



Houses of the  
**Oireachtas**  
Tithe an Oireachtais

**TITHE AN OIREACHTAIS**

**AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHORFHEIDHMIÚ CHOMHAONTÚ AOINE AN CHÉASTA**

**Cuairt go Báile Nua na hArda agus Béal Feirste**

**Déardaoin, 3 Nollaig 2015**

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**HOUSES OF THE OIREACHTAS**

**JOINT COMMITTEE ON IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT**

**Visit to Newtownards and Belfast**

**Thursday, 3 December 2015**

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## **1. Introduction**

The Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement agreed to send a delegation on an Outreach Visit to visit integrated schools in Newtownards and Belfast at a Committee meeting held on 16<sup>th</sup> July 2015.

The Committee proposed that a delegation should undertake this visit as Outreach visits to meet the key stakeholders and organisations in Northern Ireland are a priority for the Committee. The Committee unanimously agreed that a visit to integrated schools to see at first-hand how they operate would be very worthwhile. The Committee has a consistent policy of undertaking Outreach Visits that will enhance its understanding of important issues and ensure that it engages with key stake holders and local communities which is intrinsic to its reconciliation and bridge building work.

The Committee was represented on the visit by Deputy Frank Feighan (Chairman). The delegation was accompanied by Tara Kelly, Committee Clerk and Jessica O'Connor, Committee Secretariat.

## **2. Strangford Integrated College**

Principle Mark Weir welcomed the delegation to Strangford Integrated College and introduced head girl Sarah McAlees and head boy Alex Gaw, as well as other students and staff. The delegation had an informal meeting with senior management and teachers at the school, and parents and teachers of children at Strangford. A presentation was made to the committee outlining the history, ethos and challenges surrounding Strangford.

A number of key issues were raised:

- Strangford is a school that's growing – applications to attend are increasing which illustrates that there is huge demand for places at the integrated school.
- The school needs capital investment urgently to provide the requisite resources that are needed to properly implement the curriculum.

- Many of the colleges building were intended for temporary replacements or upgrades are well overdue. In particular, there is a particular need for permanent buildings and sports facilities.
- Despite these physical challenges, Strangford is an extremely positive and well run school. Teachers, parents and students make the most of what they have and don't let the lack of facilities hold them back.
- Strangford students displayed a universal enthusiasm, motivation and maturity that is a credit to themselves and their school. They explained how the opportunity to meet people from different backgrounds has enriched their school days and it is something special and unique that will stand to them for the rest of their lives.
- The school is viewed as a 'community' rather than an institution. The staff and students take great pride in being members of this community and this gives students a sense of responsibility, independence and maturity.
- The school hopes to pay a visit to the Oireachtas shortly to meet Committee Members and have a tour of Leinster House. The Chairman stated that it would be a great honour to host the teachers and students on a visit.

### **Hazelwood Integrated Primary School, Newtownabbey, Belfast**

The Committee also visited Hazelwood Integrated Primary School, Newtownabbey, Belfast. Staff and students welcomed the delegation and provided a warm reception and refreshments in one of the reading rooms.

The delegation met a number of P7 students from different faith traditions and also had the pleasure of dropping into technology and choir classes. Speaking to the Irish News about the visit, Patricia Murtagh, Principal of Hazelwood, said *'in spite of the good work of our politicians at all levels, the reality of change comes from the hearts and minds of the young people we nurture and challenge in our schools. The environment in North Belfast still bristles with sectarianism and racism and we have to ensure that our children are able to have the difficult conversations if they arise'*.

A number of key issues were raised:

- While overlooked by a 'peace wall', the atmosphere in Hazelwood conveys the gravitas of Principal Patricia Murtagh's emphasis on the "reality of change" that exists within the school.
- Further investment is urgently required for Hazelwood's Nurture Programme and related areas that address the special needs of students at an early age thus preventing later stage interventions. There is a genuine commitment to embracing children with special needs and making them part of the school community.
- Children from all religions and none are equally respected. Children break into separate groups for faith formation or as part of the 'social moral' group during school hours. There is an emphasis on respecting and celebrating different backgrounds rather than being strictly non denominational. This seems to foster a genuine atmosphere of tolerance, respect and curiosity by the students towards each other.
- The values of the school are handed down from generation to generation. It is testament to the school's inclusive approach that past pupils choose to send their children there even though it may be a distance from where they now live. It reinforces the argument that when sectarian walls are broken down, they stay down. The past pupils want their children educated in the same way where they will have the opportunity to meet children from different backgrounds and enhance their learning experience.

Following the visit the committee wrote to Minister John O'Dowd MLA to highlight the need for investment in both schools, specifically to upgrade and extend school buildings in Strangford College and further develop the Nurture Programme for students with Special Needs in Hazelwood Integrated Nursery and Primary School.

### 3. **Working lunch at British Irish Intergovernmental Secretariat Residence**

The Joint Committee delegation then had a working lunch hosted by Mr. Ruairi de Burca, Joint Secretary, British Irish Intergovernmental Secretariat Residence, Notting Hill, Belfast. It was attended by Ms. Noreen Campbell, former CEO, Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education; Ms. Roisin Marshall, CEO, Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education; Mr. Alan Henry, Chair, Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE); Ms. Tina Merron, CEO, Integrated Education Fund (IEF); Mr. Paul Caskey, Campaign Director, Integrated Education Fund (IEF); Mr. Jake Proctor, former student, Strangford College; Mr. Nigel Firth, Director of Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and Principal of Drumragh Integrated College, Baroness May Blood; Sir Nigel Hamilton, KCB.

A number of key issues were raised in a wide ranging discussion:

- Northern Ireland has secured a level of peace that, while not ideal, allows it to look to the future. The next generation, while conscious of legacy issues, is not overly burdened by them. Integrated education represents a path to building on this peace with the young people of Northern Ireland as important leaders.
- The integrated education movement expressed genuine appreciation and delight at the fact that the Joint Community has championed the expansion of integrated education in Northern Ireland. The Chairman, on behalf of the Committee, made the point that it was a great honour for the Committee to make a meaningful contribution to such an important issue in Northern Ireland. It was unanimously agreed that it is in issues like this that the Committee can make a real difference and add value to the parliamentary process on both sides of the border.
- The Chairman expressed his gratitude for the role that Mr. Ruairi de Burca, Joint Secretary, British Irish Intergovernmental Secretariat Residence has played in supporting the Committee in its interactions with the Integrated Education Movement. Mr. Burca has worked tirelessly on behalf of the Committee in organising meetings, enhancing the Committee's understanding of the issues and hosting events such as the one today.

- Integrated education can be a strong and powerful force to bring people together and develop real and genuine understanding and acceptance of our differences. However, it cannot be viewed in isolation. It needs to be supported by a strong commitment to address other fundamentally important areas ranging from mixed social housing to legacy issues dealing with the past. Integrated education cannot be seen to be the panacea to solve all Northern Ireland's problems but it can be an important catalyst for change.
- The Department of Education in recognising integrated education needs to look at how integrated education schools are funded centrally. For historic reasons, the funding mechanisms have evolved on a somewhat ad hoc basis. It is now opportune to review funding to ensure integrated schools can grow and expand in response to parental demand.
- While 'the past is a different country' the legacy it leaves is handed down from generation to generation. It is only by confronting the past that Northern Ireland as a society can move on and look towards the future with hope. Educating children of all religions and none together, where differences are respected and celebrated, is an important foundation stone in laying the past to rest.

#### **4. Conclusion.**

The Chairman intends to ensure that the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement proactively engages with the National Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) in a spirit of partnership into the future. The Committee can learn valuable lessons from the work carried out by the organisations and in return, the Committee may be able to assist the organisations in terms of seeking recognition and publicity for their commendable aims.

The Chairman would like to thank the staff, students and parents at both schools and express his gratitude to Mr. Ruairi de Burca for hosting the lunch in such a convivial setting. It proved an informal and productive forum for sharing insights and ideas and developing greater understanding on an a visit which was truly thought provoking and inspiring.

**APPENDIX 1**

**Member of the Delegation**



**Frank Feighan TD  
(FG) (Chair)**

**Oireachtas Outreach Visit  
Implementation of Good Friday Agreement  
Thursday, 26<sup>th</sup> November 2015**

**AGENDA**

**Integrated Schools: Strangford and Belfast**

- 08.30 am**    **Depart Leinster House by coach (Merrion Square entrance)**
- 11.00 am**    Arrival at Strangford Integrated College, Carrowdore, Newtownards  
Meeting with staff and Tour of College
- 12 noon**    Depart College
- 12.30 pm**    Arrival at Hazelwood Integrated Primary School, Newtownabbey,  
Belfast
- Meeting with staff and Tour of School
- 13.30 pm**    Depart School
- 14.00 pm**    Arrival for Working Lunch at Residence of Joint Secretary (Irish) of the British  
Irish Intergovernmental Secretariat, Notting Hill, Belfast
- 16.00 pm**    Departure

### Steering Note

Following on from its Committee meeting of September 2015 at which it considered integrated education in Northern Ireland, Committee members will have an opportunity to visit integrated education schools at secondary and primary level in Newtownards and Belfast. Members will also have the opportunity to discuss integrated education, as well as wider issues, at a lunch hosted by Mr. Ruairi de Burca, Joint Secretary to the British Irish Intergovernmental Secretariat.

Members will initially visit Strangford Integrated College in Newtownards. Members may recall that a former student at Strangford, Jake Proctor, addressed the Committee on his positive experience of integrated education in September this year. Mr. Proctor, who will meet Committee members during the visit, is now an activist for integrated education. At Strangford, members will also have an opportunity to meet with school staff, and tour the college. Members will meet the Principal Mark Weir, as well as Head Girl Sarah McAlees, Head Boy Alex Gaw, and some other pupils. Members may also meet Governors and some of the school leadership team.

At both Strangford and Hazelwood members will meet Paul Caskey, and Clíodhna Scott Wills from the Northern Ireland Council on Integrated Education (NICIE). Paul and Clíodhna addressed the Committee at its meeting on integrated education in September.

At 2pm Mr. Ruairi de Burca, Joint Secretary (Irish) of the British Irish Intergovernmental Secretariat will host the members for lunch at his Residence. Also attending will be several members of the Northern Ireland Council on Integrated Education (NICIE) and the Integrated Education Fund (IEF).

Attending from NICIE will be: Ms. Roisin Marshall, Chief Executive, Ms. Noreen Campbell, former Chief Executive, Alan Henry, Chair of the NICIE Board of Directors, and Nigel Frith, Director of NICIE. (Members may recall that Mr. Frith also appeared before the Committee in December during the session on integrated education). The Integrated Education Fund will be represented by Ms. Tina Merron, chief executive IEF, and Mr. Paul Caskey, Campaign Director IEF.

Jake Proctor will also attend the lunch, as will Sir Nigel Hamilton, former head of the Northern Ireland civil service, and Baroness May Blood. Members of the Committee who are also members of BIPA may have met with Baroness Blood during the recent BIPA plenary at Cheltenham.

### Integrated Education in Northern Ireland

Integrated Education brings children and staff from Catholic and Protestant traditions, as well as those of other faiths, or none, together in one school. There are currently 62 integrated primary and second-level schools in Northern Ireland, with a total of almost 22,000 pupils. This accounts for 7% of the entire student population in the region.

The Good Friday Agreement notes that an “essential aspect of the reconciliation process is the promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society, including initiatives to facilitate and encourage integrated education and mixed housing”. The Stormont House Agreement contains a commitment, in Article 69, to “promote a culture of tolerance, mutual respect and mutual understanding at every level of society, including initiatives to facilitate and encourage shared and integrated education”.

### **Shared Education in Northern Ireland**

Shared Education, a policy of the Northern Ireland Department of Education<sup>1</sup>, aims to build on the existing educational structures to create a more integrated education system with increased contact between children and young people from different community backgrounds.

This can involve pupils from different schools sharing a building or campus or coming together to study a specific subject through a shared class. Cross-school project work or joint school planning and shared activities are other examples of shared education.

92% of pupils in primary and post-primary schools attend either controlled or maintained schools. Controlled schools largely draw their student body from the Protestant community while maintained schools, which are managed by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools are largely attended by Catholic children.

### **Northern Ireland Council on Integrated Education**

NICIE, a charitable organisation, was established in 1987 to co-ordinate efforts to develop integrated education and to support parent groups through the process of opening new schools. It was formed with the encouragement of the Nuffield Foundation, which was then a major funder of integrated schools in Northern Ireland. NICIE receives core funding from the Department of Education in Northern Ireland (DENI); in 2014, funding from the DENI accounted for 93% of NICIE’s annual income of stg£734,370.

NICIE is a membership organisation with 62 associated integrated schools. In addition to encouraging and facilitating the development of integrated education in Northern Ireland, NICIE has a key role in developing the integrated ethos and best practice in good relations within schools.

Between 2007 and 2014, the Reconciliation Fund of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade made awards totalling €283,000 to NICIE, including €40,000 in December 2014. NICIE’s application to the Fund earlier this year was unsuccessful; however the organisation was encouraged to submit future applications to the Fund.

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<sup>1</sup> Sharing Works: A Policy for Shared Education:  
[http://www.deni.gov.uk/a\\_policy\\_for\\_shared\\_education\\_jan\\_2015.pdf](http://www.deni.gov.uk/a_policy_for_shared_education_jan_2015.pdf)

### **Strangford Integrated College**

The seeds of Strangford College were sown in February 1996, when parents attending a public meeting called by All Children Together (ACT) formed a Steering Committee which dedicated itself to opening a post primary integrated school in the North Down and Ards area.

With the active support and backing of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, the Integrated Fund and ACT, the College first opened its doors on 1st September 1997, with 64 students, six full-time members of staff and a school secretary.

After three years of campaigning, lobbying and fundraising, the Department of Education awarded us grant maintained status in September 1999. This recognition was a significant milestone in the College's development.

Integrated education at Strangford College offers the opportunity for young people from differing religious and cultural backgrounds to be educated together, in an atmosphere of respect, tolerance, trust and understanding. The deliberate mix of young people and teachers from different backgrounds is unique to integrated schools. At Strangford College, we believe that young people should grow up not only knowing about each other, but also have the opportunity to build friendships, which will last. We are convinced that difference is not something to be afraid of, but rather that it enriches and adds value to a young person's own religious, or cultural identity.

At Strangford, integrated education is carried out in a school, which is committed to high academic standards for its students. We believe that all students have the opportunity to succeed, if given the opportunity to do so. At the College, we seek to ensure that each child fulfils his/her academic potential. We focus on the specific needs of each child, believing strongly in the self-esteem of the individual and that healthy self-respect encourages respect for others.

The College continues to grow and thrive, and has been consistently oversubscribed. For example, 183 applied for our 80 places in Year 8. Since September 2015, the College has offered both grammar and all ability entry.

Our College motto is very significant and appropriate: In Hoc Signo Vincas – Under the sign we are strong!

## **APPENDIX 5**

### **Hazelwood Integrated Primary School**

Hazelwood opened in September 1985 at the height of civil unrest in Northern Ireland and was one of the first two integrated primary schools.

The school was created through the determination of 16 founding parents who were committed to providing integrated education in North Belfast. These parents had faith in their ideals and believed that bringing children together in schools would help to heal the divisions in our society caused by religion and politics. The school's numbers grew quickly as more and more parents opted for integrated education for their children.

In the years following, the Department of Education were forced to accept the legitimacy of integrated education and they agreed Maintained Status for the school in 1987. This greatly reduced the financial burden which had been placed on the directors of the school. As more and more integrated schools emerged throughout Northern Ireland, the government saw the need to recognise such projects and the 1989 Education Reform Order provided a basis for partial government support. By April 1991 Hazelwood was given Grant Maintained Integrated status resulting in 100% government funding. A new purpose-built school on the present site was opened in June 1996.

In May 2007, just a few months after the DUP and Sinn Fein agreed to share power at Stormont, a decision was taken by the Northern Ireland Office to erect a 'peace fence' at the perimeter of the school and on the children's playground. This was following attacks on Catholic homes in the nearby Throne Park area. This security fence remains to the present day.

Despite being on an interface between areas which are predominately Catholic or Protestant, the school welcomes children from all backgrounds, cultures and religions to be educated together from a young age. As well as a primary school there is a nursery unit, both of which are highly regarded and at full capacity. The nursery was awarded full-time Grant Maintained Integrated status in September 2011. The school has an enrolment number of 406 with 52 places in the Nursery.

In a recent inspection report the children were commended as, "confident, friendly children whose behaviour is excellent". The quality of pastoral care was reported as "outstanding".

This academic year will see Hazelwood celebrate its 30th Anniversary.

**Oireachtas Outreach Visit  
Implementation of Good Friday Agreement  
Thursday, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2015  
Working lunch at British Irish Intergovernmental Secretariat Residence**

Attendees:

**Ms. Noreen Campbell**, former CEO, Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education

**Ms. Roisin Marshall**, CEO, Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education

**Mr. Alan Henry**, Chair, Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)

**Ms. Tina Merron**, CEO, Integrated Education Fund (IEF)

**Mr. Paul Caskey**, Campaign Director, Integrated Education Fund (IEF)

**Mr. Jake Proctor**, former student, Strangford College

**Mr. Nigel Firth**, Director of Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and Principal of Drumragh Integrated College

**Baroness May Blood**

**Sir Nigel Hamilton, KCB**

**Mr. Frank Feighan, TD**, Chair, Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, Houses of the Oireachtas

**Ms. Tara Kelly**, Clerk, Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, Houses of the Oireachtas

**Ms. Jessica O'Connor**, Committee Secretariat, Houses of the Oireachtas

