

FIRST MEETING OF THE MEMBERS OF THE CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL STRATEGY FOR SUPPORTING SCHOOLS IN CONFLICT AREAS GROUP ON 3RD JUNE 2003.

PRESENT: Eddie Rooney (Chairman)
June Ingram
Terry Smyth
Matt Murray - ETI
Brian Hill)
Josie McCausland) - School Administration
Janet Cromie) - School Administration (Secretary)
Nathan Todd - BELB
Gerry Mulholland - BELB
Sean O'Coinn - CnaG
Jim Clarke - CCMS
Clodhna Scott-Wills - NICIE
Michael Wardlow - NICIE

APOLOGIES: Lorna McAlpine (NICIE), Christine Jendoubi (DE) and Peter Graham (ETI)

1. INTRODUCTION

Eddie Rooney opened the meeting by explaining the importance of the need to examine the issue of a Cross-Departmental Strategy for supporting schools in interface/conflict areas, and to identify if such a Strategy can make a difference and if so the role which education can play in such a process.

2. The issues put forward have been summarised under relevant headings. Those areas that the Working Group are likely to be able to move forward now are denoted at (A). Those requiring some time and some consideration are denoted at (B). Those needing considerable thought before further action are denoted at (C). It was agreed that while the Working Group could not of course solve all the problems that existed in this area there was a need to think of the future and try to work towards transforming communities and schools for the better.

3. Understanding How to Support Schools (including 'safe space') (Points 1, 2, 3 and 4)

An immediate response to a flashpoint situation which has just occurred – direct and prompt help for the school/s. Also teachers should have training on how best to help/guide pupils through disturbing and emotional issues with immediate support from qualified bodies.

School/s should provide a 'safe space' or sanctuary for children ensuring they are removed from incidents. In some cases schools also provide a safe place. Some children may need the opportunity for counselling in an informal manner where anything they discuss is confidential; children need to feel valued in such circumstances.

4. Formal Evaluation in Schools (Point 5)

It would be beneficial to evaluate how schools have realistically coped with difficult situations. This information should provide practical advice for improvements in such areas as:-

- i. Dealing with the media.
- ii. Giving additional support/training to the teachers.
- iii. Giving support to the pupils.

Evaluation should include:-

- an analysis of what the additional funding has achieved to date;
- comments on whether it was appropriately targeted; suggestions on alternatives if appropriate;
- an audit as to whether the funds were spent on the areas originally identified; and
- any evaluation is to be viewed against a background of general stability in schools and committed staff. However, the ethos of schools and the communities they serve can differ significantly.

Finally the range of all personnel within the schools would be helpful ie Principals, teachers plus school staff, cleaners, dinner ladies, caretakers, local people etc. (37)

6. Accountability (Point 10)

It was agreed that there was a need to evaluate the effectiveness of funding already provided by LEA in order to build upon what worked well and what was of questionable value. Evaluation of a strategy should be built in from the start of the process. There is also a need for it to be transparent and open. A number of initiatives were rolled out too quickly. However even those initiatives which did not seem to provide any improvement may have been successful in preventing circumstances from getting worse.

7. Partnerships (Point 11)

This encompasses meaningful coherent shared ideas which may be given a broad scope of funding and collaborate in the success of shared goals.

8. Role of the Curriculum (Point 13)

It would benefit children from as early as primary age to be taught cultural tolerance and citizenship in order to provide them with a better understanding of their community. It was agreed schools had adopted the curriculum to suit their needs.

It was suggested that it would be most positive to focus on 'harmony' or 'conflict' areas as 'points of contact'.

9. Understanding Pupils (Point 14)

This would require understanding the psychological make up of the pupils and the characteristics of a community/locality. (15)

5. Find out about Current Initiatives (Points 6, 7, 8, 9 and 12)

Initiatives currently in place need to be identified and examined to identify what other support can be accessed for schools. At present there are 6 inter Departmental Groups and 11 Governance Departments involved. It is vital to liaise with other bodies to avoid duplication of work. There is a need to determine multi-agency approaches towards the role of schools in the community and evaluate.

Initiatives need to be linked at Government level eg:

- CAG
- North Belfast Initiative
- Neighbourhood Renewal
- Community Capacity Building
- Youth Intervention Programmes

These links require long term community co-operation.

It would be beneficial to learn about the different communities which would include examining individual school differences and their geographical location. Consideration of the linkages between schools and churches would also be useful. (B9)

Finally the views of all personnel within the schools would be helpful ie Principals, teachers plus industrial staff, cleaners, dinner ladies, caretakers, local people etc. (A7)

6. Accountability (Point 10)

It was agreed that there was a need to evaluate the effectiveness of funding already provided by DE in order to build upon what worked well and what was of questionable value. Evaluation of a strategy should be built in from the start of the process. There is also a need for it to be transparent and open. A number of initiatives were rolled out too quickly. However even those initiatives which did not seem to provide any improvement may have been successful in preventing circumstances from getting worse.

7. Partnerships (Point 11)

This encompasses meaningful, coherent shared ideas, which may be given a broad scope of funding and culminate in the success of shared goals.

8. Role of the Curriculum (Point 13)

It would benefit children from as early as primary age to be taught cultural tolerance and citizenship in order to provide them with a better understanding of their community. It was agreed schools had adopted the curriculum to suit their needs.

It was suggested that it would be more positive to rename 'interface' or 'conflict' areas as 'points of contact'.

9. Understanding Pupils (Point 14)

This would require understanding the psychological make up of the pupils and the characteristics of a community/locality. (C)

North and West Trust completed an analysis of communities which contains qualitative information looking at school statistics and a comparison of school type in Birmingham.

Presently children's behaviour is more difficult to control in the classrooms in the wake of a drop in violence outside school hours. Twenty-five percent of pupils in these areas do not attend school. There is a need to understand what makes pupils 'tick' in order to steer them in the longer term towards appropriate careers when they leave school. A report completed by Mike Morrissey provides school statistics/social breadth/weak infrastructure.

The action that may be required is more:

- Positive community activity based - Community Action Groups
- Committed Parental Guidance programmes
- Youth Initiatives
- Church Leaders - promoting a culture of tolerance

10. Role of Professional Counselling (B/C) (Point 15)

Billy Burnison (ETI) evaluated the work carried out by the NSPCC which was viewed to be very effective. It is important that teachers can deal with situations but also necessary that professional expertise can be sought and relied upon whenever required.

The ETI is investigating counselling at schools together with attendance issues. Cross Community Counselling may be beneficial in these circumstances.

There are also resource implications for providing counselling and a scoping study would be necessary.

11. Summary

It was agreed that minutes would be completed and distributed promptly in order that relevant points can be actioned quickly or investigated further as appropriate. Members of the Working Group were asked to give some thought to the aims and objectives of the Group and consider suggestions on improvements to the current ad hoc arrangements.

It was agreed that an overall summary of all the various current funding avenues on this matter would be provided for the next meeting.

Next Meeting

Early September. Please forward dates of availability for the first 2 weeks in September to cromiej@deni.gov.uk or contact Janet Cromie on (028) 9127 9543.

POINTS LISTED AT MEETING

- A 1. Safe Space.
- A 2. Understanding how to support schools.
- A 3. How to work with schools to facilitate coping with conflict. Also coping mechanisms for teachers.
- A 4. Evaluating related issues.
- A 5. Evaluating effectiveness of what has been done and lessons learned.
- A 6. Find out what is going on in multi agency approach re the role of schools and evaluate.
- A 7. Find out views of schools.
- B 8. Initiatives
- B 9. Interface with Voluntary/Community Sectors
- B 10. Accountability
- B 11. Partnerships
- B 12. Linking Initiatives at Government Level
- B 13. Role of Curriculum
- C. 14. Understanding Pupils
- B/C 15. Role of Professional Counselling – ETI evaluation (A)