

Education and Lifelong Learning Committee

Date: 1 December 2004

Title : Minister's Report

This report updates the Committee on specific issues raised by members and on issues of current interest. Annex A sets out major engagements since the last report

1. Future Funding of Educational and Training Opportunities in the Community when European Funding Ends

The current Structural Fund programmes and Community Initiatives finish in December 2006, however some projects will continue until 2008. The draft Structural Funds regulations for a new set of programmes were published by the European Commission on 15 July 2004. The draft regulations will need to be agreed by the end of December 2005 for the new programmes to begin on the 1 January 2007.

The UK Government advocates that Structural and Cohesion Funds should be concentrated on the poorest Member States, with wealthier member states still working towards the achievement of European regional policy objectives but through their own resources. The UK Government, along with 5 other Member States, has protested strongly that the Commission's overall funding proposals for the next financial perspective – 2007-13- are too costly. If the overall EU budget is reduced, as the First Minister has already told this Assembly on previous occasions, there is a very strong likelihood that the structural and cohesion funds will receive less than the Commission has proposed.

The UK holds the Presidency of the European Council during the second half of 2005. Final decisions could be taken on the structural funds Regulations and on the overall Financial Perspective then, but these may not be taken until early 2006.

The Welsh Assembly Government is fully involved in the negotiation process. The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to securing the best possible deal for Wales, whether the funding is allocated by Brussels or by UK Central Government. In Dec 2003, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry set out the UK Government's proposals for regional policy funding, promising that English regions and devolved administrations would not lose out if the UK

proposal was agreed for the next EU financial perspective.

2. State of Higher Education in Wales –HE Management

Higher education institutions are autonomous and therefore are entirely responsible for their own management. However, given that higher education institutions receive sums of public monies, I require the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales to submit an annual report to me on its assessment of governance and management across the sector. Reaching Higher also stresses the importance of strong governance and contains the specific target "no HEI's in Wales to be assessed as being in a marginal or unsatisfactory financial position, and all achieving high standards of governance by 2007". Therefore I fully expect higher education institutions to address any areas of weakness and to continuously improve their standards of governance and apply best practice and for HEFCW to vigilantly promote best practice and suggest actions for improving governance.

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales has recently sent me its fifth Annual Governance Assurance Statement in which it concluded that across the sector, institutions' governance systems and procedures are operating broadly satisfactorily. It also reports that in all cases where weaknesses in governance have been identified, action plans have been agreed with the relevant institutions and that these are being monitored. In addition, the Committee of University Chairmen Governance Guide was launched on 17 November. I endorse the principles set out in the Guidance and I commend it to all Higher Education Chairs in Wales.

3. The Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship Panel – Response to the Select Committee Report on Outdoor Learning

The Assembly's Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship Panel has submitted a Memorandum to the Education and Skills Select Committee of the House of Commons as part of their inquiry into "Education Outside the Classroom". A copy of the Memorandum is attached at Annex B.

4. **Primary Class Sizes**

A statutory class size limit of 30 pupils has applied to all infant classes in Wales since September 2001.

The reduction of junior classes in line with infant classes was adopted as Assembly Government policy in 2000 and the target of reducing all junior classes to 30 or less by September 2004 is a "Wales a Better Country" commitment.

Additional revenue funding has been provided in 2004-05, for the 4th year in succession, for reducing junior class sizes, supporting improvements in attainment for 11-14 year olds and supporting low performing schools. £20m was provided in 2001-02, £25m in 2002-03, £32m in 2003/04 and £31.5

million in 2004-05. The proportion spent by local authorities on reducing junior class sizes has increased year on year - £9m in 2001-02, £ 13m in 2002-03, £17m in 2003-04 and £18million in 2004-05.

The results of the September 2004 primary class size count, published on 25 November [SDR 85/2004] show that infant class sizes continue to comply with the statutory 30 pupil limit and that with very few exceptions junior class sizes have been reduced to 30 pupils. The detailed results are:

- Only 4 infant classes in breach of the legislation, 2 of these breaches have been resolved and the other 2 are due to be resolved by January.
- 34 classes had over 30 pupils as a result of permissible exceptions (pupils admitted on appeal where a mistake has been made in applying admissions criteria , pupils admitted outside the normal admission round, and pupils admitted to a Welsh medium school when there is no other school within reasonable proximity)
- Only 0.1% of pupils were in infant classes of over 30 if permissible exceptions are taken into account
- The number of junior classes containing more than 30 pupils fell from 576 at September 2003 to 103 and the percentage of pupils in such classes from 13.3% to 2.3%. Making allowance for classes affected by permitted exceptions the numbers reduce to 26 classes and 0.6% of pupils.
- No junior classes over 35 remain, a year ago there were 28.

I am very pleased by the positive response of LEAs and schools to the stricter conditions attached to the grant funding in 2004/05 which have enable the junior class size target of 30 pupils or less to be virtually met. In the few cases where this has not been achieved the matter is being pursued with the LEA to establish what needs to be done to meet the target.

5. Grant to Teacher Support Line Cymru (TSLC)

The Welsh Assembly Government agreed in February 2002 to contribute to the costs of establishing Teacher Support Line Cymru (TSLC). This is a free and confidential, 24-hour bilingual telephone helpline for all teachers working in Wales. The grant of £85,000 in 2002-03 and £90,000 in 2003-04, represented half the start-up and initial running costs of TSLC.

The development of TSLC was supported by the General Teaching Council for Wales and by the teaching unions. Teaching is acknowledged to be a stressful profession and TSLC provides a service tailored to the needs of teachers in Wales, with trained counsellors who understand the education system. Reducing stress can have potential savings for LEAs by cutting the number of stress-related sickness absences among the teaching profession.

TSLC fully met five of the six key performance indicators agreed with the Assembly. These include: targets for the promptness of answering calls; the availability of Welsh speaking counsellors when needed; a couple of measures of customer satisfaction; and, of the level of awareness of the service among teachers. The target for utilisation of the service by 2.5% of teachers in Wales was not achieved, with utilisation rates of 2.4% in each of the first two years operation. However it is expected that this target will be met in 2004-05.

I believe that TSLC provides a valuable service for teachers in Wales with 96% of clients reporting an improved sense of well being. As a result, I have now agreed to contribute £100k towards the costs of Teacher Support Line Cymru in 2004-05. This sum will be used to match funding provided to TSLC by LEAs and the teaching unions in Wales. The remainder of the TSLC budget for 2004-05 will be met from TSLC's registered parent charity the Teachers' Benevolent Fund Cymru (now renamed Teacher Support Cymru).

I have also agreed, in principle, to continue funding TSLC for a further two years (2005-06 - 2006-07), on a reducing basis to be agreed subject to ongoing evaluation and monitoring. I will keep the Committee in touch with development of this service as it becomes established in Wales.

6. Devolution of Student Support and Higher Education Act 2004

A motion (NDM2138) to delegate the functions of the Higher Education Act 2004 to the First Minister was carried in plenary on 2 November. The motion recorded the Assembly's view that variable tuition fees are, in principle, wrong. I have made clear in response to a number of recent questions from Members that decisions on the future tuition fee regime in Wales will be taken in the light of the recommendations of the independent review being carried out by Professor Teresa Rees. In bringing forward our proposals, the Assembly Government will take account of the needs of students and of higher education institutions in Wales, and will have regard to the views of the Assembly.

Rees Review

The Rees Review Group has met four times since the Higher Education Act 2004 received Royal Assent in July. The next meeting is on 15th and 16th December.

In early November, Professor Teresa Rees wrote to over 200 key stakeholders inviting them to submit evidence, comments and views to the review group. Comments are requested by 8th December. In addition to the consultation exercise with stakeholders, a number of research and discussion seminars have been arranged to inform the group's work. The review remains on course to report in February and April next year.

Providing a bilingual student support system - Task and Finish Group

The work of the 'Providing a Bilingual Student Support System' Task & Finish Group has now ended. I

have received this Group's recommendations following endorsement by the Devolution of Student Support Project Board at its October meeting.

The Welsh Language Board has proposed that it undertakes a separate study into the readiness of Welsh LEAs to provide a fully bilingual student support service in AY 06/07. I am aware that bilingual provision for AY 05/06 needs to be addressed, and in order to press for improvements, I have raised this as a matter of urgency with Kim Howells, MP, Minister for State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education.

Review of Student Complaints

The Higher Education Act 2004 includes important provisions relating to the handling of student complaints in Wales. The Act gives the Assembly the power to designate an operator of an approved scheme for the review of student complaints. Under such a scheme, once a student or former student has exhausted the internal complaints procedures of their institution and remains unsatisfied with the outcome, they are able to submit their complaint to the adjudicator for review. This puts an end to the current dual system, whereby students from Charter and non-Charter institutions are subject to different systems for the handling of student complaints.

The Commencement Order for these provisions is due to be debated in plenary on 30 November. Once the provisions have been commenced, I am keen to designate an operator of a scheme on the same timescale as England, to ensure that students in Wales are not disadvantaged vis a vis their counterparts in England. The Department for Education and Skills is planning to designate an operator with effect from 1 January 2005.

A voluntary scheme is currently being run on an England and Wales basis. The operator of that scheme has written to me and to Charles Clarke seeking designation. A copy of the proposed scheme is at Annex C to this report. I see great advantages in an England and Wales scheme – there are economies of scale, but perhaps most importantly, a body of expertise will quickly be built up. Subject to a careful assessment of the detail of the scheme, I propose to designate the same operator and scheme for Wales. I have been assured that provisions will be in place for complainants to submit their complaints in Wales.

7. National Basic Skills Strategy for Wales

Background

The first National Basic Skills Strategy for Wales was launched in April 2001 with a budget allocation of £27m over the 3 years 2001-2004. The Strategy was rolled forward into the current year, with a budget of £10.36m (now increased to £11.86m as a result of mid-year re-allocations) while an independent evaluation was carried out.

The evaluators reported that the Strategy has been successful in achieving good progress in each of the

sectors targeted, although noted that there was still much to do. They recommended continuation of the Strategy, with a clearer focus on priority groups.

Consultation Document

The consultation document on the second stage of the Basic Skills Strategy for Wales will be published on 30 Nov. The closing date for responses is 1 February 2005. The proposed Strategy will build on the successes of the current strategy, taking into account the recommendations of the external evaluation.

Basic skills are defined as literacy and numeracy skills up to Level 1 in the National Qualifications Framework. This is considered to be the level required to demonstrate competence and to allow progression to further learning. IT skills were considered for inclusion in the Strategy. However, although IT is recognised as a useful learning tool, the inclusion of IT skills as a basic skill would divert attention away from the importance of good literacy and numeracy.

The consultation document proposes that we maintain an all-age approach to improving basic skills and focus on the key issues and barriers. This includes:

- action in the early years to encourage parents and carers to become involved in their children's development. Activities will be integrated into the new Foundation Phase and other early years programmes;
- ensuring all school pupils get the support they need to be competent in basic literacy and numeracy;
- reducing the number of adults with poor basic skills. This will require action on several fronts, including raising awareness, identifying individual need and ensuring that quality provision is available to meet demand. Research will be undertaken to identify what works best and develop new ways of working with adults where necessary to improve knowledge of effective teaching methods and programmes for adults with low skills.

Procurement

- The Basic Skills Agency has been charged with overseeing implementation of the Strategy since its launch and the evaluation report was very positive about the Agency's contribution to the success of the Strategy to date. However, the Assembly's Compliance Office has advised that the contract to deliver the next phase of the Strategy should be subject to competitive tender. Expressions of interest in tendering for the contract have been invited.

8. Transition Planning

In The Learning Country I set out my commitment to ensuring that there is continuity and progression

for all pupils moving from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3. Advice commissioned from Estyn has provided the basis for targeted support to schools and local authorities to improve transition arrangements. In essence, Estyn concluded that primary and secondary schools usually have good pastoral links. However, schools need to make the educational transition between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 equally successful so that teachers and pupils can build on the progress made in primary school from the very beginning of Year 7.

To address this I have asked ACCAC, Estyn and the Basic Skills Agency to provide a rolling programme of support (Aiming for Excellence) for schools and LEAs with specific emphasis on curriculum planning so that schemes of work build on what has been taught previously and there is continuity in teaching and learning. Action to date includes publication by Estyn of guidance on how primary and secondary schools and LEAs can work together to improve transition, identification of transition as one of the priority areas in the Better Schools Funds and provision of additional INSET days to be used for transition planning.

On 25 November I attended a national conference hosted by ACCAC to launch the second raft of guidance and support. This included guidance for schools on the use of Bridging Units. In addition, ACCAC in partnership with BBC Wales, has provided all schools with examples of good practice in managing transition based on filmed case studies and interviews with practitioners for across Wales.

The conference was also used to launch a consultation paper setting out proposals to require the governing bodies of maintained secondary schools and their feeder primary schools, jointly, to draw up Transition Plans. The proposals look to build on the Wales only legislation in the Education Act 2002 that has provided an opportunity to frame an approach that is distinctive to circumstances and needs in Wales.

The consultation document has been issued to a sample of primary and secondary schools, all LEAs, teaching unions, teacher training institutions and other interested parties. Responses have been requested by 25 February.

9. Review of Transport Policy Statements

Section 509AA-AC of the Education Act 1996, as amended by section 199 of, and Schedule 19 to, the Education Act 2002 (commenced by the Assembly on 1 September 2003), requires local education authorities to produce statements of the provision available for transport, and transport support, for learners aged 16-19 in their local authority area. The purpose of the statement is to make engagement in learning easier by drawing together information on all the sources of support available to learners in the target age range in their area and setting these out for the benefit of learners. LEAs are obliged to have their transport policy statements in place by 31 May in the year in which the academic year to which they apply starts. Guidance was issued by the Assembly Government on 30 April 2004 to assist LEAs in producing their first such statements by 31 May in accordance with the statutory requirement.

As well as making the statements available to prospective learners, LEAs were requested in the guidance to copy their statements to the Assembly Government so that their contents might be reviewed and the guidance for the next round of statements amended in the light of experience. As at the end of October, transport policy statements had been received from 18 of 22 Local Education Authorities in Wales. My officials have contacted the four local authorities, which have not yet provided statements, and received indications that work is progressing. I have asked my officials to send a letter to these LEAs advising them that I am minded to issue a direction requiring the production of the statements if copies are not received by mid-January. As this is the first time that LEAs have been asked to engage in the process of providing this information, the quality of the statements received so far is variable, with some good practice examples, which will be noted in future guidance. In the light of the outcomes of this years' exercise we will be revising the guidance for 2005/06, in consultation with LEAs, once all statements have been received for 2004/05. The target date for issue of the revised guidance for 2005/06 is February 2005.

10. Standing Order 21: Provisions within the DfTE MEG 2004-05

I would like to inform the Committee of changes I intend to make to budgets within the Education and Lifelong Learning MEG. The changes presented at Annex D will be included in the next Plenary budget consideration which will also permit transfers into and out of the ELL MEG for 2004-05.