**Public Consultation on Area Education Plans:**

**Influencing change or tokenism?**

**Vani Borooah and Colin Knox**

Institute for Research in Social Sciences

University of Ulster

Email:

vkborooah@ulster.ac.uk

cg.knox@ulster.ac.uk

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**Executive Summary**

* The massive public consultation response (n = 49,415) to the post-primary area plans shows an appetite for engagement in the future of education. This is hugely welcome but needs to be taken seriously by the managing authorities.
* Notwithstanding the volume of responses, the quantity of paperwork for the public to read and digest on future proposals for schools makes it inaccessible and tedious for large sections of the population and demands access to on-line resources. Although provision can be made for hard copy access, the default position is that the documents are available on-line. This, in itself, can become an obstacle when considering a large volume of information for the public to read and comment on.
* This paper has evidenced how one education and library board, in particular, has chosen to ignore grassroots opinion which offers potential local solutions. This represents the worse type of paternalism on the part of school managing authorities; a ‘we know best attitude’ reinforced by a needs model in the area plans which is based on 3 separate sectors: controlled, maintained and integrated schools. Such an approach stifles ‘innovation and creativity’ which the Department of Education implored the Education and Library Boards and CCMS to embrace in their approach to area planning.
* The Education Minister has encouraged public engagement in the future reorganisation of the education estate, in particular bottom-up solutions. The evidence in this paper indicates that people are much more advanced in their thinking than managing authorities which have acted as gatekeepers for local solutions and sought to protect their own sectoral interests.
* The indications are that consultation over the future of primary schools will repeat the same failed approach. Local communities are up for change. The key question is whether their views will be taken seriously by school managing authorities and the Department of Education – true public consultation or tokenism?

**The care homes debacle**

The recent political furore over closing care homes for the elderly as part of the *Transforming Your Care Strategy* raised questions about the role which public consultation plays in the decision making process. Although public consultation on closures will take place, the Western Health and Social Care Trust (one of three trusts to announce closure plans) confirmed it plans to close all four of its facilities, adding that it was just being ‘honest’ ahead of consultation on the matter (Irish News, 3rd May 2013).

All of this raises serious questions about the purpose and value of public consultation. One commentator on the consultation process which will take place on care homes argued: ‘the proposals will go to public consultation, but – even if there is an overwhelming majority against (closure) – such is the nature of national health service administration that the number crunchers, who are clearly behind this idea, will get their way’ (Newsletter, 26th April 2013).

Is such tokenistic consultation confined to the health service?

**Consultation in education**

The education sector in Northern Ireland is also undergoing a radical review. Minister O’Dowd, in a keynote statement to the Assembly (September 2011), highlighted the need to ensure there was ‘a network of strong sustainable schools that command the confidence of the communities they serve’. The Minister commissioned the Education and Library Boards (ELBs), working in conjunction with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), to develop strategic plans for the future schools estate on an area basis. Drawing on data from viability audits which examined the challenges facing schools in terms of enrolment trends, education quality and financial stability, each of the Boards produced draft post-primary school plans for public consultation in July 2012.

The consultation took the form of an on-line questionnaire response, although written replies were also accepted. The questions posed were aimed at ‘testing’ the terms of reference of the area planning process established by the Minister. Hence, people were asked if the draft area plans produced by the ELBs and CCMS:

* Ensured a network of viable and sustainable schools, within reasonable travelling distance for pupils, capable of effectively delivering the Revised Curriculum and the Entitlement Framework.
* Identified and met the needs of **all** children and young people in the area.
* Enhanced the quality of provision and raised standards.
* Reduced the number of surplus places.
* Reduced duplication of provision.
* Identified realistic, innovative and creative solutions to address need, including opportunities for shared schooling on a cross sectoral basis.
* Maximised the use and sharing of the existing schools estate.
* Identified the potential for co-location of mainstream and special schools.
* Took full account of appropriate and relevant Further Education Sector provision for 14-19 year olds.
* Explored opportunities for cross-boundary and cross-border planning.

There were 49,415 responses to the consultation which took place from 5th July to 26th October 2012 – a huge response to a public consultation process.

**A case study of the Western Education and Library Board (WELB)**

We consider the WELB as a case study of one (from five) of the Education and Library Boards. The Western Board area is responsible for education and library services in five council areas comprising: (London)Derry, Fermanagh, Limavady, Omagh and Strabane Councils and has a population of almost 300,000 people. There are 43 post-primary schools and 183 primary schools in the Board area. The WELB received 1,175 responses to the questionnaire, 32 letters/statements and 6,422 respondents associated with petitions – in total 7,629 replies to the consultation process.

Using data from the WELB’s own report (***WELB: Strategic Area Plan: Post Primary Provision - Consultation Analysis***, December 2012) we select four sample questions and their responses as a way of examining feedback on the area plan for post-primary schools[[1]](#footnote-1).

**Question 1**: The Strategic Area Plan for Post-Primary Provision **shows a way forward** in the WELB area (table 1).

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| Table 1: Area plan shows a way forward for WELB area |
|  | Strongly agree | Agree | Uncertain | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total |
| % | 16.6 | 12.5 | 11.8 | 10.8 | 48.3 | 100% |
| N | 170 | 128 | 121 | 109 | 494 | 1022 |

Collapsing these categories and representing them in graph form (see figure 1).

**Question 2**: The Strategic Area Plan for Post-Primary Provision will lead to a network of sustainable schools in the WELB area which will **meet the need of all pupils** in the longer term (table 2).

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| Table 2: Area plan meets needs of all pupils in longer term |
|  | Strongly agree | Agree | Uncertain | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total |
| % | 18.0 | 10.6 | 10.8 | 26.8 | 33.8 | 100% |
| N | 176 | 104 | 105 | 262 | 330 | 977 |

Collapsing these categories and representing them in graph form (see figure 2).

**Question 3**: The Strategic Area Plan for Post-Primary Provision will lead to a network of sustainable schools in the WELB area which will **enhance the quality of provision and raise standards** (table 3).

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| Table 3: Enhances quality and raises education standards |
|  | Strongly agree | Agree | Uncertain | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total |
| % | 16.1 | 11.0 | 12.5 | 27.8 | 32.6 | 100% |
| N | 156 | 106 | 121 | 268 | 315 | 966 |

Collapsing these categories and representing them in graph form (figure 3) shows:

**Question 4**: The Strategic Area Plan for Post-Primary Provision identifies realistic, innovative and creative solutions to address need in the WELB which: includes **opportunities** **for shared schooling on a cross-sectoral basis** (table 4).

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| Table 4: Opportunities for shared cross-sectoral schooling |
|  | Strongly agree | Agree | Uncertain | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total |
| % | 9.7 | 16.5 | 21.1 | 27.8 | 24.9 | 100% |
| N | 92 | 157 | 200 | 264 | 237 | 950 |

Collapsing these categories and representing them in graph form (see figure 4).

In summary, the answers given to these 4 key questions show that, on average, just over one-quarter of all respondents agreed with the findings of the area plan for the future of post-primary school provision in the WELB constituency covering five district council areas. Did the very negative public consultation responses encourage a rethink of the strategic plan by the WELB?

**Fermanagh District Council (post-primary schools)**

By way of example, consider the original proposals for Fermanagh District Council and the final recommendations (see table 5).

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| Table 5: Fermanagh District Council Area |
| Pre-consultation | **Post consultation** | **Final plan submitted to DE** |
| Approval by the DE to the Economic Appraisal for Controlled/Voluntary Post Primary Education in Co Fermanagh  | Controlled/Voluntary Post Primary Education in Co Fermanagh – 2 new post primary schools required (academic and vocational)  | Two new builds for the Controlled/Voluntary post primary sector in Co. Fermanagh |
| The WELB and CCMS to explore the proposal for the establishment of a cross-sectoral federated model to deliver a multi-campus solution for the (South East Fermanagh) Area by October 2012  | The WELB and CCMS to further explore the proposal for a cross-sectoral federated model to deliver a multi-campus solution for the Area (South East Fermanagh) | The WELB and the CCMS to explore the proposal for the establishment of a cross-sectoral federated model to deliver a multi-campus solution for the Area (South East Fermanagh) by April 2013 |
| Progress the Recommendations of the Clogher and Kilmore Diocesan Programme Board.  | Progress the Proposals of the Clogher and Kilmore Diocesan Programme Board – with revised timetables of April 2013  | Progress the proposals of the Clogher and Klimore Diocesan Programme Board |
| Investigation into the impact of a proposed increased capacity within the Integrated Sector on the Controlled, Maintained and Voluntary Sectors  | Investigation into the impact of a proposed increased capacity within the Integrated Sector on the Controlled, Maintained and Voluntary Sectors – undertaken by the Putting Pupils First: Shaping Our Future Working Group pending receipt of an increase in capacity request.  |  |

Taking one example from this area planning process illustrates the tokenism of consultation. In South East Fermanagh, the draft area plan for the post-primary schools stated that CCMS & WELB will work together to explore the feasibility of the proposal for the establishment of a cross-sectoral federated model between 4 schools (Lisnaskea High School, St Aidan’s Derrylin, St Eugene’s College Rosslea, and St Comhghall’s School, Lisnaskea) to deliver a multi-campus solution in this area and report by October 2012.

The final area plan also states that WELB is aware of the Shared Education proposals for the South East Fermanagh area. WELB and CCMS, as the statutory authorities for the schools involved, will work together to explore the feasibility of the proposal for the establishment of a cross-sectoral federated model to deliver a multi-campus solution for the area and report by April 2013. However the WELB unilaterally, has published development proposals for the closure of Lisnaskea High School and the amalgamation with Devenish College, before the above mentioned feasibility report into a cross-sectoral federated model was undertaken. A local action group including politicians has been established to explore options for keeping Lisnaskea High School open and raised concerns about the WELB’s proposals.

The Fermanagh District Council case study illustrates that final recommendations simply tinker at the margins of the original proposals, yet **75%** of all respondents in Fermanagh District Council recorded that the strategic plan ‘did **not** show a way forward for post –primary education provision in the council area’.

**Limavady Borough Council**

Limavady offers another example[[2]](#footnote-2) in the Western Education and Library Board area where Limavady High School, St Mary’s Limavady and Limavady Grammar have a strong tradition of working together in terms of KS4 and KS5 provision. The principles of shared education are embedded in the schools including a synchronised timetable which extends curriculum choice to pupils in the collaborating schools. The schools also play a central role in the Roe Valley Learning Community.

The WELB consultation document paid lip-service to the long-standing tradition of the schools working together, stating simply that the close proximity of all post-primary providers in Limavady allowed for sharing of education and collaboration. Although the schools did not fully meet the Entitlement Framework requirements, there was no suggestion in the draft plan about deepening the already established partnership. The schools highlighted the weaknesses in the WELB/CCMS proposals and suggested how, by working together, they could improve educational outcomes, reduce duplication, address surplus places and provide enhanced educational opportunities for all pupils. Despite full engagement by the schools with the consultation process, the revised plans produced in 2013 were exactly the same as the original plans. This, despite the fact that **only** 16.4% of respondents ‘agreed or strongly agreed’ that the Limavady proposals showed a way forward for the council area. Notwithstanding, the same proposals were submitted to DE for consideration and approval.

**The WELB response**

The official response to the consultation exercise from the WELB contained in its report (***WELB: Strategic Area Plan: Post Primary Provision - Consultation Analysis***, December 2012: 32) was as follows:

While many of the proposals contained in the draft Plan have not changed dramatically, the volume of responses has given the WELB and the *Putting Pupils First: Shaping Our Future* Working Group many issues for further consideration in taking forward Strategic Area Planning in the WELB Area.

This reads as official ‘speak’ for ignoring the consultation responses.

In short, little changed as a result of the WELB consultation exercise – the views of 7,629 people were ignored.

**Views across the five ELBs**

 Table 6 sets out the responses to the consultation process across the five education and library boards (source: Central Management Unit, SELB Summary Report, December 2012). There were four categories of responses

1. Completion of the on-line survey – [www.puttingpupilsfirst.com](http://www.puttingpupilsfirst.com)
2. Hard copy submissions of the on-line survey[[3]](#footnote-3)
3. Views on the area plans expressed by letter or submission
4. Other consultation (e.g. petitions)

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| Table 6: Levels of response |
| Board | **On-line** | **Hard Copy** | **Letter or Submission** | **Other\*** | **Totals** |
| BELB | 484 | 3266 | 8 | 0 | 3758 |
| NEELB | 10064 | 208 | 427 | 1(13412) | 24111 |
| SEELB | 957 | 60 | 23 | 1(240) | 1280 |
| SELB | 4552 | 1641 | 41 | 1(6403) | 12637 |
| WELB | 956 | 219 | 32 | 4(6422) | 7629 |
| Totals | 17013 | 5394 | 531 | 7(26477) | 49415 |

Results from the Belfast Education and Library Board are skewed because 3,158 paper copy submissions of the survey questionnaire were received from one campaigning school (St Louise’s Comprehensive College).

The Central Management Unit (of the Southern Education and Library Board) provides an overall analysis of the generic questionnaires - designed to facilitate those respondents who wished to comment generally about each of the ELBs plans, rather than individual council areas therein. If we discount the St Louise’s submission to the on-line survey, the generic results of the 5 ELBs across the four selected questions are set out in figure 5.

There are a number of observations which can be made about this analysis. First, the BELB data are based on the smallest number of responses (n=484) and appear to be at odds with the four other Education and Library Boards. Second, the North Eastern Education and Library Board shows the least agreement with the draft area plans for post-primary schools. Third, it is concerning to see just how few respondents considered the area plans as ‘leading to a network of sustainable schools which will enhance the quality of education provision and raise standards’ – the whole purpose of education reforms. Finally, given the low level of agreement expressed through the consultation process, what guarantee does the public have that their concerns have been addressed in the revised plans which were submitted to the Department of Education for approval?

Qualitative data/comments were also analysed in the consultation submissions around themes. The following emerged as significant based on recurrence across at least 4 of the 5 ELBs (in no order of importance):

* Impact on local communities.
* Impact on the quality of education provided.
* Cross-sectoral provision and collaboration.
* Travel distances and time for pupils.
* Impact on the integrated school sector.
* Role of further education sector.
* Sixth form provision.
* Grammar school education and selection.
* Impact on the choice of schools and sectors.
* Impact on the local economy and jobs.

In sum, this analysis suggests that the public consultation process around post-primary education provision is tokenistic. It also raises questions about how serious the school managing authorities (ELBs and CCMS) are in conducting a similar but much larger public consultation exercise currently underway for the 854 primary schools in Northern Ireland. Vested sectoral interests seem resistant to change even in the face of widespread public support for radical thinking in the way education is provided. To illustrate this we move to consider the primary school consultation process, retaining a focus on the Western Education and Library Board as a case study.

**Primary Schools Consultation**

The primary school consultation process was launched on 19th March 2013, will close on 30th June 2013, and is billed as ‘an opportunity to put forward your views to help finalise the Strategic area plans’. The format for the consultation is the same as the post-primary process – an on-line questionnaire (with an option to return in hard copy form) directly related to each constituent local council area in the relevant ELB. Interestingly however, there is no option to complete a generic response which was available to post-primary respondents. The questions posed are similar to the post-primary questionnaire in that they seek public reaction to the terms of reference of the strategic area planning process outlined above. One noticeable change however is that respondents are not asked for their views on whether the area plan ‘shows a way forward for (post)primary provision in the Board’s area’ which is now replaced by a more subtle question seeking reaction to the statement ‘that this plan articulates a clear vision for primary education in this Council area’.

**Fermanagh District Council (Primary Schools)**

By way of illustration there are 43 primary schools in the Fermanagh District Council area. The viability audit data show that: 2 primary schools are oversubscribed; 22 primary schools fall below the ‘rural’ minimum threshold of 105 pupils; and 11 primary schools do not meet the minimum threshold of 4 teachers. The Western Education and Library Board draft plan currently out for consultation essentially does two things:

1. It proposes no changes to those primary schools above the threshold of 105 pupils.
2. It proposes the exploration of a ‘local area solution’ for schools below the threshold.

In summary therefore, the area plan consultation document proposes ‘no change’ for 19 primary schools in Fermanagh, 1 school closure (St Eugene’s Primary School) Lisnaskea, and 24 primary schools where ‘local area solutions should be explored’.

The obvious question is **what are people being consulted about?** The rather strange response to this question in the WELB draft area plan is as follows:

The process of taking forward proposals is complex and it will take time to carry out the strategic area plan and it will be a process which will continue over a number of years. In implementing this plan, the WELB has its own priorities, and the DE will also have a role to play in determining what can be afforded (WELB Draft Strategic Area Plan for Primary Schools, Consultation Document, 2013: 39).

To re-interpret, proposals for 56% of primary schools are still being considered and the remainder are above the viability threshold, so how can respondents sensibly respond to a questionnaire which asked for their views on the ‘plans’ for the area? Notwithstanding, the suggestion from the WELB is that it is all a ‘moving target’ anyway and entirely subject to the availability of future funding.

Beyond the absurdness of such a consultation is more concerning evidence that the WELB appears to be ignoring views expressed by schools which have taken the consultation process seriously and sought to input local views. There is evidence from schools which have been working to develop ‘realistic, innovative and creative solutions to address need, including opportunities for shared schooling on a cross sectoral basis’ (in accordance with the terms of reference of area planning) that their expressed written preferences have simply not appeared in the draft plans for consultation. Here are some examples[[4]](#footnote-4):

1. St Mary’s Primary School Brookeborough and Brookeborough Controlled Primary School submitted a request to the WELB Area Planning Working Group for a shared education solution to be explored between their schools. However, this request has not been included in the draft area plan.

1. Killyhommon Primary School and Derrygonnelly Controlled Primary School submitted a request to the WELB Area Planning Working Group, for a shared education solution to be explored between their schools. However, this request has not been included in the draft area plan.
2. St Mary’s Primary School Newtownbutler, St Joseph’s Primary School Donagh, and Newtownbutler Controlled Primary School also submitted a request to the WELB Area Planning Working Group, for a shared education solution to be explored between their schools. This request has not been included in the draft area plan. However, the WELB is working behind the scenes on a proposal to amalgamate three local controlled schools (Newtownbutler PS, Aghadrumsee PS and Moat PS) and relocate to a newly refurbished school on the site of Lisnaksea High School (for which the WELB has a proposal to close and amalgamate with Devenish College, in Enniskillen).

The fact that the WELB’s proposal to amalgamate the 3 controlled primary schools in this area was not included in the area plan, clearly demonstrates lack of transparency and it calls into question the ‘bottom-up’ approach to consultation that has ostensibly been promoted both by the Department of Education and the School Managing Authorities.

1. Aghadrumsee Primary School, St Tierney’s Primary School and St Macartan’s Primary School submitted a request to the WELB Area Planning Working Group, for a shared education solution to be explored between their schools. This request has not been included in the draft area plan. However, the WELB is working behind the scenes, on a proposal to amalgamate three local controlled schools (Newtownbutler PS, Aghadrumsee PS and Moat PS) and relocate to a newly refurbished school on the site of Lisnaksea High School (for which the WELB has a proposal to close & amalgamate with Devenish College, in Enniskillen). Again this calls into question the lack of transparency in the process being adopted by the Board and its disregard for ‘bottom-up’ suggested solutions.

These examples illustrate that the WELB appears to have learned nothing from their experience of participating in the post-primary review and, in fact, are acting in an arbitrary way by ignoring ‘bottom-up’ cross-sectoral solutions despite explicit mention in the terms of reference for strategic planning to identify ‘opportunities for shared schooling on a cross-sectoral basis’.

**Evidence of innovation**

There are however examples where Boards have encouraged and responded to innovative and creative thinking[[5]](#footnote-5). Two case studies illustrate the point.

1. **Ballynahinch:** The High School Ballynahinch and St Colman’s High School have a limited history of partnership working between the two schools. The draft area plan issued by the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) suggested a ‘strategic alliance’ between Ballynahinch High School and Saintfield High School and, separately, between Assumption Grammar (Saintfield) and St Colman’s High School – an intra-sectoral ‘solution’. Principals in the area did not see these proposals as the most effective way to develop education for 11-19 year olds. As a result, they submitted an alternative model for provision to the consultation process involving collaborative provision between the High School Ballynahinch and St Colman’s High School. The revised plans accepted these suggestions where the SEELB and CCMS would work towards a ‘Ballynahinch solution’ involving a significant amount of cross-sectoral collaboration. Both CCMS and the SEELB have supported the model of shared education between the schools. This was as a result of lobbying and represents a significant change to the original plans.
2. **Ballymoney:** Dalrida and Our Lady of Lourdes have been working together to extend the curricular choice for pupils, and to a lesser extent with Ballymoney High School through the area learning community. The North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) proposed, somewhat surprisingly, in the draft plan ‘to explore the establishment of a shared management 11-19 co-educational school incorporating Ballymoney High School and Our Lady of Lourdes High School from September 2014 operating on a split site’. This was endorsed in the revised area plans and is seen as representing an excellent opportunity to provide a collaborative ‘town’ solution to 11-19 education, as there exists maintained, controlled, selective and FE provision in the town. The provision of the entire 11-19 curriculum within the area will reduce duplication, allow providers to take a strategic view of need across all learners and implement more efficient delivery, rather than duplicating provision across all four providers. It also recognises that there is a minority Catholic community in the town, the removal of which would further isolate this community.

**Conclusions**

There are several conclusions which can be drawn from this short paper. First, the massive response (n = 49,415) which the post-primary area plans attracted shows an appetite for consultation and involvement by the public in the future of education. This is hugely welcome but needs to be taken seriously by the managing authorities. Second, and notwithstanding the volume of responses so far, the quantity of paperwork for the public to read and digest makes it inaccessible and tedious for large sections of the population and demands access to on-line resources. Although provision can be made for hard copy access, the default position is that the documents are available on-line. This, in itself, can become an obstacle when considering a large volume of information. Third, this paper has evidenced how one education and library board, in particular, has chosen to ignore grassroots opinion which offers potential local solutions. This represents the worse type of paternalism on the part of school managing authorities; a ‘we know best attitude’ reinforced by a needs model in the area plans which is based on 3 separate sectors: controlled, maintained and integrated schools. Such an approach stifles ‘innovation and creativity’ which DE implored the ELBs and CCMS to embrace in their approach to area planning. Finally, the Education Minister has encouraged public engagement in the future reorganisation of the education estate, in particular bottom-up solutions. The evidence in this paper indicates that people are much more advanced in their thinking than managing authorities which have acted as gatekeepers for local solutions and sought to protect their own sectoral interests. The indications are that consultation over the future of primary schools will repeat the same failed approach. Local communities are up for change. The key question is whether their views will be taken seriously by school managing authorities and the Department of Education – true public consultation or tokenism?

1. We have combined questionnaire responses given in a generic format (not linked to a specific council area) plus the 5 council areas as a way of providing an overview of the entire WELB constituency. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We wish to acknowledge and thank Queen’s University, Belfast (Shared Education Programme) for examples provided. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Details of the hard copy responses were keyed into the online facility, for inclusion in the statistical analysis [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We wish to acknowledge and thank the Fermanagh Trust (Shared Education Programme) for examples in this area. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We wish to acknowledge and thank Queen’s University, Belfast (Shared Education Programme) for examples provided. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)