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COR/142/2003

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5th July 2003

Thank you for your letters and enclosed papers of 2 and 15 April advising on the curriculum and assessment arrangements for Key Stages 3 and 4 respectively.

May I say at the outset that I appreciate very much the considerable work which has gone into the preparation of these proposals. The Council has clearly been at pains to consult widely and to ensure that its proposals have been the product of a process of development that has encouraged a very full participation and involvement among schools and other stakeholders in education.

I accept the Council's underpinning philosophy – that the curriculum should enable young people to develop their potential as individuals, as members of society, and as contributors to the economy and the environment. I also concur with its analysis that the current curriculum for pupils in both Key Stages 3 and 4 lacks flexibility and allows insufficiently for the acquisition by young people of the skills, not only which employers seek, but which will stand them in good stead for their adult lives more generally.

I also strongly share your evident concern that the revised curriculum at both Key Stages should be engaging and relevant for pupils, while at the same time being manageable for schools, and that it should build on the considerable strengths of our teachers.



The changes which you have proposed, including greater emphasis on skills acquisition, are clearly the result of considerable consultation and reflection. While I would support a greater emphasis on skills acquisition, this should not be at the expense of proper breadth and balance in the curriculum for young people, in both Key Stages 3 and 4, and avenues of progression should not be closed off too early. In particular, I believe that every young person up to age 16 should study English and mathematics, through an appropriate course, to the fullest extent of their ability. ICT should also be fully integrated into teaching and learning in every subject in every Key Stage.

Your letter makes clear the central role of the learning outcomes for the ‘transferable skills’ at Key Stage 4. While I share your view of the importance of young people developing skills which are not subject-specific, I have reservations about the outcomes proposed for application of number, communication and ICT. I believe that these outcomes are still too constrained by, and too closely aligned with, the current specifications used for the accreditation of Key Skills, about which your advice noted the current concerns of teachers.

I would be grateful if the Council would reflect on the above, and on the more detailed points in relation to both Key Stages 3 and 4 in the attached appendix, and provide further advice, to allow me to take a view on bringing these proposals forward into legislation. I am aware that the Council intends to have further consultations with schools, and I am content that schools should have an exceptional closure day, in the autumn term, to consider your proposals and work on their response.

I would be grateful for your further advice on the matters raised in this letter and its appendix **not later than 31 December 2003**, so that the necessary legislation can be prepared to have the curricular framework in place by September 2005.

As new policy, your Council’s proposals for the curriculum will also need to be considered from the perspective of section 75 equality issues. I am aware that the Council has already undertaken some equality impact work on them, and I will expect your further advice to make explicit reference to equality considerations.



Schools will, of course, require sufficiently detailed guidance and training on all aspects of the revised curriculum, including models of curriculum organisation, to enable them to deploy their staff and to plan their courses and lessons. I will also expect the Council to work closely with the CASS services of the Education and Library Boards to agree detailed and costed plans, for my Department's approval, for how the implementation of these new proposals will

be phased in and supported with inservice training and appropriate resources, in particular setting out how it is intended that existing resources will be deployed to this end. Again, I would be grateful for your plans, agreed with the Boards, by 31 December 2003. My Department will be writing separately to the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards on this point.

Finally, your 2 April letter asked for my approval to your publishing the 'rationale' paper attached to your letter, and you may assume you have this as you continue your consultation with schools.

Yours
Jane Kennedy

JANE KENNEDY MP
Minister with responsibility for Education



Key Stage 3

1. The Council's more detailed proposals should set out:
 - a. clear progression from the Key Stage 2 curriculum, and how this can be achieved in order to avoid the duplicative work currently found in Year 8;
 - b. how breadth and balance is to be achieved across the range of educational experiences which young people should have at post-primary level;
 - c. how the new aspects of the curriculum, under the generic heading of 'Learning for Life and Work', can be integrated into, rather than added on to, a broad and balanced educational experience, taking account of the specialist strengths of teachers;
 - d. which elements of these new aspects would require discrete teaching provision;
 - e. how differentiation and progression within 'Learning for Life and Work' is to be achieved, across the full ability range, including for young people with special educational needs;
 - f. how the curriculum at Key Stage 3 will prepare young people sufficiently for a range of subject choice at Key Stage 4.
2. Further guidance should be prepared on how 'Learning for Life and Work' at Key Stage 3 feeds into the four elements of the statutory curriculum proposed for Key Stage 4.
3. While the proposals refer to a 'statutory entitlement' to breadth of experience at Key Stage 3, the Council's advice is not clear on whether the framework referred to would be mandatory for all pupils.
4. In particular, more work is needed on how the 'generic skills' at Key Stage 3 relate to the 'transferable skills' at Key Stage 4, and how these, in turn, relate to or differ from the current Key Skills (and see paragraph 10 below).
5. 'Skills' only have meaning in the distinctive contexts of subject learning or learning in and through other activities. Guidance will be required offering a rationale for these skills, adequate detail about each, the contribution of underpinning knowledge, understanding, skills, competences, personal qualities and dispositions, and specifications to guide course designers. The emphasis should be on the development of skills integrated into contexts across the curriculum.



6. Further advice is required on the proposed form and nature of annual assessment and standardised reporting, including progression, standards and indicators of performance, before any decision can be taken on the future of key stage tests and assessment.

Key Stage 4

7. Again, the Council's proposals in their current form do not offer schools any guidance on standards, differentiation and progression, and the Council should prepare further and more detailed advice on this across the full ability range, including for young people with special educational needs.
8. Further advice is required on how the proposed learning outcomes can be integrated into the range of qualifications for which young people study at age 16. For example, are GCSE specifications to be revised, and if so, over what period?
9. Further guidance will be required on PSHE in order to ensure coherence, consistency and equality of provision across all schools, and how, in particular, physical education is to be addressed in a way which promotes learning, range and balance of learning experiences and levels of physical activity. The Council's further advice will need to give consideration to methods of assessment in PSHE, including the balance between formative and summative assessment.
10. The outcomes proposed for application of number, communication and ICT are too constrained by, and too closely aligned with, the current specifications for accreditation of the Key Skills. The 'generic'/'transferable' skills should show progression across all of the key stages. For example, the learning outcomes for ICT at Key Stage 4 appear in some respects to be less demanding than those proposed for Key Stage 2. Also, at Key Stage 4 there is no reference to the development of critical thinking skills or, within communication, to the range of media or information handling.
11. In relation to the 'wider' skills of working with others, self-management and problem-solving, specific guidance is also required on standards, assessment and accreditation.



12. In relation to Citizenship at Key Stage 4, the Council will need to ensure that the very particular needs of young people in living in Northern Ireland's difficult and divided circumstances are explicitly and realistically addressed if the full benefits of this area of the curriculum are to be realised. The listed learning outcomes do not achieve this at present.