

ANGUS COUNCIL

POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE
EDUCATION COMMITTEE

10 February 1998
10 March 1998

REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

Report No 181/98

PUBLIC EDUCATION IN SCOTLAND INTO THE MILLENNIUM - TASK GROUP 2

1 RECOMMENDATIONS

- a In order to comply with the timescale set by the Task Group, it is recommended that the Policy and Resources Committee authorises me to send the attached response to CoSLA.
- b It is further recommended that this report be considered by the Education Committee for its interest.

2 BACKGROUND

Reference is made to the meeting of the Education Committee on 27 January 1998 when Report No 97/98 was approved. That report is also being considered by the Policy and Resources Committee.

CoSLA and the Teachers' Unions have launched a joint enquiry into Public Education in Scotland into the Millennium. The intention is to examine issues through written evidence from a wide range of partner organisations and individuals, backed up by oral evidence from key interests. The enquiry has established four Task Group, three of whom wrote to the Council in time for draft responses to be submitted to the Education Committee at its meeting on 27 January 1998 (see Report No 97/98). The fourth request - from Task Group 2 - was received in mid January, with a requested response date of 20 February 1998. The time to prepare a considered response has therefore been exceptionally short.

The response attached (appendix) has been prepared within the constraints of time as described above.

3 CONSULTATION

This report and its appendices have been the subject of consultation with the Chief Executive and the Directors of Law and Administration and Finance and Personnel.

JIM ANDERSON
DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

BACKGROUND PAPERS

No background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) were relied on to any material extent in preparing the above report.

APPENDIX

JAA/CJ

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1 INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

- 1.1 This response has been compiled within an exceptionally tight time-scale and one which - given other demands on staff - has precluded any opportunity for measured deliberation between officers of the Council or within consultative staff group. It should be seen therefore very much as one of several preliminary contributions to what, it is hoped, will be an important national debate.
- 1.2 The issues identified by Task Group 2 represent a comprehensive and ambitious list and an immensely ambitious agenda which will be difficult to overtake before the new millennium is upon us.
- 1.3 When the proposed remits of all four Task Group are reviewed as a group, the overall impression is one of an overwhelming agenda which cannot be easily addressed without losing a sense of focus. It is suggested therefore that the issues which have been identified should be considered very much as background to the work of this particular Task Group, and that further consideration be given to identifying which critical areas require to be addressed.

2 DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS AND PROJECTIONS

- 2.1 Over lengthy periods of time, there are bound to be significant population changes; one inescapable corollary of this is the need to review the location of schools from time to time.
- 2.2 Any review of school provision will almost inevitably lead to identification of locations which no longer have as great a need for a school as once was the case, and other locations which now have a pressing need for a school but wherein none presently exists. In order to address this situation, it seems reasonable to suggest that education authorities need to be empowered to review and adjust the spread of school building in their own areas. To do this, a major public awareness campaign may well be necessary, but this itself will only be effective if additional resources are also available to temper any proposed school closures with off-setting improvements and/or new school buildings (see also Section 4 below).
- 2.3 As far as Angus is concerned, the overall projection is for a stable population; however, this overall trend will undoubtedly mask potentially major fluctuations from one settlement to another and it seems inevitable that over a period of, say, 20 years there will be significant shifts in population at a very local level. In the case of a rural Council, such shifts - even small shifts - can have quite dramatic effects on settlements, particularly small rural settlements. For many years, the trend here has been for fewer and fewer people to live in the most remote of our rural areas and, although there may be some evidence of a reversal of this trend in some areas, it is one which

potentially poses most difficulties and tensions between educational requirements and community empowerment.

3 COMPARISON OF NEEDS AND AVAILABLE RESOURCES

- 3.1 This area is one about which it is difficult to be absolutely objective. For example, it is impossible to quantify "needs" without some subjective view, say, about the ideal maximum class size. There are many who would argue that average class sizes at present ought to be significantly lower and if such an argument were to hold sway, then the "needs" of the education service would increase dramatically from current resourcing levels.
- 3.2 It does not seem unreasonable, therefore, to propose that some parameters should be agreed at a national level, and that these parameters should provide a framework for local authority planning. In many ways this already happens and there is much to be said for a continuation of current arrangements in order to ensure as much stability within the education system as possible.
- 3.3 It is therefore suggested that the current arrangements for calculating grant supported expenditure should be continued, albeit that regular and critical reviews of the details of these arrangements should quite properly be undertaken by an objective body.
- 3.4 Recent years have seen a quite unacceptable series of crisis budget savings exercises having to be effected on an annual basis. The government should be strongly encouraged to give a high priority to ensuring that local Councils are enabled to plan in advance, and the proposed three-year budgeting approach is one which has much to commend it.

4 PRESSURES RESULTING FROM CAPITAL INVESTMENT REQUIREMENTS

- 4.1 The property assets attributable to Councils from their school buildings are enormous. The need to maintain these assets must be fully recognised, as should the inevitability of having to replace some buildings periodically, either as a result of population shifts or as a result of dilapidation.
- 4.2 The tight constraints on capital funding which have been applied to Councils over several years, have made it impossible to address adequately this issue. Recent government funding allocations are now offering some small help, but it will be essential that these levels of funding are continued for many years, or that alternative means of funding are found which are sustainable.
- 4.3 Current PFI proposals are interesting, but there remains some doubt as to the effect in the longer term on the provision of a public education service, particularly with some schools possibly having been built through a PFI route, and others through a more traditional route.

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