

December 11th 2009

IVEA

Submission to Department of Education and Science Regarding the Future of VECs

1.0 Background Comments

The McCarthy Report (Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes, July 2009) recommended the abolition of 11 VECs to realise a savings of up to €3 million and the Minister for Education and Science informed the IVEA 2009 Congress that, in his opinion, a “*reasonable aggregation of counties*” might be expected to underpin better service delivery.

The Minister also indicated to the Congress that his Department would be open to receiving proposals from both the IVEA and VECs regarding how the current VEC system might be transformed. In issuing this invitation, he said that he wished to enhance the role of VECs and that a revised VEC structure would enable VECs to take on new functions for other educational providers within their geographical area of remit, such as: procurement, IT support, finance, HR and the provision of support to non-vec boards of management. He opined that VECs should be able to take on such functions while respecting the patronage and management arrangements for non-vec schools.

At the IVEA Congress, the Minister explicitly acknowledged that he wished to extend the pilot Community National School model to a number of new locations in 2010 and paid tribute to the long and honourable tradition of VECs in:

- providing high quality education;
- meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged in society;
- adopting and facilitating curricular change, and in
- converting national adult and further national policy into practice.

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IVEA appreciates the Minister's generous acknowledgement of current and former VEC achievements. Furthermore, IVEA notes approvingly the Minister's confidence in the capacity of VECs to take on added functionality and deliver effectively a range of services and supports to non VEC schools.

As IVEA understands it, the Minister's position in relation to the reform of VECs, has three strands as follows.

- The need for VECs to achieve greater efficiencies through the implementation of shared services.
- The additional functions that might be allocated to VECs to enhance the capacity of non-vec schools.
- The re-structuring/aggregation of existing VECs to achieve greater efficiencies and economies in their operation.

In this context, IVEA is very much aware of the need for VECs to improve both efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of education and training. However, IVEA is also very cognisant of the need to reform Irish education and training provision (levels 1 to 6 on the NFQ) and believes that the current moves to modernise and reform public services presents the State with a unique opportunity not only to effect efficiencies but, more importantly in the longer term, to make the delivery of those services more effective in terms of learner outcomes and more rewarding from the point of view of those who deliver the services. If the reform of education and training provision focuses exclusively on the expenditure side, an opportunity for real reform of education and training provision may not present itself again for many years to come.

The Irish education and training system is a product of its unique historical context. Its diverse range of providers¹ and the manner in which these providers interact with both the Department of Education and Science and the numerous support agencies² that have grown up around the Department (for very good reasons and with a beneficial effect on learner

¹ At second level, there are three different school sectors – each providing students with similar educational programmes.

² Currently support agencies tend to operate independently and on a categorical basis. Schools, their students and their students' parents require integrated supports on a one-stop-shop basis. Such integrated supports can also be delivered more efficiently than the separate services are delivered today.

outcomes) has, nevertheless, resulted in the system lacking integration and coherence. When the role of the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment and other bodies such as Fás is considered, the lack of service integration becomes even more manifest. There is now, in the context of reforming VECs, an opportunity to change Irish education structurally in a way that will, once and for all, but over a period of years, address the weaknesses and deficiencies in the current system while preserving all the strengths of the current system – in particular, the right of non-VEC schools to operate autonomously.

This submission, which is the product of extensive consultations between the IVEA Executive and VECs, proposes to address all three strands in the Minister's speech to the IVEA Congress.

Before addressing each of these strands, it is necessary to provide some context – both for the VEC sector as a whole and for individual VECs.

Currently there are thirty-three VECs. Some counties (Waterford, Limerick, Cork, Galway, and Tipperary) have two VECs per county. Dun Laoghaire VEC shares one local authority area with Co Dublin VEC.

The success of the VECs heretofore can be attributed to a number of factors, not least being the extent to which individual VECs identify with the geographical areas for which they have a remit. This factor is further addressed in **Appendix I** (IVEA Document entitled: VECs – at the Heart of the Local Community) and also in **Appendix 2** (Relevant section of IVEA Presidential speech to Congress 2009).

As well as managing some one third of all second level schools, VECs provide a wide range of further education courses and programmes to in excess of 200,000 adults annually – much of this targeting disadvantage, those with low basic literacy and numeracy skills and those seeking second-chance education. Indeed, the number of adult learners that VECs cater to annually exceeds the total number of graduate and undergraduate students currently in third level education.

A very significant proportion of a VEC's administrative staff is involved in developing and leading education programmes for early-school-leavers and those availing of second-

chance education in one form or another, many of whom fall into the hard-to-access category.

Each VEC is a complex organisation and, while all VECs do similar work, it needs to be acknowledged that the structure and process for each VEC evolved over many years in response to particular needs of the local authority area for which the VEC has a remit.

As well as providing a wide-ranging programme of educational services, each VEC also provides a range of what may be termed ‘head-office’ services - see **Appendix 3**³. All VECs are also involved in partnership and collaborations at a variety of levels with a range of other providers and with national and county agencies supporting the provision of an extensive range of education and community development services.

2.0 The need for VECs to achieve greater efficiencies through the implementation of shared services

VECs are very conscious of the need for efficiencies and innovation and the VEC National Partnership Forum (VECNPF) has worked in cooperation with management and unions, for a number of years, to achieve savings and efficiencies; and this process is ongoing.

Furthermore, VECs have developed a lead agency model of operation whereby one VEC takes responsibility for coordinating and supporting an education/training programme nationwide - for example, ITABE, SkillIVEC, the refugee language programme and the Skills for Work Programme. Furthermore, City of Dublin VEC operates the Further Education Support (FESS) Programme for all DES funded further education providers and County Cork VEC supports the YMCA STEP programme for Youthreach at National level.

Already, also, the VEC sector, through the IVEA, is implementing a shared services approach in relation to the whole HR function with the appointment of an IVEA HR officer to facilitate the coordination and standardisation of HR practices across the sector. This development will produce both payroll savings and administrative efficiencies in an area

³ The implementation of the Rochford Report streamlined and categorised the range of services delivered from Head Office as set out in this appendix.

that presents the further education area, in particular, with huge challenges following the enactment of both the Protection of Employees (Part Time) Work Act 2001 and the Protection of Employees (Fixed Term) Work Act (2003).

Currently, in the area of further education, there is considerable coordination across the VEC sector regarding award development. This coordination will be extended further in the near future when FETAC quality assures either the sector as a whole or combinations/consortia of VECs to validate further education programmes.

The lead agency approach has significantly improved both the efficiency and effectiveness of programme delivery and there is potential to extending the lead agency or shared services approach to other areas of VEC operations as follows.

- One VEC could manage the procurement function and tender for supplies for the entire network of VECs. Alternatively, one VEC could tender for all office/school materials while another could tender for all other supplies.
- The development of a single IT portal for VECs could link all VEC IT systems, thus enhancing the capacity for shared services such as advertising, payment of student grants, advertising, etc., while also providing the DES with access to sectoral reports and information – as required. Access to such information at the touch of a button would greatly enhance the planning of education and training provision, to the benefit of learners.
- One VEC could carry out the payroll function on behalf of all VECs – especially for staff in mainstream schools.
- A single VEC could be given responsibility for the Garda vetting function for all VECs.

The lead agency or consortia approach is ideal when it comes to VECs responding flexibly to local/regional needs – many of which are in a constant state of flux. It facilitates collaboration, where collaboration is relevant to enhancing service provision across VECs, without the necessity of establishing permanent structures that may need dismantling once circumstances change. Further education and training is organic by nature and its effective

provision is greatly facilitated by the availability of organic organisational structures at provider level.

IVEA is particularly mindful that Section 21 of the Vocational Education (Amendment) Act of 2001 specifically provides for VECs, with the consent of the Minister, making arrangements for the joint performance, by two or more VECs, of any of their functions. While VECs have not, to date, formally availed of this provision, it is open to VECs to do so should they consider formal agreements necessary to facilitating the necessary level of cooperation between VECs. On the other hand, where the Minister is of the opinion that ‘2 or more VECs would more effectively perform any function if they were to perform it jointly, with one another’ s/he may ‘direct that they do so.’

3.0 The additional functions that might be allocated to VECs to enhance the capacity of non-vec schools.

Section 10 of the Vocational Education (Amendment) Act of 2001 empowers the Minister for Education and Science to allocate additional functions to VECs. As alluded to above, the Minister has indicated that he is open to using this power for the purpose of using the capacity of VECs to provide supports to autonomously managed non-vec schools.

IVEA believes that VECs have a unique capacity to add value to Irish education and training both by efficiently and effectively providing a range of supports to non-vec schools and by providing labour market relevant and quality assured education/training to adults from levels 1 to 6 on the NFQ – either on their own or in collaboration with bodies such as Fás or the Institutes of Technology (IOTs).

VECs, in particular, have the capacity to provide accredited education and training to young, low-skilled unemployed people in the communities in which they reside. This capacity is particularly relevant to the economic circumstances we find ourselves in today – with burgeoning numbers of young people with relatively low skills joining the unemployment queues. The sole impediment to VECs delivering on this capacity is the DES cap on PLC enrolments. If this cap was lifted and if VECs were allowed to offer PLC type programmes on a part time basis, VECs, either on their own or in collaboration with Fás or the IOTs, could relatively quickly put cost-effective programmes in place that would

both upskill these young people in preparation for the inevitable economic up-turn and provide them with a constructive and fulfilling way of occupying spare time that might otherwise be used in way that would be neither to the benefit of either the young people or the wider society.

Before further addressing the matter of VECs providing support services to non-vec schools, it is necessary to refer briefly to a major weakness in the Irish educational landscape at both first, second and further education levels – namely the absence of an intermediate tier between the Department of Education and Science and education/training providers. While a detailed exploration of this issue is beyond the scope of this submission, it is important to highlight the extent to which a variety of expert reports have advocated the need for the establishment of such a tier.

Specifically, a series of authoritative reports extending from the OECD’s 1991 *Review of Irish Education*, through the Green Paper on Irish Education (*Education for a changing world 1992*), the White Paper on Irish Education (*Charting our Education Future, 1995*), the Department of Education and Science’s 2001 Review of its Operations Systems and Staffing Needs, to the OECD’s 2008 report: [*Ireland - Towards an Integrated Public Service*](#). have all alluded, either directly or indirectly, to the need for the Department of Education and Science to concentrate its energies on policy-making and strategy with the implementation of these policies and strategies being devolved to an intermediate tier in a newly configured system – a tier that would connect the policy function and the delivery function, without necessarily being directly involved with either function.

Indeed, as far back as 1993, in an IVEA commissioned Report on sub-national education structures “Restructuring Education in Ireland”, the authors, Fairley and Brown concluded that there was ‘a strong consensus favouring the creation of an intermediate tier to operate between the schools and the Department, within an education system which is committed at all levels to the principle of the devolution of responsibility’ and that the implementation of

the reforms proposed in the Green Paper could not be implemented in the absence of such a tier⁴.

Some 16 years later, with schools literally creaking under the weight of legal compliance issues and vastly expanded responsibilities to students, parents and staff, the need for an intermediate tier to support and facilitate the work of schools is more pressing than ever. Indeed, with hindsight the insertion of such a tier towards the end of the last Century might well have enabled schools to implement more effectively the intent of the Education Act 1998, the Education (Welfare) Act 2002, the EPSEN Act (2004) and a variety initiatives such as school development planning, curriculum reform, inclusive enrolment, differentiated teaching and individualised learning, assessment for learning, etc.

Of course, our nearest neighbour, the United Kingdom, has for many years had a highly valued local education structure in place. And, just north of the border, the Education and Library Boards (ELBs), which operate their own schools in the way VECs do, also effectively provide a range of support services to non-ELB schools – particularly but not exclusively in the whole area of providing supports to students with special educational needs of one kind or other.

In this regard, the supports provided to special needs students in our own jurisdiction manifestly lacks real integration, with an array of different bodies providing student supports, on a categorical basis.

Yet, all schools clearly require access to an integrated, comprehensive student support service, if they are to have a real chance of meeting the needs of their most marginalised students. In Northern Ireland, the Belfast Education Library Board (BELB) provides an integrated student support service to all schools within the greater Belfast area, irrespective of whether or not they are under BELB management, without in any sense interfering with the capacity of these schools to manage their own affairs on an autonomous basis. Could VECs not provide an integrated student support service and indeed other support services to all schools within their catchment areas?

⁴ Brown, Alice & Fairley, John (1993). *Restructuring Education in Ireland – The Question of Sub-national Structures*, p69.

The stand-alone character of non-vec schools generally means that they lack the capacity to develop a range of expertise/supports that the scale of VEC activities has allowed them to develop cost effectively across a range of areas – the construction of new buildings/facilities and the ongoing maintenance of these buildings/facilities, procurement, ICT planning and maintenance, health and safety, insurance, HR, payroll, board of management training and support and even staff development. Yet the efficient and effective management of the 21st century school depends very significantly on the availability of such expertise/supports.

VECs have the manifest capacity to take on added functions – particularly in supporting non-vec schools.

- ✓ The provision of HR, ICT, procurement, payroll, health and safety, insurance, supports to schools within the catchment area. Such supports would be particularly important to primary schools, where many schools are relatively small and, sometimes, geographically isolated.
- ✓ A VEC Building Officer could manage capital procurement (sites, etc.) for other schools and also supervise the maintenance programme for school buildings. In most cases, primary school boards of management do not have the expertise for such functions.
- ✓ VECs need to be considered as the prime educational authority in the VEC catchment area in terms of community and adult education. After all, they are the only body with the experience and quality assured capacity to deliver such programmes. Other bodies such as County Development Boards, Community Development Partnerships, Area Partnerships and LEADER are currently competing with VECs for the delivery of educational programmes.
- ✓ In the interests of both efficiency and service quality, educational programmes should be delivered by VECs the statutory education authority in the catchment area – even if the education/training service may need to be delivered, in some instances, in collaboration with other agencies. The current reality is that, where other agencies are given responsibility for delivering many of these education/training programmes, VEC tutors and/or facilities have to be used by the other agency.

- ✓ VECs have the capacity (youth officers, local knowledge and administrative supports), but do not yet have the statutory authority, to coordinate the provision of Youth work activities until the Youth work Act was fully implemented.
- ✓ Currently, Chief Executive Officers, as Transport Liaison Officers (TLOs), organise the second level transport scheme, the co-ordination of the primary school transport scheme could also be undertaken by the TLOs’.
- ✓ The new community national school model currently being piloted in County Dublin highlights the capacity of VECs to contribute in a very practical way towards the putting in place of a primary school option capable of addressing the needs of the new, more diverse Ireland. One great advantage of VEC patronage in primary education is the extent to which VECs are in a position to support primary schools for which they may be patrons across a range of their functions – HR, finance, support to board of management, etc.

In a sense, it may be said that the Irish school system has developed in an uncoordinated, incremental and reactive manner – a situation that is further exacerbated by the establishment of independent support agencies such as the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB), the National Council for Special Education Needs (NCSE), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the Second Level Support Service (SLSS), the Leadership Development for Schools Programme (LDS), the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS), the Special Education Support Service (SESS) and the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). While each of these agencies has undoubtedly added value to Irish education, the tendency of each agency to operate independently of all the others presents serious difficulties from an operational viewpoint.

The activities/services of these agencies need to be integrated as they interface with schools, their students and their staff, if student outcomes are to be maximised. VECs are well placed to facilitate such service integration for all schools within their catchment areas. The current system results, on the one hand, in different agencies working separately to resolve a student’s problems and, on the other hand, in curricular and other issues being addressed in a one-dimensional rather than in a multidimensional/holistic

manner – resulting in less than optimal outcomes for all involved and a consequent inefficient application of scarce resources.

In recommending that the functions of VECs be expanded to enable them to provide a range of supports and services to non-vec schools, it is acknowledged that some non-vec schools might, at first, have concerns about such a development impinging on their independence. Consequently, it would be important, from the outset, to put in place agreed protocols between the IVEA and the other management bodies regarding the context within which, and the process by which, such supports and services would be provided. Most significantly, any agreement for VECs to provide supports and services to non-vec schools would need to incorporate a clear guarantee of autonomy for non-vec schools.

Overall, moves towards VECs supporting/servicing non-vec schools would need to be taken gradually, commencing with the least controversial supports/services and building confidence over time through the VEC contribution manifestly adding value to the work of the schools they support/service.

Thankfully, intersectoral divisions in Irish education have waned appreciably over the 20 years since the Education Act was enacted. More and more all sectors acknowledge that their respective roles are complementary and that they all serve the same master – the Irish nation and **all** its children – irrespective of their backgrounds, aptitudes or aspirations. Reforming the VEC system in a way that would enable it to use its capacities to add value to the work of non-vec schools could be expected to enhance Irish educational outcomes very appreciably – indeed to provide the Irish school system with a level of coherence and integration that its piecemeal development has deprived it of for so long.

One remaining matter needs to be addressed in the context of VECs taking responsibility for providing services and functions to non-vec schools. Each VEC might need to amend its organisational structure through the establishment of an external services section with specific responsibility for providing services to non-vec schools. Though those working in this section might also work in the provision of VEC internal services, it would seem important to establish clear lines of responsibility and accountability in relation to the services and supports that VECs would be providing to external bodies.

4.0 The re-structuring/aggregation of existing VECs to achieve greater efficiencies and economies in their operation.

Firstly, Section 2.0 above addresses a range of current and proposed initiatives that have the potential to improve very significantly both the efficiency and effectiveness of VECs. IVEA believes that, over time, these initiatives will produce very positive outcomes. Also, at Section 2.0, the relevance of Section 21 of the Vocational Education (Amendment) Act of 2001 to the achievement of inter-vec cooperation/collaboration was highlighted.

As far as the aggregation of VECs is concerned, IVEA wishes to make the following points.

- ✓ VECs are deeply rooted in and reflect their communities and the community voice is represented by the local authority members elected or appointed to the Vocational Education Committee. Central to the historical local legitimacy and influence of VECs as educational bodies is the authority they derive from the role that the elected public representatives play in their governance.
- ✓ Given the historical significance of the relationship between VECs and local authorities, IVEA believes that it would be imprudent to sunder this relationship. In this context, it is noted that a government white paper on the future of local government is imminent.
- ✓ Notwithstanding the close relationship between the VECs and local authorities, IVEA does not believe that VECs or their learners would benefit from an amalgamation of VECs and local authorities and it welcomes the Minister's comments to the IVEA Congress that he would not favour such amalgamations.
- ✓ IVEA believes that the county-based VEC has a unique capacity to add value to Irish education and training, at a local community level, in the modern Ireland – something the VEC has done for decades. The VEC is identified as a bulwark against the erosion of social capital in our rural communities – as an integral and vital part of the fabric of local Irish society. In this regard, VECs work closely with other county-based bodies such as County Development Boards, County Childcare Committees and County Councils to ensure that local communities retain the social infra-structure essential to retaining their populations, in the face of the inevitable pull of the surrounding towns.

- ✓ The democratic representation on committees (local authority members and elected parents and staff) roots VECs in their local communities and acts as an important counterweight to the centralisation “pull” of the Department of Education and Science. As argued above, the OECD and others recommend that Irish education needs an intermediate tier between its Government Department and the school.
- ✓ The partnership between the Committee and the Executive, each with statutory functions, has worked well. Indeed, it establishes an exemplar for the efficient and effective management of community services.
- ✓ IVEA is concerned that the aggregation of VECs into multi-county entities would seriously diminish the local knowledge and experience that has been so vital to the success of the VEC sector over the decades. In this regard, IVEA was pleased to note the Minister’s statement to the IVEA Congress that ‘.... *we would not be well served by a small number of regional bodies*’.

Because VECs are locally based, they know the needs of the communities they serve. They are not remote, large organisations that operate at arm’s length. IVEA believes that multi-county entities, as proposed by the Minister, would, notwithstanding the Minister’s assurances that the aggregated VECs would preserve individual county representation on the committees, effectively end over 100 years of significant county representation on the local vocational education committee.

- ✓ The McCarthy Report in identifying potential cutbacks in government expenditure, proposed that a saving of €3m could be realised, over a number of years, through the reduction in the number of VECs from 33 to 22. IVEA asks if it is worth weakening a vital piece of local County and Borough educational infrastructure to achieve such a modest financial savings if similar savings could be achieved by other methods. It would be IVEA’s view that the developments proposed above could deliver savings in excess of those which could be achieved by amalgamating VECs without the unintended negative consequences.

5.0 Concluding Remarks

The vision of VECs is to ‘lead the development of a high quality, locally responsive education system for Ireland which will promote excellent outcomes for all learners at pre-school, Primary, Post-Primary and Further Education and Training’.

This vision builds on the experience that VECs have had in serving the particular education and training needs of their catchment communities for nigh on eight (8) decades. Over those years, each VEC has grown organically to meet local needs and circumstances. VECs are not off-shelf, one-size-fits-all bodies. Rather, each VEC is a body that has been moulded through its growth and development into a provider of education/training and associated services that meet the specific needs of the communities it serves.

The Scottish researchers, Fairley and Brown, in 1993, in an independent study,⁵ identified the strengths of VECs as follows.

- ✓ They are, because of their connectedness to the local community, responsive to local needs and, in particular, they meet the educational needs of the disadvantaged and marginalised.
- ✓ They carry out much of their work in partnership/collaboration with other organisations. The development of the community college model of post primary school is but one example of the benefits of this partnership approach.
- ✓ They are ‘innovative and flexible in their response to change – the development of PLCs, curricular development, traveller education, accessing EU funding and mobility, the establishment of the RTCs - to mention just a few areas in which VECs have pushed out the boundaries of Irish education nad training.
- ✓ They provide a ‘coordinating and supportive function to local schools’ under their management, thus releasing school principals and deputy principals to lead teaching, learning and student welfare.
- ✓ They facilitate ‘links between local schools the labour market and the wider economy’.

⁵ Brown, Alice & Fairley, John (1993). *Restructuring Education in Ireland – The Question of Sub-national Structures*, pp 21-29.

- ✓ ‘The larger VECs, in particular, are complex organisations which sit at the centre of diverse and complex educational, social and developmental networks. In this respect, they are a key part of the very fabric of their communities.’
- ✓ They carry out their functions in a cost effective and efficient manner. Interestingly, the authors came to this conclusion having inspected VEC audited accounts.
- ✓ They are democratic, representative and publicly accountable.
- ✓ VEC staff are generally expert, experienced, committed and enthusiastic

If VECs were as described Fairley and Brown in 1993, it may be assumed that each of the strengths in evidence then has become further enhanced over the intervening years with the enactment of the Education Act (1998) and the Vocational Education Amendment Act (2001), the establishment of the Code of Practice for the Governance of VECs and the Code of Best Practice for VEC Members and Staff, the appointment of education officers, adult literacy organisers and community education facilitators and the quality assurance agreements that all VECs have entered into with FEATAC. Other developments such as the recent IVEA-Fás Cooperation Agreement may also be expected to facilitate better outcomes for learners and a better return on state investment in further education and training.

In a sense, the Fairley and Brown comment that VECs could be seen as a ‘key part of the very fabric of their communities (see above) probably more than anything else sums up the importance of VECs in local communities. All of this has only been possible because of the support networks that individual VECs have built up over the decades. It is vital that these networks are retained and further built upon based on the good practices which exist in the VEC sector.

For all the reasons outlined above, is it worthwhile risking a reduction in the capacity of some VECs to serve their communities in expectation of a relatively small financial saving?

ENDS

APPENDIX 1

VECs - at the Heart of the Local Community

Dear Colleague

The OECD Report on Transforming Public Services was very much welcomed by the IVEA and its member VECs as an opportunity to highlight the efficiency and effectiveness of VECs as local statutory education authorities - working at the heart of local communities in the delivery of a wide range of education, training and related services.

As in the case of local authorities, VECs connect government services to people in their home areas, in literally every corner of the State. Furthermore, through their representative body, the IVEA, they operate in close collaboration with one another, constantly sharing best practice and, wherever possible, effecting economies of scale.

VECs are as identified with county/city boundaries as are county/city councils and GAA teams, and this identification gives a manifest local ownership to the services that VECs provide. Far from being remote, faceless and bureaucratic organisations, VECs are part and parcel of the day-to-day life of every county in Ireland. Their involvement in so many facets of a county's educational, social, cultural and sporting life facilitates coherence, integration and synergy to an extent that would not be possible in their absence. This involvement is both welcomed and appreciated for the simple reason that it is 'our VEC' that is involved and not just some faceless state agency.

The great strength of the VEC sector is that it works locally in addressing the particular needs of local communities yet achieves many of the advantages that accrue to the operation of large organisations because of the networked way in which it does its work. Furthermore, VECs, as I outline below, are hugely adaptable organisations – constantly reinventing themselves in responding to both national and local needs.

While VECs are arms of the State, they are, unlike many other such arms, deeply embedded in local communities. A VEC's close relationship with and accountability to local communities are very much a function of the statutorily-prescribed composition of its

committee, with each VEC committee comprising representatives of the local authority, representatives of teachers and other staff working for the VEC, representatives of parents, of students attending VEC schools locally, and persons reflecting the interests of students, trustees of community colleges managed by a VEC, local voluntary organisations and the wider world of work – trades, professions and business generally.

At the heart of VECs are the chief executive officers and their teams of administrative and educational support staff – effectively connecting national policies and priorities to the felt needs of local communities. In a very real sense, the composition and structure of VECs establishes and maintains both local and national partnerships. These partnerships reflect a genuine devolution of responsibility for the implementation of national education/training policies and priorities to dedicated providers - the work of which is constantly informed by local needs and circumstances.

It could be said that the operation of VECs very much embodies the notion of thinking globally and acting locally; that it marries the best of small and large scale operations, while avoiding the disadvantages inherent in both.

VECs manage one third (247 schools) of all second level schools in the country, catering to nearly 100,000 students. In doing so, they provide a school management model that allows school principals and school boards of management to concentrate on maximising learner outcomes, as VEC administration staff take responsibility for buildings, finance and HR. Significantly, VECs ensure that their schools operate transparently-inclusive admission policies and, in the process, cater to the educational needs of a disproportionate number of students with special needs – learning, language, social, emotional and behavioural.

However, VECs are about much more than second level schools. They currently deliver some form of education and training to 200,000+ adults annually – much of this targeting disadvantage, those with low basic skills and those seeking a second chance. These further education and training programmes are delivered in VEC schools and colleges, centres of education (of which there are 350 strategically located throughout the country), in workplaces and in a variety of community settings. This education and training work is undertaken from levels one to six on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and

caters to the needs of a wide range of learners – from those with severe literacy difficulties to those on the verge of stepping in to third level education.

Much of the work undertaken by a VEC's adult and further education service addresses the education/training needs of many that our education system had previously failed for one reason or another, and its success relies very much on the extent to which VECs identify with and connect to their local communities. The task of delivering education to this clientele is very challenging and it certainly is not just a matter of advertising a programme of courses that readily attract participants and then timetabling teachers/tutors to deliver the courses. Invariably, the work involves recruiting difficult-to-access learners, assessing their learning needs, guiding them in their selection of programmes/courses and, to a very significant degree, differentiating the teaching and individualising the learning.

In all of the work undertaken by VECs, the contribution of the CEO and his/her professional support and administrative staff is vital, as is the management function undertaken by members of the VEC committee, whose input ensures that the education, training and related services provided by the VEC are always accessible and relevant to the needs of local communities. The Vocational Education Amendment Act (2001), in codifying the respective roles of both the executive and "reserve" sides of the VEC partnership, provides a template for the delivery of community-relevant services that could well be emulated elsewhere.

The local community connectedness and accessibility of VECs is particularly relevant currently with thousands of workers and school/college leavers being cast onto the dole queues. Given our Celtic Tiger experiences, many of these are devastated by what has befallen them. Their self-esteem will have been shattered and they will desperately need the guidance, direction and upskilling that their local VEC can provide. Again, because of its local connectedness, the VECs' Adult Guidance Service will be especially able to provide a skills check and recommend relevant local education and training programmes to fill any perceived skills gap.

Under the direction of the Department of Education and Science, through the National Partnership Forum (VECNPF), VECs have been modernised into efficient and effective

providers of workplace-relevant education/training programmes. This transformation was greatly facilitated by both the new system of corporate governance that was put in place for VECs earlier this decade and by the enactment of the 2001 Vocational Education (Amendment) Act, which put in place a contemporary structure for the operation of VECs – a structure that marries best practice in modern organisational management and participatory democracy.

In implementing a new reserved-executive model of governance, the 2001 Act committed VECs to strategic planning. Accordingly, all VECs have developed five-year strategic education plans that incorporate output targets, performance management and value-for-money service delivery. In this context, VECs are internally audited by the VSSU and externally audited by the Comptroller and Auditor-General. Furthermore, all EU-funded programmes delivered by VECs are audited as part of the normal oversight of these programmes. Consequently, VECs deliver their programmes and services in a cost-effective manner.

Conscious of the need to ensure the integrity and coherence of services to the public, VECs collaborate with a wide range of organisations and agencies at both a local and national level. Indeed, there is hardly a local project to improve the social, educational, economic or recreational life of a community that does not involve local VEC staff or committee members in one way or another. While much of this involvement is initiated by the VEC, other bodies also seek out VEC involvement in the knowledge that the VEC, because of its participation in so many other community-improvement activities, has the capability, through either its “reserve” or executive arms, to pull in resources capable of enhancing the outcomes of whatever project is being considered.

Currently, through the IVEA, VECs are in the process of putting in place a Memorandum of Understanding with FÁS to ensure, as the draft memorandum notes, that *the learning needs of both providers’ learners and potential learners are met to the maximum degree possible, having regard to the State’s investment of scarce resources in education/training*. Indeed, this is the kind of thinking that underpins all of the work undertaken by VECs – the betterment of client outcomes, having regard for the utilisation of scarce resources. Of course, VECs already work collaboratively with FÁS in a number of programmes (Return

to Education, Return to Learning, Learning at Work, Skills for Work, etc.) but it was felt that there was a need for a more formal agreement to inform current and future collaborations.

Similarly, VECs are putting in place structures and processes to facilitate collaborations with Skillnets whereby VECs will provide the bulk of Low Basic Skills (LBS) training to the 140 Skillnets networks around the country. VECs also work collaboratively with local business interests, Institutes of Technology, Enterprise Boards, local authorities and community and county development boards. Again, much of this work is informed and facilitated by the extent to which VECs are integral parts of county and city authorities.

Their local nature and county/city structure is the key to the success of VECs. They are identified with and inextricably linked to their local community. Indeed, they are part of their local community. They are an integral part of county/city administrative support structures and, as in the case of the local authorities, they are among the last bastions of provincial Ireland. In fact, the VEC is community in action - being staffed and administered/managed by people from the local community responding to their own community needs and operating in accordance with locally-developed strategic plans.

In essence, VECs facilitate the development of social capital. They constitute a valuable community asset and are valued as such by local communities within their counties and cities. They function strategically through locally relevant five-year action plans; they are accountable to the Oireachtas, the Minister, the Comptroller and Auditor-General and, most crucially, the communities they serve. Furthermore, they publish annual reports and service plans that allow their performance to be evaluated against their published organisational objectives.

Most importantly, VECs develop and provide education and training programmes that meet the felt needs of local communities. In the challenging times in which we find ourselves, they form an essential bulwark for local communities as these communities face the chill global storms that threaten their very survival. They are every bit as relevant and important in small rural counties as they are in our more populous counties and cities.

It can be claimed that VECs deliver education and training “from the cradle to the grave.” They operate crèches, second level schools, further education (Post Leaving Certificate) colleges, adult and community education centres and programmes and, most recently, they are developing community national schools. Indeed, the community national school model has the potential to contribute very significantly towards the development of primary education in the years ahead.

While in former times, VECs tended to operate on a stand-alone basis, they have now begun to work cooperatively with one another – much of this under the auspices of or facilitated by the IVEA. Most recently, VECs have developed a shared services model of working collaboratively. For example, in relation to the provision of student support grants, it is envisaged that one VEC will make all grant payments. In the case of SKILLVEC, one VEC currently coordinates and administers the whole programme on behalf of all other VECs, while each VEC delivers the programme. Similar developments have taken place in relation to the delivery of the Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE) programme and of the English Language and Socialisation programme to refugees. A similar approach has been proposed in relation to the Skills for Work programme.

This collaborative approach to the delivery of services is proving attractive to VECs and the approach is now being explored in relation to advertising, recruitment and procurement – with a view to delivering economies of scale and cost reductions, while retaining local-connectedness and relevance.

All in all, VECs are locally based, cost-effective, statutory arms of government; their key asset, from both a national government and community perspective, is the extent to which they identify with the communities they serve. In a very real sense, VECs are local conduits for the delivery of national education/training programmes and related services. This local connectedness, together with their capacity to respond quickly and flexibly to both national and local priorities has been very much the strength of the VECs down the decades – something that was very much recognised during the push, in the late 90s, for the establishment of regional education boards.

The regionalisation of service delivery has badly failed Irish society in the past for the very simple reason that it delivers few of the benefits and most of the disadvantages of both small and large scale operations. In effect it embodies neither the local nor the national perspective.

Ring-fencing the VECs in 2001, through the Vocational Education (Amendment) Act 2001, was a visionary development founded on strong principles that recognised the unique character of Irish society. Being local is not necessarily a bad thing – as some would have had us believe a few short years ago. The Department of Education and Science also recognises this through its policy on devolution in accordance with the recommendations of O’Croimín Report.

VECs have faced several challenges over the course of their history but their deep-rooted identity with their local communities and with their county/city structures have, in every instance, been recognised as a key and valuable asset that deserved to be preserved in the interests of both community and national development/cohesion. Now more than ever, as Ireland finds itself in profound crisis, there is a need to strengthen further our local communities and VECs have the capacity and commitment to facilitating this strengthening.

As community life is threatened by social upheaval, as people’s lives are being shattered because of unemployment and related pressures, the local VEC can be the beacon of hope through which local communities can regain their self-respect and take responsibility for their own futures through engagement with education and training. VECs can and will work towards the betterment of local communities, because they are *of* those communities.

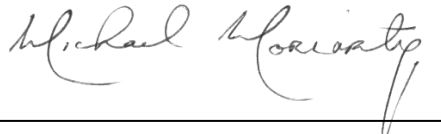
I firmly believe that VECs, as they are currently constituted, have a huge amount to offer Irish society – both now and in the future. Indeed, I believe that they are capable of efficiently and effectively delivering new services and supports to education/training – services and supports that that can make our education/training system more coherent and effective than it is currently.

I trust that you will find this correspondence helpful. Regrettably, it is much longer than I would have liked it to be but VECs are involved in so much and I felt that there was a need

to be as explicit as possible. Should you have any query regarding any matter, I shall be very happy to respond at the earliest opportunity.

Full details of all the work undertaken by VECs is set out in Appendix 3 and Appendix 4.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Michael Moriarty". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Michael Moriarty
General Secretary

APPENDIX 2

EXTRACT FROM CLLR MARY BOHAN'S PRESIDENTIAL SPEECH TO THE 2009 IVEA CONGRESS

'McCarthy Proposals cause disappointment and disillusionment...

The establishment of Vocational Education Committees in 1930 has rightly been seen as a dynamic, progressive and far sighted development as it put in place statutory local education authorities to provide for local people delivering education programmes in their own communities in accordance with national policies and priorities.

VECs deeply rooted in the community...

The cornerstone of the Vocational Education Committee system is that VECs are deeply rooted in their communities. They are of the community, and peopled by the community. Their target for the delivery of their education programmes and services are ordinary people (young and not so young) in every parish and community in Ireland.

Now, more than ever, there is need for VEC provided education and training programmes to counter the blight of unemployment and hopelessness that has descended on so many of our citizens – in every community in Ireland.

Because VECs are locally based, they know the needs of the communities they serve and they are proactive in meeting those needs. VECs are not remote, large organisations that operate at arm's length from the people they serve. Rather, they engage with their communities face to face – through their schools and centres, their Adult Education Officers, their Adult Literacy Organisers and their Community Education Facilitators.

VECs about much more than second level schools...

Some recent media stories would have you believe that the work of VECs is confined to what they do in providing second level education and that the costs of running VECs relate exclusively to such work. The reality, as you know Minister, is very different.

VECs, as well as managing some one third of all second level schools, provide some form of further education to in excess of 200,000 adults annually – much of this targeting disadvantage, those with low basic skills and those seeking a second chance. Indeed, the number of adult learners, that VECs cater to annually, exceeds the total number of graduate and undergraduate students in third level education.

Some commentators fail to acknowledge that a very significant proportion of a VEC's administrative staff is involved in developing and leading education programmes for early-school-leavers and those availing of second-chance education in one form or another, many of whom fall into the hard-to-access category. This involves recruiting learners, developing bespoke, locally-relevant programmes for these learners; providing guidance and support to learners prior to, during and at the conclusion of their programmes, and facilitating learner assessment, progression and transfer.

Without the work of VECs at local level many adults would not have their education and training needs met. Ask those who avail of VEC adult literacy services or those who have their lives transformed as a result of joining a VEC VTOS or Back to Education Programme. These programmes only thrive because of the local connectedness of VECs.

Our VEC administration staffs are hard-working, indeed overstretched, and dedicated to serving their local communities.

For some sub-editors to dismiss these staff as ‘pen-pushers’ is an insult to them, their VECs and the people they serve.

VECs very much identified with county boundaries...

VECs are as identified with county and city boundaries as are county and city councils and GAA teams, and this identification bestows local ownership on the services that VECs provide. Far from being remote, faceless and bureaucratic organisations, VECs are part and parcel of the day-to-day life of every county in Ireland.

Minister, as a former inter-county footballer, you are well aware of the significance of community and county identity in Ireland.

The framers of the 1930 Vocational Education Act were certainly very keenly aware of this reality, and the establishment of local education authorities to deliver national education programmes to local communities has proven both visionary and wise. It has, delegates, stood the ultimate test – the test of time.

County affiliations not appreciated by Dublin based experts...

The McCarthy proposals are reminiscent of the proposals to emasculate the VECs that surfaced in the late 1980s. Then, in 1987, Fianna Fáil, on entering government, reversed the policy of the outgoing government, when your predecessor, Micháel Martin, moved to, in his own words, “ring-fence” VECs. Today, Minister, a little over a decade later, we ask you and your government to “ring-fence” VECs for the generations that come after us.

An Bord Snip acknowledges that the abolition of 11 VECs is, at best, only likely to realise savings of €3 million and that such savings can only be achieved over a number of years. Is it worth weakening a vital piece of local infrastructure, in the hope of achieving such a financial saving?

VECs are very conscious of the need for efficiencies and innovation and the VEC National Partnership Forum (VECNPF) has worked in cooperation with management and unions, for a number of years, to achieve savings and efficiencies; and this process is ongoing.

Furthermore, VECs have developed a lead agency model of operation whereby one VEC takes responsibility for coordinating and supporting an education/training programme nationwide - for example, ITABE, SkillVEC, the refugee language programme and the Skills for Work Programme. The lead agency approach has significantly improved both the efficiency and effectiveness of programme delivery.

Minister, Section 21 of the 2001 Act gives VECs the statutory wherewithal to achieve significant economies of scale or critical mass, without any need for amalgamations, and Section 10 of the Act facilitates additional functions being allocated to VECs. IVEA

believes that VECs have a unique capacity to add value to Irish Education and training in the New Ireland. To dismantle this capacity as this point would, we believe, be a regrettable step.

What strategic aim will the amalgamation of VECs achieve...

What strategic aim is it proposed to achieve by implementing the Bord Snip proposal? Certainly not significant financial savings!

VECs contribute massively towards the accumulation of social and human capital. Is it not time to recognise social costs and benefits as well as financial costs and benefits?

Delegates, we were promised huge savings and efficiencies when the Health Boards were amalgamated to produce the HSE. Did they materialise?

County identity and loyalty have been deeply ingrained in the Irish psyche by the GAA for over 100 years. While Dublin 4 economists may not appreciate the significance of such loyalty and identity in Irish life, we know Minister that, as a son of the Cork–Kerry frontier, you are very much aware of its significance.

VECs effective transparent and highly regarded local education authorities...

Whether it is Leitrim VEC, Roscommon VEC, Longford VEC or any other county VEC that we are referring to, each VEC is an effective, transparent and highly regarded local statutory education authority – an authority that identifies with its local community, and its local community with it.

Today, delegates, we appeal for common sense. Provincial Ireland has been stripped of too many of its assets. At a time of obvious need for locally-based education services, it is important that our government stands behind our local education authority framework and rejects the advice of those who seem to have no apparent comprehension of the heart and soul of the Irish identity.

Our VEC structure is very much aligned with that identity and we hope and expect that common sense will prevail and that our VECs will be allowed to continue to work on behalf of their communities in the decades ahead.’

ENDS

APPENDIX 3

Head Office Services

The various administrative pillars of Finance, Educational Support Services, Human Resources and Information, Communication Technology, within Head Office, provide a range of supports in the following areas.

- ✓ Payroll for all employees
- ✓ Human Resource services
- ✓ Recruitment and Appointments
- ✓ Service Vocational Education Committee monthly meetings
- ✓ ICT Provision, support and development
- ✓ Building and development
- ✓ Strategic Development
- ✓ Publication of Annual Reports and Plans
- ✓ Youth Services, Grants & Scholarships
- ✓ Childcare and crèche services
- ✓ Mainstream school services
- ✓ Adult and Community Education
- ✓ Adult Basic Education & Literacy
- ✓ Back to Education Initiative
- ✓ School Completion Programme
- ✓ Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme
- ✓ Prison Post-Release Service
- ✓ Youthreach Development
- ✓ Senior Traveller Training Support
- ✓ Internal Audit Service
- ✓ Finance Sub-Committee
- ✓ Audit Sub-Committee
- ✓ Boards of Management
- ✓ Oideachas agus Seribhísí Trí Ghaelge

Some of the principal services that come directly under the remit of the VECs include the following.

Main Services

- ✓ Modern and highly equipped Second-level School and Community College Buildings and Facilities

- ✓ Outdoor Education Centres
- ✓ Ionad Cultúrtha
- ✓ Youthreach Centres
- ✓ Adult and Community Education Regional Centres
- ✓ Adult Basic and Special Education Regional Centres
- ✓ Schools of Music
- ✓ Further Education Centres
- ✓ Aonaid Lán Ghaeilge
- ✓ Senior Traveller Training Centres
- ✓ Asylum and Refugee Education Support
- ✓ A role in the establishment and Trusteeship for each of the Community
Schools and Comprehensive Schools

APPENDIX 4

Partnerships

VECs are proactive partners with a range of other interested providers in supporting the provision of a diverse range of services countywide.

- ✓ Department of Education & Science – Regional Offices
- ✓ Department of Education & Science – Regional Inspectorate
- ✓ Local Dioceses
- ✓ County/ City Councils
- ✓ County/ City Development Boards
- ✓ Foróige
- ✓ County Childcare Committees
- ✓ Ógra
- ✓ Arts & Culture Committees
- ✓ County /City Local Sports Partners
- ✓ Area Development and Leader Groups
- ✓ Comhair Cumann na n-Oileáin
- ✓ Irish Prison Service
- ✓ Asylum Seeker & Integrated Agency
- ✓ Teacher’s Union of Ireland
- ✓ Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland
- ✓ Irish National Teachers’ Organisation
- ✓ IMPACT & SIPTU & UNITE
- ✓ Further Education & Training Awards Council
- ✓ Gael Scoileanna
- ✓ Department of Justice Equality & Law Reform – Reception Centres
- ✓ Department of Health and Children (Youth Services)
- ✓ Cumann Lúth-Chleas Gael
- ✓ Department of Arts, Sport & Tourism
- ✓ National Transition Drama and Choral Festival

Collaboration

VECs collaborate and co-operate with a range of national and county agencies.

- ✓ FÁS
- ✓ AONTAS
- ✓ NALA

- ✓ Cumann Luith-chleas Gael
- ✓ County Development Boards
- ✓ County Childcare Committees
- ✓ Local Area Development Boards
- ✓ Dioceses
- ✓ Comhair na n-Oileáin
- ✓ County/City Councils
- ✓ Department of Education & Science Regional Offices
- ✓ NEPS
- ✓ NEWB
- ✓ ACCS
- ✓ Partnership Forum
- ✓ Teaching Council
- ✓ Teacher Conciliation Council
- ✓ Drugs Task Force
- ✓ Health Service Executive