Sustainable Schools Policy & Area Based Planning – How Can They Promote Shared Education?

SELF Conference Paper (Workshop C)

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Two workshops were held on these themes at the SELF conference and were facilitated by Tony Gallagher and Gavin Duffy. The first workshop was mainly comprised of principals and teachers from primary schools, whereas the second was mainly comprised of principals and teachers from post primary schools. This short briefing note tries to capture some of the main themes to emerge in both conversations. As a starting point, it is worth noting that there were some differences expressed in the two workshops. It is likely that this was explained by the different balance of primary and post primary participants in both.

High on their concerns were the lack of genuine consultation in the area planning process, the lack of information they were provided with, and with the lack of options for sharing they were aware of. They have experienced the process to date as being top-down, sector led and with little attempt seriously to encourage locally tailored options. One group even highlighted that CCMS and the Education Authority (EA) were running their current processes to different timetables.

In the first, mainly primary, workshop there was concern at the complete lack of information they had, not least as this reduced their capacity to engage with the process. Among the post primary schools already engaged in shared education work there seemed to be more confidence they would hold their own, even in the face of contrary recommendations from the sectors.

There was a sense, however, that schools would appreciate an independent source of ideas and information, and links to practice in other parts of Northern Ireland or beyond, to help them engage more pro-actively in the area planning process. This might also help make the consultation process more effective: at present most took the view that decisions were already made, that the consultation process was a bit of a 'fig-leave' and that most decisions would be confirmed unchanged at the end of the process.

They were also critical of the commitment of the politicians: they supported shared education, but were not showing much evidence of shared practice amongst themselves, and there was little evidence that shared solutions were being encouraged through the area planning process - someone said the only difference they could see this time, as opposed to previous processes, was a single bullet-point on a slide in a presentation which mentioned shared education. The politicians also allowed the EA to force schools to plan three years budgets to reduce deficits that were caused by funding cuts, while the politicians themselves cannot agree anything more than a one year budget.

The fact that the Shared Education Law is now in place may make a difference: the Department has lost a judicial review once on the operation of the area planning process, so may be loath to risk losing again.

The current consultation process has 'dealt with' the various criticisms of the first round by reducing the amount of information in the public domain, so some suggested that an important test of the process will emerge when the first action plans are published.

Some also believed that area planning decisions should also take some account of the wider local economic consequences of school closures.

A theme in each workshop was the lack of trust they held for the Department or Education authority, and this was expressed more strongly by the second, mainly post primary, group. Both workshops cited a recent communication seeking their views on whether they would like greater devolution of budgets. As a matter of principle, they were well inclined towards this, seeing this as an existing advantage held by voluntary grammar schools, but they uniformly wondered if DE and EA were working to some agenda whereby they would follow up budget devolution with additional significant responsibilities, especially one with ever increasing resource implications: covering the cost of special education needs was generally cited as the example of this.

In the second workshop group, there was more interest in the option of pooling resources as a way a shared network might access some shared resource, although someone did warn that this could become the focus of dispute within a network if someone felt they were not getting a fair access to this resource. There was also some support for the idea of pooling resource to hire a School Business Manager, as is common in multi-academy trusts in England, with the grammar school participants highlighting the value of admin support in their schools.

Primary and post primary groups differed in their views on the redeployment of the circa £100m allocated to cover the cost of school transport. Among the primary group a few expressed the view that if the costs of travelling to, for example, IME schools was going to be met, then the system should also cover the cost of transport to other sectors, for example, grammar schools. In the post primary group there was a consensus that the current costs favoured grammar schools and that it was reasonable to ask parents to make a bigger contribution to the cost of transport: this consensus did include some from the grammar sector.

The groups differed also in relation to an element of their formula funding being ring-fenced to support shared education work. All were agreeable with the idea in principle, but the primary participants felt that it would not work in practice as the EA continually pressed them to allocate their budget in a way which would reduce their deficits, whatever priorities the Department might have intended in the formula. The post primary participants generally expressed less concern about this pressure.

Both groups were also critical of the ETI, though in different ways: the primary participants felt that the ETI took a different few of priorities than the EA, and the main consequence for the primary schools was that they felt pulled in different directions, and criticised almost no matter what they did. For the post-primary participants, a bigger concern was that ETI inspectors were inconsistent in the way they talked about or evaluated shared education practice: these inconsistencies made it difficult for schools to steer a consistent path as they received different advice or criticism.

Both groups were highly critical of the procurement process operated by the EA and readily produced examples of situations where there had been significant time delays and, usually, significantly higher costs, as a consequence of going through the official process. There was mild interest in the possibility of some school networks running their own procurement process.

Two final points emerged in the second workshop: participants were frustrated because all the personnel that had once known in the ELB had seemed to move or leave, and it was sometimes difficult to find the appropriate person to talk to about an issue when they contacted the EA. They felt there was a need for some support system to provide a framework for CPD, although this did not mean they wanted it delivered in the old way.

As a final note in the conversation, they contrasted the way they were treated at SELF - where they felt respected as professionals - in comparison with their experience of other contexts within the education system.