



Consultation Response

Department of Education Consultation:

Supporting Newcomer Pupils

October 2019

The Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership is a cross-party partnership working across the spheres of government and between the public, private and third sectors to ensure that Northern Ireland effectively welcomes, supports and integrates new migrants in a way which contributes to future economic growth and vibrant, cohesive communities. The Partnership provides a regional advisory function which enables our partners and stakeholders to cultivate an appropriate Northern Ireland migration policy structure and works to ensure that Northern Ireland's needs and concerns in respect of immigration are recognised within the parameters of related UK wide policy.

This response has been approved by representatives on the Partnership. However this does not necessarily reflect the views of Partner Organisations, some of whom have not been canvassed.

Introduction

We would like to commend the Department on their approach to this strategy review. As a member of the Reference Group, we found the process to be rigorously transparent and inclusive of the views of the widest range of stakeholders possible in a limited timeframe. The Department set a tone which allowed for open and frank discussions within the reference group that helped ensure that underrepresented groups and areas were given the opportunity to raise their priorities during the pre-consultation activity outlined in the consultation document. We believe that it would be useful for the Department to provide a short report on this approach, outlining how they perceive it impacted on outcomes, with lessons learnt and recommendations for others undertaking similar consultations.

In 2014, NISMP convened an Education and Skills Working Group to look at the issue of interrupted education in primary and post-primary schools in Belfast. The group comprised officers from BELB, school principals, heads of strategy at DEL and the coordinator of HAPANI, an organisation which represents many of the communities struggling with the issue of interrupted education. Methodology included interviews with principals and teachers from 4 affected post-primary schools and 3 affected primary schools, as well as a focus group with 9 Roma parents. The comments below are drawn from the findings within this report (<http://www.migrationni.org/resources>) as well as from our experience of working alongside organisations which directly support vulnerable newcomer children and their families.

Question 1: How could the current policy be improved to ensure that Newcomer pupils receive effective and timely support to achieve their full potential?

Current policy defines a Newcomer as a child who “does not have the satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum”. However, in Annexe C of the consultation document, schools identify a range of other factors facing newcomer pupils which impact on their ability to meaningfully participate in the classroom and achieve their full potential. These include: interrupted education, cultural differences, and social and emotional needs. Issues relating to trauma in young asylum seekers and refugees have been highlighted In the

‘New to Northern Ireland’¹ research. All of these issues are echoed regularly in network meetings of community and voluntary organisations which directly support families of asylum seekers, refugees and other vulnerable migrants.

We therefore believe that the current definition of Newcomer Pupil is too restrictive as it doesn’t acknowledge barriers to education faced by vulnerable groups that are additional to EAL; nor does it allow for support to be given to newcomer children who may not have a language barrier but who are dealing with trauma and the effects of interrupted education. The definition of Newcomer should therefore be revised so that associated funding can be used to address factors such as those listed above and can also be used to support all newcomer children who require support, regardless of their language skills.

Question 2: What additional support services should be available to schools with Newcomer pupils?

1. Additional assessment support: The issue of assessment was raised repeatedly by schools who contributed to the NISMP report. CEFR was considered not relevant or useful when assessing newcomer children who had had interruptions in their education, as it assumes a level of literacy in the child’s first language. One EAL support teacher who worked with both primary and post-primary schools described CEFR as unsuitable for non-European languages and completely unsuitable for primary schools. In addition to language needs, these schools also recognised the need to assess for previous school experience, emotional needs etc. Similar points are also raised by schools in Annexe C of the consultation documents. Adequate assessment support will also help schools better identify SEN needs and manage support.
2. Additional support for liaising with parents: Parents’ expectations of education are embedded in their own experiences and cultural background. Schools and parents both need clear guidance on how to more effectively engage with each other. Three schools which participated in the NISMP research had employed attendance officers or community liaison officers who had effectively improved communication with families and attendance of children.
3. Trauma counsellors: For the last 4 years, families have been resettled across Northern Ireland under the Vulnerable People Relocation Scheme. To date 1549 people have been relocated under the scheme. The scheme has been designed to protect the most vulnerable: “women and children at risk, people in severe need of medical care and survivors of torture and violence”. Children arriving under the asylum system can likewise be affected. Schools have noted signs of trauma in children attending school and are ill-equipped to deal with this.

¹ https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/17%20ntni_web_final.pdf

4. Additional guidance and resources to effectively support children in the classroom: Schools struggle with effectively supporting certain groups of newcomer children who have more complex needs than simply a language barrier. Schools in the NISMP research gave innovative examples of how they were working to address these more complex needs, e.g. through providing intensive support, accelerated learning programmes or establishing a staffed ‘hub area’ where children can be supported in their social and cultural as well as academic needs. However, all schools stated that these interventions were arrived at through trial and error and that they were “crying out for help” in terms of guidance and resources. These sentiments are echoed in Annex C of the consultation documents.

Question 3: How could schools best be supported and encouraged to embrace and share best practice in supporting Newcomer pupils?

Specialist School or Centre of Excellence status should be awarded to schools which have expertise in supporting and integrating newcomer children and which are prepared to share this practice with other schools.

Online platforms could be developed to facilitate the sharing of learning and the co-design of interventions.

Question 4: In your experience, are Newcomer pupils given opportunities to maintain their home language(s) in school? What are the difficulties / challenges in facilitating this?

Where it is difficult for a school to meaningfully support home languages in school, the Department should consider how community-led initiatives can be supported. The Polish Saturday School in Belfast is an example of such an initiative.

Question 5: Should schools be required to report on how they use their Newcomer funding? If so, how do we ensure this reporting remains proportionate to the amount of funding received?

Yes, there should be a requirement to report on how this funding is used. As well as ensuring accountability for funding received, reporting could also be used as a mechanism to help identify good practice.

Question 6: Should there be different levels of funding depending on whether the pupil is at primary school or post-primary school? Should there be additional funding provided to help support pupils who have experienced disruption to their education (i.e. those pupils who have been out of school for a long time or who have never been to school before)?

There should be additional funding provided to help support pupils who have experienced disruptions to their education. The Departmental goal of “closing the performance gap, increasing access and equality...ensuring that young people who face barriers or are at risk of social exclusion are supported to achieve to their full potential”, recognises that children have widely differing starting points. While factors common to other groups of vulnerable children (such as looked after children, children from disadvantaged areas) are addressed through regional initiatives (e.g. Sure Start, bespoke training for school staff, Looked After Children Strategy), no such initiative exists for children suffering from the impacts of little or no previous experience of formal education. Northern Ireland’s participation in VPRS and increasing numbers of asylum seekers has led to increasing numbers of pupils who fall into this category. This must now be addressed through policy and funding streams. It must also include collaboration with DfE to ensure that appropriate pathways are identified for post-primary children who are struggling because of interrupted education, so that they are adequately supported when they transition out of school.

Question 7: Should there be a limit on the maximum amount of total Newcomer funding a school can receive? Should there be a minimum amount of total Newcomer funding that a school can receive (this could benefit schools with very low numbers of Newcomer pupils)?

Schools with low numbers of newcomer pupils need to receive a level of funding which will enable them to effectively support these pupils. An economy of scale argument could be used to limit funding to schools which have particularly large numbers of newcomer pupils.

Question 9: Do you have any additional comments?

- The consultation paper notes that: ‘parents reported a wide range of experiences of the school admissions process’ and contrasts the experience of parents who arrived as part of the VPRS who were allocated key workers to help them navigate the school admissions process, with other newcomer parents who “reported frustrating experiences including being turned away from schools and given no further information on how to proceed”. We recommend that the Department introduces a formal role for the Education Authority in directly supporting families with recognised complex needs (such as asylum seeker and Roma families) in securing school places and in providing accessible information and guidance on navigating the education system.

- We have heard concerns from schools that the inclusion of newcomer children with interrupted education in attendance records and performance tables, skews a school's results and fails to reflect the value-added that the school has made to the children's experience of education. The Department should introduce records which reflect a child's progress from his/her baseline on entering the school.
- Curriculum and school staff should reflect the diversity of the school population.
- Schools should be allowed to exercise discretion around Free School Meals if a pupil's migration status precludes them from accessing public funds.
- In implementing the recommendations arising from this consultation the Department needs to recognise and address any additional demands that will be put on other educational resources. For example any additional SEN needs that have been identified through more effective assessment will require sufficient resources within SEN teams.