsultation.pdf>

²⁷ Northern Ireland Assembly – Committee for Education (2001) Report on the Review of Post-Primary Education in Northern Ireland 2001 (Volume 1 Report and Proceedings of the Committee Relating to the Report). http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/education/reports/report01-01_Vol1.htm#3

institutions based in the existing schools - in this second case additional resourcing would be required to achieve parity of esteem and provision; or (c) 'lower' schools in which pupils stayed until age 16 before transferring to linked Sixth Form Colleges, Further Education Colleges or the sixth forms of bi-partite institutions.

The Committee noted a number of *advantages* which could result from moves towards this form of educational organisation. These included:

- the maintenance of greater flexibility during the early teenage years regarding the educational routes eventually to be taken;
- the extent to which the curriculum would map readily onto Key Stage 3 and reflect the current 'breaks' in the Key Stage system by encapsulating Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3;
- the extent to which, at a time when GCSE is losing its place as a terminal examination and more young people are being encouraged to stay on post-16, the 14-18 curriculum could be increasingly planned as a set of more integrated experiences;
- the greater opportunities for schools to differentiate their curriculum and specialise in their age group;
- the likely reduction in 'backwash' effects on the primary school curriculum;
- the likelihood that pupils themselves would have greater knowledge of when they intended to leave school, what route they wanted to take and what efforts they would need to make to secure their objectives;
- the greater scope for developing and negotiating parental/pupil views about the most appropriate routes to opt for post-14;
- the fact that some of the advantages for educational organisation related to selection and curriculum differentiation would be delayed but not abolished;
- the possibility of considerably increasing the number of more 'academically-focused' places by locating them in existing grammar schools (which would have space released by the removal of the 11, 12 and 13 age-groups); and
- the potential for developing more vocationally appropriate curricula for those who opted for these routes post-14.

As with other alternatives the Committee also noted a number of *disadvantages* associated with these options. These included:

- the potential disruption caused by a change of school at age 14 which might cause difficulties in planning an 11-16 curriculum (a possible way of reducing this might be to confine transfers to those who wanted to move into more 'academically-focused' schools at age 14);

- the fact that as selection would be delayed but not abolished, it would still be necessary to develop systems (perhaps combining continuous assessment with summative information about pupil performance) for the purposes of selection; pupils and parents might recognise these as fairer but they would still create some stress and anxiety;
- the need to ensure that all 11-14 schools made strong and appropriately-tailored provision for more able pupils;
- the need for good liaison between 11-14 and 14-18 institutions;
- the possibility that more management teams might be required, depending on how many 11-14 and 14-18 institutions were created; and
- the need for further expenditure on 14-18 institutions - 'academically-focused' institutions might well require some additional facilities whilst more 'vocationally-focused' institutions would need to ensure they were resourced to levels which gave them good prospects of ensuring parity of esteem - some further link-ups with local Further Education Colleges might help here.²⁸

The Costello Report

In June 2003, the then Minister with responsibility for Education, Jane Kennedy, announced the membership of the Working Group which she had established to recommend options for future arrangements for post-primary education. The remit of the Group, which was chaired by Mr Steve Costello, was:

To take account of the responses to the consultation on the Burns Report, including the diversity of views on academic selection, and provide advice on options for future arrangements for post-primary education.²⁹

The Group published a report containing recommendations in January 2004. Addressing the issue of transfer at age 11 the report stated that:

We have outlined earlier our view that the first major decision point about learning pathways in a pupil's education should normally be at age 14, when pupils are beginning to choose the courses to be taken for external examinations. From that point, provision should increasingly reflect the pupil's personal choice of learning pathway and his/her needs, aptitudes, interests and aspirations. It nevertheless remains the position that the physical transfer of pupils from primary to post-primary education will normally take place at age 11. This is the most common age of transfer in other European regions. Responses to the Burns proposals confirmed that this is an appropriate arrangement. The Working Group shares this view,

²⁸ As above paras 4.5.1 - 4.5.3

²⁹ DENI (2004) Future Post-Primary Arrangements in Northern Ireland Advice from the Post-Primary Review Working Group http://www.deni.gov.uk/22-ppa_costelloreport.pdf

though alternative arrangements could be developed as long as they meet the requirements of the Entitlement Framework and criteria and are agreed at local level.

Under our proposals, the schools to which pupils will be transferring at age 11 will offer a broad, general education in Key Stage 3, based on the CCEA proposals for the Key Stage 3 statutory core curriculum, together with extension courses and enrichment opportunities to widen and develop interests and which reflect a school's ethos and emphasis. At Key Stage 4 and beyond, they will offer a wider variety of learning pathways, whether in-house or via collaboration with other schools, the FE sector or other providers. There will also be increased scope for pupils to change school at the end of either Key Stage 3 or Key Stage 4, where pupils and their parents so choose in order to better meet pupils' needs, aptitudes, interests and aspirations. These decisions would be informed by the Pupil Profile and with advice from the school.³⁰

The report, commenting further on the issue of the age at which decisions on education should be taken stated that:

There is a widely held view that the age of 11 is too early for significant decisions to be taken which commit pupils to particular learning pathways for at least 5 years. Children mature at different rates and their career interests and aspirations will not emerge until much later. It is for this reason that we see age 14 as the earliest point at which major decisions about learning pathways should begin to be taken.³¹

The report added that:

The Group would recommend the immediate removal of the Transfer Test but for the realisation that this would lead, in the short term, to very substantial over-subscription in a number of post-primary schools and considerable upheaval in the system generally. The key underlying problem is that, where attractive alternative provision is not available, many parents seek a grammar school place regardless of their child's individual interests or aptitudes. The Group's recommendations aim to address that imbalance by ensuring that all post-primary schools, whilst offering provision that may differ in ethos and emphasis, are regarded as of equal value. In addition, the present arrangements tend to accentuate the decision at age 11. Rather, the emphasis should be on the decisions at age 14 and on the important role of the Pupil Profile in helping pupils and parents make informed choices. Age 14 is the stage at which most pupils will be making their first significant decisions about the courses to be taken for external examinations.³²

³⁰ As above paras 7.1-7.2

³¹ As above para 7.7

³² As above para 7.9

SCHOOLS FOR THE FUTURE: FUNDING, STRATEGY, SHARING (THE BAIN REPORT)

As has been highlighted earlier, the Ministers statement on the future of education indicated that a range of schools would exist in order to meet on local needs. These included 11-14 schools which might be similar to the Junior Highs Schools which form part of the Craigavon two tier system.

The Strategic Review of Education, which examined education funding, and the strategic planning and organisation of the schools' estate (taking particular account of curriculum changes and demographic trends), did not, however, provide guidance on school size for such institutions. Rather the Bain Report set out review the following recommendations in relation to enrolment in primary years, years 8-12, and sixth forms.

The 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.
(b) The 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.³³

The Minister's statement also indicated that area based planning would be used to determine the type of provision required.

The Department of Education should establish a provisional timetable, to be refined and taken forward by the Education and Skills Authority, specifying target dates for the following key steps in setting up and implementing the area-based planning strategy: (a) the Department of Education's strategic framework of vision, policy, principles, and guidelines; (b) the specification of local areas; (c) the review of local provision; (d) the initiation and conclusion of local planning; (e) the submission of area proposals to the Education and Skills Authority; (f) the finalised and approved area plans; and (g) the implementation of individual plans for the estate as a whole.³⁴

8th Februray 2008

³³ DENI (2006) Schools for the Future: Funding, Strategy, Sharing Report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education. p 100 http://www.deni.gov.uk/review_of_education.pdf

³⁴ As above p 123