

ANGUS COUNCIL

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

22 AUGUST 2000

“IMPROVING OUR SCHOOLS” – A CONSULTATION PAPER ON NATIONAL PRIORITIES FOR SCHOOLS EDUCATION IN SCOTLAND

REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

ABSTRACT

This report seeks Committee approval for the terms of a response to the Scottish Executive.

1 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Education Committee:

- a notes the publication of the Scottish Executive’s consultation paper on national priorities for schools education in Scotland (copies of the consultation paper are available in the Members’ Lounge)
- b welcomes the long overdue realisation by central government that a national framework is required to enable some sense to be made of the current incoherent patchwork of national educational initiatives
- c approves the terms of the enclosed response to the consultation paper (Appendix)

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 For several years now schools have been enjoined by representatives of national government to engage in a meaningful process of development planning.
- 2.2 Over the same period, education authorities have engaged in an annual process of service planning.
- 2.3 Whilst endorsing in absolute terms the desirability of school development planning and education service planning, these processes have been bedevilled by the growing tendency of central government to introduce new initiatives with little prior notice, with bewildering frequency and – occasionally, it appears - based on little other than political expedience or whim.
- 2.4 In these circumstances there have been calls for some time for the government itself to provide the key missing ingredient in the development/service planning process – a national approach to prioritising educational developments.
- 2.5 In April of this year, the Scottish Executive belatedly responded to these calls by publishing a paper on national priorities for schools education in Scotland. Copies of this consultation paper are available for perusal in the Members’ Lounge.

- 2.6 The consultation paper – although long overdue – is to be welcomed for the opportunity it offers to ensure the government is held responsible for the many educational initiatives which it promotes.

3 RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION PAPER

- 3.1 Responses to the consultation paper are sought by 31 August 2000.
- 3.2 As members of the Education Committee have noted on many previous occasions in recent years, the sheer volume of new initiatives promoted by central government means that there is insufficient opportunity to consult widely with staff before constructing responses to consultation papers of this type. The attached draft response has been compiled therefore without extensive staff consultation.

4 CONSULTATION

- 4.1 In accordance with the Standing Orders of the Council this report has been the subject of consultation with the Chief Executive, the Director of Finance and the Director of Law & Administration.

Jim Anderson
Director of Education

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

ANGUS COUNCIL
EDUCATION COMMITTEE

22 AUGUST 2000

**“IMPROVING OUR SCHOOLS” – CONSULTATION PAPER ON NATIONAL PRIORITIES FOR
SCHOOLS EDUCATION IN SCOTLAND**

1 GENERAL COMMENTS

- 1.1 For several years now, schools have been enjoined by representatives of national government to engage in a meaningful process of development planning.
- 1.2 Over the same period, education authorities have refined their own service planning arrangements.
- 1.3 Whilst endorsing in absolute terms the desirability of school development planning and education authority service planning, these processes have been bedevilled by the growing tendency of central government to introduce new initiatives with little prior notice, with bewildering frequency and – occasionally, it appears – based on little other than political expedience or whim.
- 1.4 In these circumstances, there have been calls for some time for the government itself to provide the key missing ingredient in the development/service planning process – a national approach to prioritising educational developments. This consultation paper is therefore long overdue.

2 CATEGORISATION OF NATIONAL PRIORITIES

- 2.1 The difficulty of embarking on the task of creating a framework of national educational priorities for the first time cannot be overestimated.
- 2.2 The authors of the consultation paper are to be congratulated on producing a simple and easily understood categorisation of national priorities into:
 - Key Outcomes
 - Key Inputs
 - Action Areas
- 2.3 If the above categorisation is to be used, it will however be important to avoid inappropriately rigid or mechanistic approaches to performance measurement.
- 2.4 It will also be important to develop transparent audit mechanisms which can be used objectively to identify “Action Areas” as part of a systematic and continuous process.

3 KEY OUTCOMES

- 3.1 As soon as one examines the proposed key outcomes one is faced with the tensions between simplicity/attainability on the one hand and completeness/complexity on the other. To have any hope of success the framework of national priorities needs to be capable of being readily subsumed into the consciousness of all key stakeholders, and to be described in ways which enable the degree of success attained in achieving the stated objectives to be easily identified. Equally, the educational process is a complex one and if the range of key outcomes is unduly restricted, there is a possibility that this in turn may lead to educational provision being skewed in undesirable ways, possibly resulting in an unacceptably narrow experience being provided for children and young people.

- 3.2 The Key Outcomes suggested are perfectly sensible and represent a reasonably wide range of activities – mostly related to the cognitive domain.
- 3.3 Notwithstanding the tensions described in paragraph 3.1 above, there would be merit in including some reference to the affective domain, and in particular to the desirability of helping our young people to develop the kinds of attitudes and dispositions which will be essential for the promotion of a fairer and more tolerant society which genuinely embraces Social Inclusion.
- 3.4 One obvious way to resolve the tensions inherent in any national framework is to set out explicitly the need for individual education authorities to define their own key outcomes in certain areas, and indeed – when appropriate – for individual schools to do the same.
- 3.5 Measurement of Key Outcomes
- 3.5.1 There are some arrangements already in place which will inevitably be used in some way to measure performance – primarily Standard Grade and Higher Still results. Given the enormous effort which goes into managing this system of national qualifications, it is perfectly reasonable that it should be used in a variety of ways to measure the performance of the whole education system, as well as the performance of individual education authorities, individual schools and individual pupils. Neither is it unreasonable that performance targets should be set using examination passes as a measure. However, care needs to be taken that such measurements as are used offer an accurate reflection of pupils' attainment. The current target setting regime is perceived by schools as having been imposed centrally and there is therefore less of a sense of ownership over the process than would be ideal if a genuine scheme of national priorities could be developed; equally – with hindsight – it appears that the somewhat arbitrary measures used (eg number of pupils attaining five or more Standard Grades at Bands 1 or 2) are liable to narrow unnecessarily the focus of schools, teachers and individual pupils. Given the ease with which statistical data on examination results can now be accessed and analysed there would be merit in looking for ways in which the measures used could be amended to ensure that each pupil has an incentive to strive to achieve the best she/he can in all subjects (eg at present a pupil attaining four Band 1s and three Band 3s fails to register as a "success" in terms of the school's target for Credit passes, unlike the pupil who attains five Band 2s and two Band 5s. Using grade point averages (or grade point totals), the former pupil would register as having been much more successful than the latter).
- 3.5.2 The desire to measure the performance of certain groups in society is understandable, and can be given cautious support. One obvious example is the measurement of attainment of young people in the care of a local authority. If one becomes too specific, however, there is a danger that the measurement itself will begin to skew the educational process in unintended (and possibly detrimental) ways : one example of this may be the Scottish Executive objective (within its Social Justice Strategy) to raise the Standard Grade performance of the 20% with lowest attainment relative to the performance of higher achievers. This objective might have been better expressed in absolute terms so that it does not have the tendency to lead to a dumbing down uniformity.
- 3.5.3 The use of 5-14 Attainment levels also seems inevitable, although clearly depending on whatever decisions the Executive finally takes about 5-14 Assessment – the precise ways in which this information is obtained may change.
- 3.5.4 Measurement of school attendance levels is also a reasonable approach, and in this context the simpler the measure the better. Attempts to date to classify non attendance as authorised and unauthorised have been of little real value in helping to address truancy. That truancy needs to be addressed is, of course, accepted wholeheartedly. However, in terms of a simple, easily understood

national measure, the percentage attendance figure for each school is more reliable and more useful than any other.

- 3.5.5 It is also fair to measure the frequency of outcomes which we aim to minimise or eliminate, eg number of violent incidents (including racist incidents), number of “unsatisfactory” HMI findings, number of complaints made by parents (although a measure of this type is almost certain to be more meaningful the more locally it is analysed).
- 3.5.6 It is critical that the educational process does not become dominated by those aspects of it which can be measured, only because such measurement is possible. There are many important outcomes which are difficult to describe and even more difficult to measure meaningfully. Any system of national priorities needs to flag up essential and desirable features, albeit that reporting on these features is almost certainly best left to individual education authorities and individual schools (who have developed expertise in self evaluation using “How Good is Our School?”)

4 KEY INPUTS

- 4.1 It is likely to be much easier to measure inputs than it will be to measure outcomes. However, it is vital to maintain the focus on outcomes and not to become bogged down in an excessively bureaucratic concentration on prescriptive approaches to inputs – which would, of course, stifle creativity and make the Scottish education service so much the poorer.
- 4.2 Nonetheless, it is accepted that input (in general terms) can be a key ingredient of success.
- 4.3 One obvious input which appears to have been omitted from the consultation paper is that of overall funding. This omission should be rectified, and should be linked with the need to secure Best Value from whatever funding is made available.
- 4.4 Another important input is the overall policy framework, and in particular the stability of that framework. Some recognition of the need for a national framework to demonstrate planned change (rather than a random rash of initiatives) would be welcome.
- 4.5 The proposal to include reference to investment in buildings as one of the key inputs is welcomed and supported wholeheartedly. Once again, this particular input should be linked with the need to secure Best Value from, in this case, capital investment.
- 4.6 Just as there are some outcomes which are easier to measure than others, so too is this true of inputs. The reference to a professional well motivated staff as a key input is welcome, as are references to engaging parents, positive ethos and schools as safe environments. None of these inputs will be easy to measure, nor should measurement itself become the be-all and end-all; it should be sufficient to highlight these inputs as priorities and to look for appropriate indicators of success within each.

5 ACTION AREAS

- 5.1 In some ways, this category of priority is redundant : specific issues should be capable of being flagged up either in terms of Key Outcomes or of Key Inputs. However, the practicalities of presentation may well mean that a separate category of this type could be helpful, particularly in terms of ensuring there are not too many short-term initiatives introduced.
- 5.2 Of the three areas identified, each would benefit from being further developed before appearing within any national framework. The following preliminary comments may be helpful:

- attainment of boys and girls (already referred to within Key Outcomes) is a genuine area of concern and one which has national resonance
- primary/secondary transition (relating to Attainment in S1/S2) is also a genuine issue but one which might benefit from a wider look at learning and teaching including current arrangements for pre-service training of teachers and the exceptionally restrictive pigeon-holing of teachers into ever narrower subject boundaries
- curriculum priorities can obviously be highlighted, although some care needs to be taken about how these are identified and about how they are addressed without skewing the overall curriculum in unintended ways

5.3 It would be all too easy to identify other Action Areas : initially the number of these in any national framework should be limited.

6 GAELIC MEDIUM EDUCATION

6.1 Gaelic medium education provides a good example of the practical issues which will inevitably arise as the national framework evolves. It is perfectly reasonable for the government to commit itself to making Gaelic medium education a national priority, but the corollary is that the government must provide adequate resources to deliver Gaelic medium education, and will require to set in place a framework for evaluating success and for ensuring sustainability.

7 OTHER ISSUES

7.1 Frequency of Review

Given the commitment to three year budgeting and given also the need for promoting a national framework with a significant degree of stability, a triennial review of the proposed national framework would be appropriate.

7.2 Benchmarking Information

The commitment to developing an approach to value added measurement of performance is supported. It seems clear that there is much development work still required in the whole area of benchmarking, and the Executive should not be unduly hasty, therefore, in attempting to specify precise benchmarks quite yet.

7.3 Timetable for Implementation

The timetable as set out is fairly ambitious. Interestingly, specific months are scheduled for the completion of certain tasks by education authorities and schools, whereas the task of Ministers is to be completed in "Autumn 2000." Previous experience with commitments of this type suggest that Autumn may well be as late as December, and if that is the case then clearly the rest of the timetable becomes less easy to meet. Given that it is more important to get the process right than it is to get it started there might be merit in building in some flexibility (or possibly even in pushing all the dates back by precisely 12 months).

