

COMMUNITY USE OF SCHOOL PREMISES

INTRODUCTION

1. This briefing provides background information on community use of school premises. It outlines the legislative background to community use of schools in Northern Ireland and in Great Britain, and provides additional commentary on community use of schools. The content of the note refers to general information on the use of school premises by local communities. It offers no commentary on the Private Member's Bill on community use of school premises.

BACKGROUND

2. School premises have been utilised for community use for many years in Northern Ireland and further afield. Opening a school's premises and facilities has been acknowledged as beneficial to communities in promoting social inclusion and lifelong learning, for example. Community use of school schemes have also been used to further wider initiatives such as health promotion.

LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT

3. The following is a brief summary of the current legislative context in the UK, which essentially requires schools to consider the 'desirability' of community use of school premises. The emphasis is on encouraging community use of schools, rather than being prescriptive.
4. In England and Wales, legislation refers to the furthering of 'any charitable purpose'. However, in practice, use of school premises outside the school day is not confined to charitable purposes and often forms a part of wider initiatives such as encouraging lifelong learning or health promotion.

NORTHERN IRELAND

5. Article 140 of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 states that:

'Subject to regulations—

- (a) the managers and Board of Governors of every controlled school;*
- (b) the trustees and managers of every voluntary school and grant-maintained integrated school,*

shall, in exercising their respective powers in relation to the school premises..., have regard to the desirability of the premises being made

available (when not required by or in connection with the school) for use by members of the community served by the school.'

ENGLAND

6. Under the Education Act 2002, governing bodies of maintained schools have a limited power to provide facilities or services outside educational purposes. Section 27(1) of the 2002 Act states that:

'The governing body of a maintained schools shall have power to provide any facilities or services whose provision furthers any charitable purpose for the benefit of—

- (a) pupils at the school or their families, or*
- (b) people who live or work in the locality in which the school is situated.'*

7. In availing themselves of the power contained in section 27, schools can also incur expenditure, enter into arrangements or agreements with others, co-operate with others, and provide staff, goods, services and accommodation. Governing bodies are also able to charge for services or facilities provided under section 27.
8. Section 28 places certain limits on the power contained in section 27. Governing bodies cannot do anything that they are already prevented from doing through the school's instrument of government or any scheme prepared in relation to local educational authorities' financial schemes.
9. Under section 28(4), governing bodies must consult their local education authority, school staff, parents and any other persons that the governing body considers appropriate. In addition, where pupils themselves may be affected, and the governing body considers it appropriate to do so, pupils may be consulted.

WALES

10. The Control of School Premises (Wales) Regulations 2008 provide for the control of school premises in the community, maintained and voluntary sector. The Regulations replicate a provision in the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, which was repealed by the Education Act 2002. Under the Regulations, governing bodies of schools in Wales are responsible for the control of school premises during and outside the school day. While governing bodies are required to follow directions given by the local authority, they 'must have regard to the desirability of making the premises available for use by the community.'¹

¹ Control of School Premises (Wales) Regulations) 2008, Explanatory Note, paragraph 2

11. Regulation 2 defines community use as:

'the use of school premises (when not required by or in connection with the school) for charitable purposes by pupils at the school or their families, or people who live or work in the locality in which the school is situated'.

12. However, in practice, the policy is not confined to 'charitable purposes'. Local authorities require schools to have in place lettings policies that outline requirements for the use of school premises outside school time.

SCOTLAND

13. Scotland has a long history of community involvement in schools, including community education and community use of premises. Under section 14 of the School Boards (Scotland) Act 1988, control of school premises is vested in school boards, subject to local authority direction. Schools are required to encourage the use of premises by the use of the local community. However, while this provision is deemed to be out of date, community use of schools is still actively promoted by local authorities.

14. Section 14(1) of the 1988 Act states:

'Every School Board shall, subject to any direction by their education authority..., control the use of the premises of the school outside school hours, and shall encourage the use of those premises by members of the community in which the school is situated.'

15. Scotland also piloted new community schools, which were based on the concept of full-service schools, aimed to addressing social exclusion and promoting inclusion by placing schools at the centre of a range of inter-agency provision, covering education, health and social work services. A key aspect of new community schools was health promotion. The concept of new community schools is currently being reconsidered in light of the change in Administration from Labour to SNP following the Scottish elections in May 2007.

BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY USE

16. Sharing school premises and facilities with the local community has been generally acknowledged as positive for a variety of reasons, such as ensuring that use of the schools estate is maximised and affirming the important roles that schools play in local communities. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has conducted research into the potential for schools to share facilities and premises with their local communities. PricewaterhouseCoopers also undertook a literature review on behalf of the Department for Education into community use of schools, which identified six categories of activity offered through the use of school facilities:

- (a) adult learning (often in conjunction with FE colleges)
- (b) youth activities (e.g. youth clubs, after-school programmes, homework clubs)
- (c) leisure activities (through use of sports facilities and gymnasia)
- (d) resource use and information dissemination (e.g. through schools libraries)
- (e) social services and healthcare provision (e.g. immunisation programmes)
- (f) cultural and social activities (e.g. festivals, concerts, religious ceremonies)

17. Many such activities already take place in schools across Northern Ireland. In addition to the extended schools programme, the concept of offering social and other public services through schools, as the focal points of local communities, is being progressed by the Department of Education through full-service school schemes. Full-service schools, which are an extension of the extended schools initiative, aim to provide a range of service provision on school premises. Currently, two pilot schemes operate in Belfast; one is a joint project between the Girls' and Boys' Model, and the other is at Corpus Christi School in Ballymurphy.

THE HUB OF THE COMMUNITY

18. The unique position that schools occupy in their local areas has been acknowledged:

Schools...are community-based facilities that can even be regarded as belonging to the community. They are respected community assets.²

19. Opening school premises for wider community use can emphasise 'the notion of the school as a key public resource placed at the hub of the local community.'³ Furthermore, the role that schools play at the centre of communities has been highlighted by an OECD report, which explained that:

'Schools are also in the front line of the breakdown of some urban societies, where many of their pupils come from dysfunctional families and have not encountered stable relationships or regularly employed adults. In these circumstances, schools are sometimes a refuge from an uncertain world.'⁴

² Adam Ingram, Minister for Children and Early Years, Scottish Parliament, in evidence to the Lifelong and Culture Committee 4 June 2008, Column 1114.

³ Department of Education (2003) *Community use of schools – an international literature review* by PricewaterhouseCoopers Research Support Series No. 31, page 1.

⁴ OCED (1998) *Under One Roof – The Integration of Schools and Community Services in OECD countries*, OECD, Paris, page 14.

LIFELONG LEARNING

20. Opening a school's premises and facilities to the local community helps to ameliorate the bond between the school and its local community.⁵ Many people living in the environs of a school will already have links to that school, either through their own previous attendance or through that of their children.

21. In addition to the fact that school premises are often centrally located and are therefore easily accessible, schools often have a range of equipment, notably computers, that can contribute to lifelong learning, which has been acknowledged as a key factors in growing a successful and economy. The OECD report stated that:

*'Lifelong learning policies realise that education is too important — for both individuals and society — to be confined to schools and to take place only during childhood and adolescence. The knowledge society requires an ever higher proportion to reach standards of literacy and numeracy formerly reached only by a small elite and also to master information technology and other forms of communication.'*⁶

22. While lifelong learning and continuing education are widely available through further education colleges and other third-level institutions, schools are particularly well placed to capture parents and former pupils who already have links to a particular school. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that people seeking to engage in adult education may prefer to access lifelong learning classes that are offered in schools, rather than further education colleges, as the former can often appear more accessible and less daunting.

SOCIAL INCLUSION

23. In addition to the facilities offered by schools, such as sports halls and computer suites, the fact that many schools are centrally located means that 'it is through by some that the school has a key part to play in terms of reducing social exclusion'.⁷

A READY-MADE RESOURCE

24. Part of the impetus for encouraging schools to open their premises for use beyond scholastic purposes comes from a recognition of the fact that the schools estate is an existing resource that is perhaps not being used to its full potential. It has been asserted that:

⁵ Taylor and Ryan (2005) Excellence in Education: the making of great schools, David Fulton, London, page 160.

⁶ OCED (1998) Under One Roof – The Integration of Schools and Community Services in OECD countries, page 12.

⁷ Department of Education (2003) *Community use of schools – an international literature review* by PricewaterhouseCoopers Research Support Series No. 31, page 1.

*'The truth is that too many schools remain idle for too many evenings each week and during the holidays. But these are community facilities and they should be made more available to their own pupils and local residents.'*⁸

25. Furthermore, in a constrained public-sector spending environment, extending school facilities beyond the education of children to be shared with local communities can represent an efficient use of resources. The use of public-private partnerships in school building projects has enabled joint use of facilities, such as libraries for both school and municipal use.

⁸ Taylor and Ryan (2005) *Excellence in Education: the making of great schools*, David Fulton, London, page 153–54.