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Mrs Claire Moore
Director of Finance
Northern Regional College
Farm Lodge Buildings
BALLYMENA
BT43 7DF

15 July 2010

Dear Mrs Moore

BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT PLAN & EQIA

I am writing on behalf of Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance regarding the public consultation on Northern Regional College's (NRC) Business Improvement Plan (BIP) and associated Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA).

Before providing a detailed response on the proposals as set out, there are a number of more general points we would seek to raise.

Timeline

NIPSA does not consider the timeline, as set out in Page 30 of the BIP, is sufficiently robust to suggest an impartial decision-making process but rather supports an argument that proposals have already been agreed and decision made.

NIPSA considers it is not appropriate to provide such a short period of time from date of Governing Body's meeting on 17 August 2010 to the start of new academic year on 1 September 2010, during which all decisions will have to be drafted, consulted on and students and staff informed.

NIPSA therefore considers that timeframe, where possible, should be extended until at least 30 September 2010 to provide for proper consultation on all decisions reached by Governing Body.

Lack of Detailed Information

NIPSA considers that detailed information, needed to inform those commenting on consultation, is lacking from the document. For example, Para 1.5 refers to decline in part-time courses while Para 1.7 refers to decreasing income and increasing costs but no specific detailed information is included on either issue. A number of proposals also refer to savings based on reduction in staff hours but no detail is provided as to how much these savings are.

NIPSA considers that this information is critical to assessing the merits or otherwise of proposals and should have been included in the BIP.

Equality Impact Assessment

NIPSA would acknowledge that EQIA is relatively comprehensive but would not fully agree with some of the findings as listed.

Para 3.1 of EQIA refers to negotiations with strategic partners regarding usage of Larne Campus while reference is also made to negotiations with Translink. NIPSA understands that these processes are at a very early stage and therefore any decisions will impact on the BIP, as well as the EQIA, but cannot be included. The document therefore is not complete.

The document also refers to new Council areas but decisions have now been reached that will mean existing structures will remain for the foreseeable future. How will this affect Government policy if NRC has four sites, as proposed, in nine council areas?

NIPSA also believes that Protestant females, both students and staff, are the significant group, under Section 75, that will be affected by the BIP proposals. Also, given that caring responsibilities are predominantly carried out by middle-aged to older women, we consider that NRC should not have disregarded its responsibilities by indicating that statistical information is not available for staff in this regard.

We would therefore recommend that a survey of staff is conducted regarding dependants to ensure there is no adverse impact under Section 75. Obviously decisions to move staff with caring responsibilities need to be assessed and any impact mitigated.

Business Improvement Plan

NIPSA agrees that students and staff should be working in modern well equipped and fit for purpose buildings. We believe that these opportunities should be available to all and that access to opportunities to upskill and improve education standards must be a priority for all colleges but especially one with such a large geographical spread, like NRC.

While finance is obviously a driver for the College Management team in drafting its proposals, we believe that alternative decisions are available, especially regarding the proposed closure of Antrim and Larne campuses.

I would seek firstly however to deal with proposals in BIP as set out before raising matters relating to Estates.

- (i) Proposal 1 - no issues of concern.
- (ii) Proposal 2 - no issues of concern.
- (iii) Proposal 3 - NIPSA disagrees with proposal as is. While we accept that Management see this as an anomaly that needs fixed, it is the case that many 'A' level courses provided at Newtownabbey campus are well attended and

supported. Given social deprivation in areas, we consider a review of provision should be taken to see what courses are cost effective and popular with students and these should be retained, with option to review at a later stage.

- (iv) Proposal 4 - NIPSA believes further detail is necessary before a decision could be made on this proposal. It is the case that no detail on student numbers has been made available and commitments given regarding Part-time, Special Needs and EF Provision are loose at best. We believe the decision to rationalise catering provision should be suspended pending more detailed analysis of impact.
- (v) Proposal 5 - While we have no significant issues regarding this proposal, NIPSA does remain concerned that the College is 'pricing' itself out of market and commitments would need to be given regarding participation rates.
- (vi) Proposal 6 - This proposal is vague and lacks detail and direction. NIPSA would have considered that this was already a high priority for College. It does however raise the question - Will BIP result in more or less students overall?
- (vii) Proposal 7 - no issues of concern.
- (viii) Proposal 8 - As with proposal 4, detail is lacking and further analysis needs to be provided before a decision could be reached. Reference is made to fluctuating student numbers but no detail is provided. We do not consider it a sufficient response to "redirect students to another trade" when there is a desire to take up painting and decorating. Also, as the course is only provided at Ballymoney, any decision to remove will mean a loss to College as a whole. NIPSA would therefore recommend its retention.
- (ix) Proposal 9 - As NRC is the only College providing Motor Vehicle in North East, NIPSA considers it a false economy to remove the course. Given that it is planned to provide a new build in Coleraine area under Estates plan, retention of this course, with small investment regarding equipment, would allow for further expansion under any Coleraine new build to enhance service to North East. NIPSA would recommend this course is retained.
- (x) Proposal 10 - No issues of concern.

Estates Proposals

NIPSA believes that a well-equipped, fit for purpose estate is critical for delivery of curriculum and retention of students. However, accessibility is as important to this, especially for those in socially deprived areas. Increased Educational attainment has been proven to lift families out of poverty and the debilitating consequences that poverty brings.

The Department of Employment and Learning Assembly Committee, in its enquiry into Apprenticeships stated at key recommendations 3, that colleges and employers

"must broker more flexible arrangements for the delivery of the College's element of apprentices's training, with particular regard to timing, location, cost and the structure of training".

NIPSA therefore considers that part of any plan regarding estates must focus not only on finances but on location.

1. Closure of Larne Campus

As College is aware, the Larne Campus is a nearly new building that is fit for purpose and the decision to propose its closure is based on falling student numbers and low utilisation rates.

Larne Borough Council area is a recognised area of high deprivation. The 2001 Census indicated that 41.9% of Larne's population have no qualification while its Jobseekers Allowance register, indicating totals out of work, increased from 290 claimants in August 2008 to 845 claimants in August 2009, a 291% increase.

NIPSA welcomes the work of College in seeking to improve usage of the building through a sub-committee established with Larne Borough Council. NIPSA would suggest that this committee is extended to bring other strategic partners on board, especially those in other areas of public sectors, to try to enhance and maintain services for such a deprived community.

NIPSA believes that the College must retain a comprehensive programme of part-time courses in Larne. While ongoing work with strategic partners is not properly detailed in document, work with the Jobs and Benefits Office and Libraries NI may open up access to opportunities for usage of building and improved awareness of benefits of upskilling the workforce. We consider every effort should be made to retain a full programme delivery in the Larne area.

2. Antrim Campus

NIPSA acknowledges that current facilities in Antrim are not fit for purpose and need to be significantly renovated to improve the learning experience for students and staff alike.

Antrim Borough Council area has high levels of deprivation with 43.9% of population with no formal qualification (2001 Census) and high unemployment. In August 2008, 575 claimants were on the Jobseekers Allowance register which had increased to 1230 claimants by August 2009, 213% increase.

As previously indicated, it is critical this community is provided with opportunity for full-time and not just part-time education opportunities.

NIPSA understands, through discussions with College Management, that a significant part-time programme will continue to be provided in Antrim area and discussions will begin shortly, if the decision is taken to close the Antrim Campus, with strategic partners to provide accommodation to run these courses.

This ongoing commitment to provide part-time courses is not clear from document and should be clearly communicated as soon as possible. While we welcome the fact that part-time provision will not be removed, we do consider that a full-time presence in Antrim area is also critical to both College and local community.

Management have also provided details regarding travel patterns of full-time students from Antrim area to Ballymena and Magherafelt areas primarily . While this is being used to support the fact that students will travel for courses, we would suggest that this clearly shows a need to provide and enhance programmes in Antrim area and if this was done, courses could be taken up by the community.

To this end, NIPSA are seeking to propose an alternative to Management proposal of 4 main sites under its Estates strategy.

It is known that DEL provide a complex formula to assess the overall accommodation needs of the College, based on student numbers and courses provided. This formula provides College with an overall total of square footage it requires. From this total the Newtownabbey and Magherafelt square footage is removed to give a remaining total. These figures are not available to NIPSA but are, as I understand it, contained in its statement of need as set out in the Strategic Business Case, currently with Department of Finance and Personnel.

NRC Management have decided that this remaining total accommodation need will be divided amongst two new sites in Ballymena and Coleraine areas.

NIPSA would suggest that another decision, which would be financially viable and meet government policy on accessibility, as well as supporting Antrim communities, would be to slightly reduce the overall totals of the Ballymena and/or Coleraine new builds to house a small, modern, fit for purpose site on current Antrim site.

A similar model already exists in South Eastern Regional College where a decision could have been made to house a newly built Campus only on Downpatrick site but Management decided to retain a presence, for business reasons, in both Newcastle and Ballynahinch, although both sites are significantly smaller than Downpatrick site.

We see this option as a credible alternative to proposal as is. Antrim Campus could be retained as is until work would begin and then closed, on temporary basis while construction work was ongoing. The campus could be established as a specialist site for selection of courses or could provide a wide range of curricular programmes.

NIPSA would strongly argue for this option.

3. Restricted Opening Hours

While NIPSA appreciates that College must review its evening opening to reflect the programme, it is also critical that courses are not shoe-horned in a way that affects accessibility. We are unsure if proposals as are, will improve accessibility.

There are also a wide range of alternative impacts on our members through reduced opening hours that could impact on total number of working hours and potential

redundancy at a later date. We will raise these with Senior Management separate to this consultation process.

4. Other Estates Proposals

We consider that information regarding:-

Detailed Efficiency Measures
Age Related Retirements
Support Efficiencies
Utilisation of Lecturing Staff

are without sufficient detailed information to comment on. We do however believe that there should not be a blanket approach to not filling vacant posts but rather each post should be considered on its own merits considering impact, importance of post, etc.

NIPSA hopes we have clearly set out our position on the consultation process and we are of course happy to discuss detail further if required.

Yours sincerely



ALISON MILLAR
Deputy General Secretary