

To: Members of the Working Group on a Strategy for supporting schools in conflict areas

May 2003

Dear Colleague

The initial meeting of the above working group is scheduled for Tuesday, 3 June at 10.00 a.m. in Rathgael House, Bangor.

I have enclosed an agenda for your information and an initial briefing paper that you may wish to consider prior to the meeting. The paper is a starting point which I hope will form the basis for discussion at the meeting.

Mrs Janet Cromie in School Administration Branch will be Secretary to this Working Group and if you require any further information please contact her on 9127 9543 or email Janet.Cromie@deni.gov.uk. Alternatively you can contact Josie McCausland in School Administration Branch on 9127 9550 or email Josie.McCausland@deni.gov.uk

Thank you for making the time available to join the Group. I look forward to our discussions surrounding this important area and to seeing you at the meeting.

Yours sincerely

JUNE INGRAM

Head of Schools and Pupil Services Division

MEETING OF THE STRATEGY GROUP FOR SUPPORTING SCHOOLS IN CONFLICT AREAS

TUESDAY 3 JUNE 2003

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, RATHGAEL HOUSE, BANGOR

A G E N D A

Chair: Dr Eddie Rooney, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education.

- 1. Welcome**
- 2. Apologies**
- 3. Aim of the Group**
- 4. Discussion of Background Paper (attached)**
- 5. Next Steps**
- 5. Any other business**
- 6. Date of Next Meeting**

1. Schools supported and areas affected

There have been a number of high profile disruptions to schools, most notably Bally Creek and Whitefield in the North and Beechfield and St Malachy's in East Belfast. More recently Malvern Street and Edenduff Primary Schools in the Shankill experienced extreme problems during the loyalist feud. Problems being experienced include increased behavioural problems of pupils, tension among parents, pressure on staff, attacks on the school premises, disruption to the school and teacher safety and resultant potential for decline in standards.

While the more high profile disruption appears to be subsiding, ongoing uncertainty appears to still be having an underlying detrimental effect on schools and their ability to provide a full range of education.

STRATEGY FOR SUPPORTING SCHOOLS IN CONFLICT AREAS

1. Background

As a direct result of acute community tensions an increasing number of schools are seeking support from education authorities and the Department to assist them in dealing with the impact on pupils, parents, staff and the school environment. Among the difficulties being reported are severe emotional and behavioural problems being displayed by pupils and their parents, falling school enrolments, a deteriorating school environment and the subsequent pressure being placed on staff working in such an environment. These problems have been most evident and acute at interface areas and during and after periods of high profile community tension but the ongoing impact of conflict is felt across a wide range of schools.

A series of support packages and initiatives have been provided. It is however, timely that we evaluate and review these support measures and learn from our experiences with the aim of developing a long-term strategic approach to the provision of support to schools situated in and/or suffering as a direct result of community conflict, also identifying, co-ordinating and maximising support structures and initiatives which are currently in place.

To this end, the Minister asked that a working group of representatives from the education service be established to share knowledge and expertise and begin to address these important issues.

2. Schools supported and areas affected

There have been a number of high profile disruptions to schools, most notably Holy Cross and Wheatfield in the North and Beechfield and St Malachy's in East Belfast. More recently Malvern Street and Edenbrook Primary Schools in the Shankill experienced extreme problems during the loyalist feud. Problems being experienced include increased behavioural problems of pupils, tension among parents, pressure on staff, attacks on the school premises, constant fear for pupil and teacher safety and resultant potential for decline in enrolment.

While the more high profile disruption appears to be lessening, ongoing community unrest is still having an underlying detrimental effect on schools and their ability to provide a safe secure

learning environment for their pupils. In particular, schools situated directly on interface flashpoints are suffering unsustainable disruption to their capacity to deliver. Schools are also working hard to make a positive impact on the community and in turn contribute to the lessening of community tensions.

In response, a number of support packages have been put in place designed to help alleviate the difficulties being experienced. Since Oct 2001 the Department has committed approximately £4.5m to provide special support packages for schools in North and East Belfast: this is in addition to resources previously allocated through the Youth Service, and initiatives such as the School Support Programme.

3. Main Issues

Among the main issues emerging from these difficulties are that:

- schools were seen as refuges from the community behaviours;
- communities around schools were being manipulated with behaviours being transferred through pupils back into schools;
- there are pressures on teachers to be neutral but actions are undone by behaviour of parents;
- there is a need to coordinate a strategic approach by identifying personnel and initiatives that could be utilised and developed;
- need to harness community groups and on the ground expertise;
- plans from within the area are increasing and there is a clear need for a multi agency approach;
- these are issues for training for school staff and there is a need to consider the impact of programmes such as EMU and the plans for citizenship in the curriculum.

4. Purposes of DE short-term funding packages

The main purpose of DE support packages to date has been to support the immediate needs of schools and youth clubs in areas suffering from community violence. This included funding of additional support and counselling for pupils, respite activities, curriculum support, literacy and numeracy tuition, and the employment of temporary teaching staff and classroom assistants.

The Department's Youth Services division also participates in the Community Action Group that includes representatives of other Departments and agencies such as the Housing Executive, the Belfast City Council, the Community Relations Council and the PSNI. The purpose of the Group is to co-ordinate action across Government and key agencies to help build trust and confidence within and between communities, by developing a series of short, medium and long-term actions to counter sectarianism and to build trust and confidence.

5. Development of a multi-agency strategic approach to support schools.

In order to develop a new long term strategic approach to supporting schools it is necessary to consider the level and type of support schools need, and consider how in turn they can contribute to their own communities and wider society. Each educational partner will be aware of the needs of their particular sector and the difficulties they are experiencing as a result of community problems with the impact of such problems dictated by the extent of the difficulties in the immediate area.

At present, in addition to the work of the education service, there are several government departments and a number of NDPBs promoting and supporting community development. In addition a considerable volume of work is being undertaken through statutory agencies, community and voluntary groups. It would be beneficial in the context of developing a strategy if a review of the content of this type of support and an assessment of the effectiveness of such support could be made.

6. Summary of initial DE discussions with other Departments/agencies

Officials from DE have met with representatives of OFM/DFM and NIO to clarify what programmes or initiatives are currently in place and to consider how such programmes could interlink with the remit of the Working Group. We are aware of a number of initiatives that are focused on a particular aspect of supporting communities and minimising difficulties but it is also essential that we ensure that there is sufficient and appropriate focus on the impact of such initiatives on education in those areas and the contribution education can make to them. The main activities that we are aware of are:

NIO Community Safety Unit, tasked with coordinating partnership development with participation from organisations such as the PSNI, Community Relations Council, BELB,

the Youth Service and NIHE. They assist schools in developing drugs and alcohol awareness programmes, citizenship initiatives and abuse programmes. They work in all the main flashpoint areas and would be keen to become involved in supporting any education led strategy.

DSD Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy (NRS) which is, we understand, due to be launched in the near future. We understand that the key components of NRS will be to put in place measures to address the spiral of decline and the endemic deprivation that exists in the poorest neighbourhoods.

OFM/DFM: North Belfast Community Action Project established primarily to encourage communities to develop through capacity building. It is encouraging the setting up of a network of Community Development Programmes to be delivered by Community Employment Partnerships. We understand that the main work to date in schools has been through the youth service working in youth clubs and youth forums. Among issues to be considered is the possible community use of schools as a resource.

There is at present considerable amounts of inter agency work taking place with an effort being made to create a "virtual circle of support" with the emphasis on self development. A number of interrelated bodies are working to help develop communities not only in North Belfast but also throughout the Greater Belfast area. Amongst those we may wish to consider liaising with as an educational strategy develops are:

DSD Community Action Group;

Department of Environment (The Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Castlereagh and Belfast City Councils are working in conjunction with the DoE in developing regeneration strategies for areas of social deprivation in need of housing development.);

Other bodies which are engaged in work in conflict areas e.g.: DETI West Belfast Task Force, Trade Union Group, Greater East Belfast Partnership Board, International Fund for Ireland, North Belfast Partnership, Belfast Regeneration Office, Community Relations Council.

7. Aims and Objectives

We propose that the objective of the Group should be:

“To develop recommendations for the development of a strategic multi-agency approach to support for schools in areas of acute community tension and conflict;
By acting together and maximising resources to generate positive outcomes for schools and their pupils.”

8. Next Steps

The purpose of this paper has been to set out a brief overview of the background to the situation. It is not intended to provide a comprehensive picture of the situation but will be expanded and enhanced in discussion by the knowledge and expertise of members of the group. Suggested issues to consider are:

- what has the education service learnt from the experiences of the past 2 years in particular in terms of how to react to acute community conflict and how to contribute to its prevention?
- what positive contribution can initiatives and activities which are in place outside the support packages make? Are they being maximised?
- how best can we disseminate good practice?
- what mechanisms should be used or created to ensure a more effective response (both short and long-term) to difficulties?

We would suggest that immediate activities would be to define the problem, agree the purpose of the group and consider possible roles and responsibilities within that group (including if appropriate the establishing of focus groups). We will want to: identify areas for and degrees of possible convergence; clarify mechanisms for combining effort; manage cooperation; and determine roles and responsibilities for individuals, groups, partners and organisations.