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**RE: Providing Pathways - Draft Strategic Area Plan for School Provision 2017-2020**

**Introduction**

The Community Relations Council (CRC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Education Authority’s consultation on the Draft Strategic Area Plan for School Provision 2017-2020.

CRC has a specific interest in how the strategic planning of education on an area-based approach can support and increase levels of sharing on a cross-community sectoral basis, whilst contributing to better educational outcomes and sustainable communities. CRC has previously provided policy comment on education in the context of a society emerging from conflict and its contribution to peacebuilding and reconciliation. CRC has also cited results from attitudinal studies and academic research when evidencing support for increased opportunities for sharing and integration within the education system – by pupils, teachers and parents. CRC concluded that despite the aspirations of many to educate children in a mixed religious, integrated and shared environment, education continues to operate on the basis of parallel provision. CRC therefore believes this current consultation process provides a further opportunity to reflect on these hopes and to strategically enhance shared and integrated education in a society that continues to emerge from conflict.

**Policy Context**

The current draft Programme for Government 2016-2020 includes a number of outcomes and indicators with a community relations focus which must influence the strategic area planning of education. Outcomes, indicators and delivery plans which aim to increase respect, build and increase shared space and promote reconciliation across society are important, and especially so for those with responsibility for planning the educational future of our children and young people. CRC is therefore pleased to see reference to the relevant peacebuilding indicators within the draft documentation as well as the statement that ‘all managing authorities and educational sector support groups will, in their plans’ be seeking to support the Minister in the delivery of the outcomes contained in the Programme for Government’. Furthermore, whilst indicators and related delivery plans for integrated and shared education sit with a Senior Responsible Office in The Executive Office (TEO), CRC expects a close working relationship across all levels of government – this is a task for everyone.

Other existing policies are important in educational planning. The Together Building a United Community Strategy, as well as commitments in The Fresh Start Agreement on Integrated and Shared Education are important approaches which need to be given attention to during this current process. The Shared Education Bill and the Shared Education Policy emanating from the Department of Education (DE) earlier in 2016 must also influence area planning. Additionally the report from the Independent Review of Integrated Education has not yet been made public. This in-complete sequence has the potential to limit opportunities for influencing structural changes to the schools estate in terms of integration and enhanced sharing. This would be a missed chance and CRC would like the Education Authority to examine how it and the various steering and working groups will consider recommendations when it is available. The current Private Members Bill on Integrated Education also has the potential to recommend changes for Integrated Education.

Other policy andlegislative forces include DE’s Community Relations Equity and Diversity Policy, the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989[[1]](#footnote-1) and international law[[2]](#footnote-2) e.g. Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child[[3]](#footnote-3) is of particular relevance in relation to sharing and preparation for a diverse society.

All of the above must be taken into account as the area planning process progresses.

**Practice Context**

CRC continues to be a strong advocate for ‘practice influencing policy’ and support the view that best practice on integration and sharing should influence strategic planning. The practice developed within and between schools, across a range of communities and geographical areas should form part of the planning environment when considering what could be done i.e. what is happening, what has already been achieved and where traction exists for further change. Small increases in the number of integrated schools, as well as ongoing and new sharing between schools (through a range of programme interventions[[4]](#footnote-4)) are constant reminders that the aspirations of children and young people, parents and teachers, to have more integration and sharing in education is not diminishing. These ambitions must be seen as drivers for policy and structural change – changes that will affect both structural and cultural transformation within education.

**General Comments**

Firstly, CRC welcomes the inclusion of explicit objectives which, if actively pursued, have the potential to increase opportunities for sharing and integration. Those which resonate with the building of strong community relations are to ‘Identify realistic, innovative and creative solutions to address educational need, including opportunities for shared schooling and jointly managed schools on a cross-sectoral basis’ and ‘Maximise the use and sharing of the existing schools’ estate including potential for shared campuses and consider co-location of mainstream and special schools’.

It is important to set out early on the vision and goals to be achieved.

CRC is pleased that all the educational bodies involved in the area planning process were able to agree the theme of ‘Promoting cooperation, collaboration and sharing across all sectors’. This sets an important marker for the direction of travel for the schools estate over this planning period. CRC is particularly pleased that the Area Planning Working Groups were able to identify a number of key issues which are significant to the building of strong community relations i.e. ‘need to encourage, facilitate and promote Shared Education’ and ‘Duty to encourage and facilitate the development of sustainable provision in the Integrated and Irish Medium sectors’. These issues have been carried across into the evaluation of all Area Planning Districts as identified issues and subsequently each district has committed to developing a proposal which will:

* Encourage and facilitate sustainable Irish Medium and Integrated schools; and
* Promote shared education solutions which provide sustainable schools.

CRC looks forward to seeing proof of these commitments when firm proposals have been developed for further consultation. Only then will CRC be able to give an opinion as to how successful the Education Authority and its working groups have been at promoting these aims and objectives at local level.

**Planning Structures**

The Northern Ireland Audit Office’s (NIAO) review of Area Planning (2015) highlighted concerns about a sense of disconnect with decision makers and non-full participation of other sectors in the process. The report also reported that this led to ‘resistance to change in many areas’.

Therefore the creation of new structures e.g. Area Planning Working Groups which have ensured wider participation and increased inclusivity from all sectors and educational representative bodies is an encouraging development. Exclusion and inconsistency in approach (membership) is not good for strategic planning - all voices and proposals should be heard and considered. These structures should be reviewed throughout the process to ensure they continue to be representative and inclusive, and to ensure a wide range of proposals are being considered.

**Engagement**

Whilst recognising this draft Strategic Area Plan is at the early stages of development and firm proposals will come at a later stage in the process, CRC is interested in what actions are being taken to promote dialogue and engagement on issues, themes and proposals relating to integrated education and sharing.

CRC would like clarification as to what mechanisms have been used to date to enable schools and parents to discuss potential options and solutions. At a recent evidence session with the Education Committee (October 2016) Education Authority officials referred to *‘looking at strategies where we can provide support resources so that, if schools want to engage in consultation at their school level or at school level with other schools, we will provide resources to enable them to engage with that process and advice and support for that process’.* Officials also acknowledged limitations due to the number of schools and referenced the use of questionnaires.

Direct and sustained engagement is crucial if pre-emptive decisions are to be avoided. Facilitated dialogue with parents and children is required, as well as with other stakeholders e.g. business community[[5]](#footnote-5) and those involved in community planning. CRC therefore recommends the Education Authority and the various Working Groups reflect again on the experience of the deliberative poll exercise (Omagh 2007). This facilitated discussion enabled parents from various sectors to consider the current models of education provision in their locality. The final report on this direct engagement revealed that people wanted more sharing with 71% specifically stating that they would support integrated education[[6]](#footnote-6). This current area planning process would benefit from similar type engagement.

CRC therefore recommends the provision of resources to support dialogue. This intervention may help develop creative proposals on integration and sharing. CRC also recommends the draft area planning timetable be amended to allow for meaningful engagement.

**Children & Young People**

CRC acts as the Secretariat for the TBUC Engagement Forum and its last meeting focussed on children and young people. During the forum a number of representations were made by young people to include them in the design and implementation stage of action planning. They asked to be included in the decision making process and to give them a role in planning for their future.

Subsequently, CRC requests detail as to how the current consultation has been taken forward with young people, in particular on a cross-community basis, and with those already engaged/not engaged in collaborative work.

**Recommendations**

CRC made a number of recommendations during the 2012 public consultation and they remain current (adjusted for new structures)

* appropriate weight given to current models of integrated, shared and collaborative (on a cross-community sectoral basis) when devising the strategic structure of the schools estate;
* serious consideration to current policy commitments and PfG targets in relation to integrated and sharing and ensure these are reflected in area-based plans;
* ensure the consultation process, particularly in relation to parents and children, supports direct dialogue on options for integration and sharing on a cross-community sectoral basis. This needs to be explicitly referenced in the Providing Pathways Strategic Plan.
* note the recommendations from the Good Relations Forum’s publication *‘Ensuring the Good Relations Work in our Schools Counts’*[[7]](#footnote-7)which relate to increased sharing within the various educational structures. These recommendations remain relevant and this consultation provides a timely opportunity to revisit them in the context of developing a strategic direction for a sustainable schools estate and enabling the delivery of the entitlement framework to all children.

**Conclusion**

CRC welcomes the opportunity to comment at this stage of the Strategic Area Plan for School Provision. There are a number of positive developments such as inclusive governance structures, collective agreement on issues and themes relating to integration and sharing, as well references to Programme for Government outcomes and indicators.

Yet, at this stage it is too early to determine what the end proposals will look like – will they be creative, will this be the moment the education estate undergoes a transformation that will have lasting impact on relationship building and reconciliation. To encourage this journey, the Education Authority, the Department, the working groups and the schools, will need to take persuasive actions. It will require interventions that will lead and facilitate discussions, and it may involve setting targets, especially in communities where sharing, collaborating and integrating already exist.

Finally, current conditions must add value to the area planning process and must act as a catalyst to develop new partnerships. There is substantial opportunity for area based planning to promote and enhance community relations and to have a positive impact on our transformative process from conflict to sustainable peace, equity and equality. CRC hopes that these comments support the Education Authority and its planning structures and would welcome the opportunity to discuss this response in more detail as the area planning process moves forward.

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1. Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 - 64.—(1) state that: It shall be the duty of the Department to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education, that is to say the education together at school of Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Council of Europe, Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities Section II Article 6, Section II, Article 6: The Parties shall encourage a spirit of tolerance and intercultural dialogue and take effective measures to promote mutual respect and understanding and co-operation among all persons living on their territory, irrespective of those persons' ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious identity, in particular in the fields of education, culture and the media. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to: The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. CRC itself provides development support and grant aid for interventions on a whole schools approach with both parents and teachers. Further detail can be provided upon request. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Institute of Directors stated the importance of a holistic approach to area-based planning, and said a totally coherent plan would take into account views not just of parents, pupils and educationalists, but also the wider community including business interests. Response to Area-Based Planning Institute of Directors, October 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://cdd.standford.edu/polls/nireland/2007/omagh-report.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Good Relations Forum, Ensuring the Good Relations Work in our Schools Counts - A Strategy to meet our needs for the 21st Century (April 2010), CRC & ECNI. <http://www.community-relations.org.uk/fs/doc/crc-good-relations-forum-booklet-final-21-april-2010-pdf.pdf>

   *School and Local Level:*

   * Compulsory good relations programmes in schools;
   * Good practice to be shared and publicised;
   * Capacity building programmes for existing school teaching staff;
   * Capacity building of parents and local communities;
   * Keeping local communities fully informed of the opportunity for possible collaboration, where school are at risk of being closed or new schools are planned.

   *Strategic Level:*

   * Strategic leadership - the Minister of Education and the Department of Education to give greater strategic direction to the schools sector to ensure that the teaching and practice of good relations is successfully mainstreamed across all schools.
   * Culture change - by creating a culture of co-operation, partner schools and colleges can bring considerable resources and skills that both add value to the learning experiences of children and young people, and crucially, help schools to do things differently.
   * Budget commitment to good relations programmes - the Department of Education to identify and commit a long-term and appropriate budget to supporting all schools to provide good relations modules within Citizenship programmes.
   * Good Relations lens – the entire curriculum to be good relations proofed, at least in those subject areas where it is both relevant and appropriate to do so.
   * Targeted support and resources - the Department and ESA to offer more targeted support and resources for those schools in areas that continue to experience considerable community conflict, segregation and disadvantage.
   * Greater focus on sharing and collaboration within service delivery - the Department, ESA and other key educational stakeholders to focus on maximising value for money and avoiding duplication of educational provision, by placing a greater focus on existing drivers, policies and practices that encourage greater sharing and collaboration, particularly on a cross-community basis.
   * Developing tools that measure change – the Department to develop a set of targets, as well as a monitoring and evaluation framework to measure the changes to the level of collaboration and cooperation between local schools. This should be published yearly and publicised widely.
   * Teacher, head teacher and governor training - the Department to ensure that amendments are made to the various training programmes by relevant regulatory and training bodies, making good relations modules compulsory components of study.
   * Greater sharing and collaboration between teacher training colleges – the Department and ESA to encourage stronger collaboration between the different teacher training institutions, to ensure all student teachers, whatever their community background, have the appropriate time and opportunity to experience other sectors and school ethoses. All initial teacher training courses/programmes to encompass an element of teaching from different sectors on a cross-community basis.
   * Mapping future opportunities - Audits would help identify geographical areas for potential growth in integrated or shared education and changes in public attitudes, thus, providing a strategic context within which the transformation of schools might take place.
   * A generic commitment to ‘collaboration’ cannot be allowed to disguise the imperative for inter-sectoral sharing which must result. Of course, some schools will have more opportunities than others to engage on a cross-community basis and there are already a number of schools delivering this in practice. However without an obligation to explore all options some schools may opt out of this opportunity. This collaboration cannot be allowed to occur on an ad- hoc basis - this could simply come down to it being easier to engage/collaborate cross sector (not cross community) and also happen at the discretion of Board of Governors or the Principal.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-7)