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BRIEFING NOTE: THE NEW THRESHOLD PAYMENTS FOR TEACHERS IN NI

This briefing note presents an overview of the new system of threshold payments for teachers in Northern Ireland.

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SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

1. BACKGROUND

The threshold payment scheme is being introduced as part of the reform of teachers' pay structures negotiated within the Northern Ireland Teachers' Salaries and Conditions' of Service Committee. It has been agreed by all the teachers' unions¹ in Northern Ireland.

The scheme was announced in Northern Ireland in January 2001. Under these arrangements, teachers with seven years experience can apply for additional payments of £2001, a rise of up to 8%, backdated to September 2000. It is estimated that 13,000 of the 24,000 teachers in Northern Ireland will be eligible for the scheme². Performance-related payment and payment by results were removed from the NI threshold arrangements although they remain in the scheme in the rest of the UK. The administration costs of the new arrangements are estimated at £850,000, which includes training, application forms, and the assessors' daily rate (£240)³.

Threshold payments were first introduced in England and Wales following consultation on the 1998 DfEE Green Paper, *Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change*. The first application deadline for England was in June 2000, and for Wales, March 2001. The DfEE announced in June that 197,000 teachers in England had made applications, however, soon after, legal action by the National Union of Teachers halted the process. The process restarted in November 2000, after a further report by the School Teachers' Review Body and the Education (School Teachers' Pay and Conditions) (No.4) Order came into effect on 13 December 2000⁴.

School teachers in Northern Ireland have traditionally been paid on the same salary scales, and have had their salaries increased at the same rate as teachers in England and Wales.

2. THE DEFINITION OF THRESHOLD PAYMENTS

According to the Department of Education, the purpose of the new threshold payments is to:

- Contribute to the overall process of improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools
- Recognise the high calibre of Northern Ireland teachers and allow those with relevant experience to gain due reward for their professionalism in the classroom
- Be based on standards which reflect the significant characteristics of effective teaching
- Support the further development of teachers as reflective professionals
- Build on the sound practice already established in the early professional development of teachers
- Promote equality of opportunity throughout the profession⁵.

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From 1 September 2000 the current 17-point spine was abolished and replaced with:

- A nine-point spine for qualifications and experience
- A five-point upper pay scale
- Flat-rate allowances for management responsibility, SEN, etc.

Those teachers that meet threshold standards for effective teaching will be placed on point 1 on the upper pay scale, representing a salary increase of £2,001. A teacher who passes the threshold will stay in their existing job and keep their existing contract. The salary increase is funded directly by the Department of Education, therefore there are no financial implications for the school.

There are four threshold standards on which the teacher is assessed:

1. Core values, understanding the curriculum and professional knowledge
2. Teaching and assessment of learning
3. Contribution to raising standards through pupil achievement
4. Effective professional development.

3. PROCEDURES FOR AWARDING THRESHOLD PAYMENTS

ELIGIBILITY

Any teacher who wishes to be considered for the threshold payment must have reached Point 9 by qualifications and experience alone by 1 September 1999. This equates to seven years' experience. The eligibility test will exclude teachers paid on Point 9 (or higher) if, for example, they have points for responsibility but have not reached Point 9 for qualifications and experience. Threshold applications are open to part-time teachers, supply teachers, teachers in central services, teachers on maternity leave, sick leave, secondments and career breaks, provided they meet the criteria⁶.

THE APPLICATION PROCESS IN 2001

Application packs were sent to schools in May 2001 and the deadline for completed applications this year was 30 September 2001. Head teachers are required to brief all eligible staff prior to completion of these forms. The teacher must then complete the form, using concrete evidence of his or her experience in relation to all the standards listed above over a two- to three-year period. Examples used should be verifiable. The principal makes the initial assessment before forwarding all forms to an external assessor. The assessor samples the forms to ensure that the threshold standards are being applied fairly and consistently in each school and makes the final decision for each teacher. Criticism has been voiced regarding the timing of the process: teachers were required to complete the forms at the busiest time of the year. According to DE, the forms will be phased out in coming years as a new performance management scheme is developed⁷.

THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The principal is responsible for assessing the evidence provided by the applicant, judging whether the standards have been attained, and noting areas for future development (even if the required standards have been met). In this process, the



principal's knowledge and experience of the applicant may inform his or her judgement. DE suggests that this may be done through classroom observation, existing monitoring systems or consultation with other senior staff members. External assessors then examine a sample of applications from within a school. In advice to teachers, the teachers' union NASUWT states that external assessors should not request portfolios of evidence nor should they observe the applicant in the classroom⁸. The Department warns that:

"all individuals involved in the assessment process must not act unfairly to any individual and in particular, must not unlawfully discriminate on the grounds of a person's sex, marital status, race or disability. Part-time staff should not be treated less favourably than a member of staff working full-time"⁹.

The Department states that the process will be regularly monitored and reviewed.

4. POTENTIAL AREAS OF PERCEIVED INEQUALITY AND DISCONTENTMENT IN THE PROCESS

Threshold payments are open to part-time teachers, supply teachers, teachers in central services, teachers on maternity leave, sick leave, secondments and career breaks, provided they meet the criteria. As noted above, DE has published a clear statement of the responsibility of assessors in relation to equality.

There is a risk that the criteria requiring evidence from the last 2-3 years could affect those on *maternity leave, having a career break or teachers with a disability*. There are provisions for an extended period of relevant experience for those on maternity leave but no guidance has apparently been issued in relation to the other categories of teacher. It is unlikely that the new arrangements discriminate on age as the criteria relate to the experience of the teacher.

Complaints have also been raised by younger teachers, who, because they have not yet reached spinal point 9 in terms of qualifications and experience, are not eligible to receive threshold payments. The government has declared that a minimum of seven years' experience is required in order for a teacher to present sufficient evidence of pupil achievements, classroom expertise, knowledge of the curriculum and professional development.

Any aspect of the in-service teacher training system that may be viewed as discriminatory, such as a possible lack of access to professional development, could have implications for the success or not of the applicant in the threshold process. However, it is potentially more likely that any discrimination that might occur would be due to the behaviour of an individual assessor rather than to the procedures and criteria employed: appropriate monitoring systems and appeals procedures could therefore be employed to guard against this.

In October 2001, the National Association of Head Teachers was in the process of considering the possibility of industrial action over the effect of the threshold payments on the pay differential between principals and vice-principals and

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classroom teachers¹⁰. Also unclear, as of October 2001, is the position of teachers with protected salaries. Other important issues include the workload of head teachers

and the administration costs of setting up the system (particularly in light of the intention to change the system by phasing out the application forms in coming years), which is estimated at £850,000 for the current school year¹¹.

¹ [http://www.askatl.org.uk/pay_and_conditions/Threshold_2001/Northern Ireland/ni_what_is.htm](http://www.askatl.org.uk/pay_and_conditions/Threshold_2001/Northern_Ireland/ni_what_is.htm)

² Belfast Telegraph, 24 January 2001

³ Belfast Telegraph, 16 October 2001

⁴ DfES circular 12/00: School Teachers' Pay and Conditions of Employment: Threshold Resumption

⁵ *Threshold Northern Ireland* available at <http://www.deni.gov.uk/teachers/index.htm>

⁶ [http://www.askatl.org.uk/pay_and_conditions/Threshold_2001/Northern Ireland/ni_what_is.htm](http://www.askatl.org.uk/pay_and_conditions/Threshold_2001/Northern_Ireland/ni_what_is.htm)

⁷ Belfast Telegraph, 16 October 2001

⁸ NASUWT Northern Ireland News, 2 October 2001

⁹ <http://www.deni.gov.uk/teachers/index.htm>

¹⁰ In a recent article, an NASUWT regional official admitted that 'the payment will squeeze or remove the pay differential between classroom teachers and senior staff'. Principals and vice-principals are angry that 18 months after the threshold payment was implemented in England, they are still awaiting a decision determining how they will be treated (Belfast Telegraph, 9 October 2001).

¹¹ Belfast Telegraph, 16 October 2001