

## **LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY ADMINISTRATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND AFTER PARTITION: THE EARLY YEARS OF THE COUNTY DOWN EDUCATION COMMITTEE 1925-31**

George Beale  
*Department of History*  
*Stranmillis University College, Belfast*

The new concept of local education authority administration in the devolved state of Northern Ireland is explored, focusing on the establishment and work of the County Down Regional Education Committee. After the passing of the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 1923, there were extensive negotiations between the county council and the newly appointed Ministry of Education, particularly in relation to the issue of a single county administration. The debate with the Ministry and reaction to the council's proposals are considered. The duties and responsibilities of the education authority are also discussed, and an assessment of its progress during the early years of administration are examined.

On the partition of Ireland, the Northern Ireland Ministry of Education assumed control of the educational services which had been previously administered by four independent bodies in Dublin. The Commissioners for National Education controlled the national schools which had provided elementary education throughout Ireland since 1831. When it was introduced, this system encountered objections from several of the main churches, and, as a consequence, what was intended to be a non-denominational system for the 'combined moral and literary and separate religious education' of children became a denominational system with almost every school under the management of a church. The cost of teachers' salaries was met by the Commissioners who also gave grants towards the expense of new schools. The Intermediate Education Board provided grants to secondary or intermediate schools, many of which were privately owned and all of which charged fees. These schools educated students up to university entrance standard, and some had preparatory departments for children from 5 to 11 or 12 years of age. The third body involved in education was the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction which was primarily concerned with technical schools but

which also gave certain grants to foster the teaching of science and drawing in intermediate schools. Finally, the Commissioners of Education in Ireland were concerned with the administration of schemes sanctioned by the Commissioners for Charitable Donations and Bequests for endowed schools.

The Education Act (Northern Ireland) 1923 created the county councils and county borough councils of the new state and local education authorities in their areas, and imposed on them certain duties for the establishment of machinery for the local administration of education. These provisions were not implemented until an Order in Council dated 24 May 1924 stipulated that, from 1 October 1924, the sections of the Act relating to county councils should be operative.<sup>1</sup> Until this date, the Act had been in operation only in the county boroughs of Belfast and Londonderry, since it had been carefully arranged not to be implemented in other areas until after the county councils had been reconstituted following the results of elections in the early summer of 1924.

#### THE ISSUE OF A SINGLE COUNTY ADMINISTRATION

Early in 1924, Down County Council commenced discussions with the Northern Ireland Ministry of Education on the implementation of the Education Act within its area.<sup>2</sup> From the initial stages of negotiation, one question was predominant, namely the number of regional areas which should be created. The boundaries and the most suitable administrative centre of each area had also to be decided. The Ministry of Education had not fixed any particular number of regional areas for each of the six counties, as conditions varied considerably

- 1 The parliament of Northern Ireland was established in May 1921 under the terms of the Government of Ireland Act, 1920. This Act affirmed that executive power was vested in the king, but section 8 distinguished between executive power in relation to 'transferred services', that is those services over which the Northern Ireland parliament had power to legislate, and 'reserved matters' which included the Crown, defence, external trade and relations (for complete provisions, see Section 4 of the 1920 Act). Power in relation to 'reserved matters' was exercised by the monarch through his Whitehall ministers and the Imperial civil service, while the executive power in relation to 'transferred services' was delegated to the governor. Immediately after this delegation of executive power in 1921, the governor established seven departments (known as Ministries), including Education, to discharge the duties in connection with these services.
- 2 County Down, situated in the south-east of Northern Ireland and covering an area of 951 square miles, was divided into 18 county districts: 8 rural districts and 10 urban districts. In 1911, the population was 204,303, and by 1926 this figure had risen to 209,228. In 1926, 44% of the population were wage earners, the majority being employed in agriculture, fishing and the textile industry.

across the province. However, in his speech on the Second Reading of the Education Bill in the Northern Ireland House of Commons on 17 April 1923, the Minister of Education, Lord Londonderry, stated that he contemplated the establishment of 'some twenty regional areas under regional committees each controlling schools serving the requirements of an average population of some 40,000' (Northern Ireland, 1923b, col. 347).

It was possible, according to Section 2(4) of the Education Act, to establish a single regional committee for the entire county district, or several smaller committees within the county. If a suitable educational area could be agreed within the county, Section 2(5) of the Act provided for a combination of county districts situated in more than one county. The principal objective in the formation of such areas was, according to Lord Londonderry, 'to work towards the real co-ordination of educational effort, while not too large to hinder the development of local interest in education' (Northern Ireland, 1923b, col. 346).

With a view to assisting county councils with their decisions concerning the formulation of education areas, the Ministry of Education prepared 'model schemes' for each county and submitted these to the chairman of the county council. Such schemes were framed to comply with the requirements of the Act and, if found acceptable to the council, would meet the approval of the Ministry.

The opening paragraphs of the 'model scheme' for County Down referred to the phraseology of Section 2(4) and (5) of the Act which provided (a) for each committee to consist of

not less than fifteen nor more than twenty-one members and shall include persons appointed by the education authority either from members of their own body or partly from those members and partly from other persons, as the education authority think fit; and persons appointed by the councils of the urban and rural county districts in the education area, from members of those councils, or from other persons as they think fit; and (b) that the combination of county districts or single county district assigned to the committee is an area suitable for educational purposes, having regard to population, rateable valuation, geographical considerations, and existing or prospective educational facilities. [Northern Ireland, 1923a, Ch. 21, 13 & 14 Geo 5, Section 2(4) (a) (b)]

Taking into consideration these sections of the Act, four areas were suggested with their headquarters in the towns of Banbridge, Downpatrick, Kilkeel and Newtownards. It was envisaged that the committees based in Banbridge and Newtownards would comprise 15 members and those in Downpatrick and Kilkeel 11 – fewer than those stipulated in the Act.

Section 2(5) of the Act provided for the formation of joint committees where the Ministry was satisfied that it was not practicable to establish educationally suitable districts within a single county. In this respect, four committees were proposed. These were to be formed jointly with the neighbouring counties of Antrim and Armagh, in addition to those within County Down. However, Down County Council representatives who met the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education on 24 August 1924, objected on financial and representational grounds to any arrangement which would involve the establishment of regional committees outside their own boundaries, and the idea of forming a single county area began to emerge as a possibility. The single county committee had been suggested by the Ministry for County Fermanagh based on geographic and demographic considerations: the population was much smaller (61,836) (Northern Ireland, 1911) and Enniskillen was a convenient focus for the whole county. County Down, however, had a much larger population and very different geographic conditions (Down County Council, 1924a).

Correspondence between Down County Council and the Ministry of Education during the late months of 1924 indicated, on the council's part, an attitude of continued uncertainty to the proposed regional areas. From this time also, the Ministry began to adopt a somewhat intransigent attitude towards its own proposals. The council, evidently rather insecure, continually sought advice from the Ministry. In a letter dated 15 September 1924, members posed several questions: (i) whether the council as the education authority had power at any time to increase or reduce the number of regional areas originally planned, if these were found to be unsatisfactory? (ii) would the education authority be competent to make the first administrative appointments on a temporary basis? and (iii) in the event of County Down not formulating a joint regional scheme with a neighbouring county, if pupils from a rural area in that county attended a technical school in an urban district of an adjoining county, would the council be under obligation to make a payment to the technical school *pro rata* in respect of such pupils? (Down County Council, 1924a).

The council received assurance from the Ministry that Section 5(3) of the 1923 Education Act provided for the preparation and submission of a new or revised scheme for the constitution of regional committees within a council area, modifying in the light of experience, the original scheme. If approved by the Ministry, this would become legally binding from the particular date agreed upon by both the Ministry and the council. It would also contain a clause making it operative from the agreed date and abrogating in whole or in part any previous scheme from the same date. On the second point, the Ministry indicated that

temporary administrative appointments would be satisfactory, but it was unable to advise on the third query until the matter had been more fully investigated (Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland, 1924a).

Further correspondence between the two bodies reveals more definitely the Ministry's disapproval of the council's provisional plans for the formation of a single regional area:

the Minister is of the opinion that the establishment of a single regional committee for a whole county would not be in conformity with the spirit of the Education Act which aims at the promotion and stimulation of local interest in education, unless the considerations specially referred to in Section 2(4) of the Act, viz. population, rateable valuation, geographical considerations and existing or prospective educational facilities, clearly point to a combination of all the county districts within a county. (Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland, 1924b)

Clearly, the Ministry did not wish its draft scheme to be rejected and, realising the Down County Council was concerned with the financial burdens to be imposed by the implementation of the Education Act, since such fears had been expressed by delegates at a previous interview, the Ministry endeavoured to employ an earlier tactic, namely that a single regional committee did not necessarily mean that there would be no need for local committees with a consequent expense. Additional educational activities, in the opinion of the Ministry, could only be dealt with satisfactorily on a local basis, for example, the conveyance of children to school, the granting of exemptions from school attendance, the employment of school children and young persons, the care of afflicted children and 'all matters arising out of the exercise of the functions of management.' Indeed, the Ministry intimated that 'with regard to economy in administration, the expense connected with the establishment of regional education committees as contemplated in the Act might well be less than that involved in central administration' (Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland, 1924b).

A special meeting of the county council was held on 24 October 1924 to consider the report of its Finance, Law and Parliamentary Committee which was dealing with the matter. The committee's findings detailed the negotiations and correspondence with the Ministry of Education and included the examination of the draft schemes and membership of committees. Having carefully considered these and the views of several urban and rural district councils, it was felt desirable by the members of the sub-committee that the entire administrative county should be constituted as a region under Section 2(3) and (4) of the Education Act, and that membership of the regional education committee should

be increased from 21 to a number not exceeding 30. The report was received and adopted by the council and it was believed to be a wise decision. However, as this was experimental, if it were found to be unsatisfactory, smaller areas could be formed (Down County Council, 1924c).

#### REACTIONS TO COUNTY COUNCIL PROPOSALS

During the late months of 1924, it can be observed that two distinct viewpoints were in existence – those in favour of a single regional area and those who believed that administration could be more efficiently executed on a more localized basis. Reaction to the council's proposed scheme emanated from three principal sources – teachers' unions, local councils and central government.

The County Down National Teachers' Organisation was in favour of a single area for the county. In arriving at this decision, members had seriously considered the situation in England after the 1902 Education Act, by which school boards were abolished and county and borough councils established in their places. Teachers, supported by the Board of Education, were anxious, for administrative and inspection purposes, to secure a fairly extended area geographically. This could only be devised by the fusion of a number of smaller controlling bodies, many of which were dissimilar in interest and character, into one authority, thus providing greater educational efficiency. Consequently, provision was made by which smaller authorities, until that time autonomous, could transfer their responsibilities to a larger area. Indeed, in many instances this occurred in practice as in the case of Stafford with a population of 23,385 and Warwick with a population of 11,858. After one year, both boroughs surrendered their autonomy and became merged in a larger authority. English teachers, according to the County Down organisation, found that larger authorities had proved a great success and that this was the attitude adopted by their members for the control of education in Northern Ireland. They were, in addition, convinced that there was sufficient identity of interest on the part of the general public in the province to warrant the selection of the largest possible areas as units for educational administration (National Teachers' Organisation, County Down, n.d.).

Members forwarded two further objections, one concerning expenditure and the other school attendance. On the former, it was considered that a multiplicity of areas would lead to both increased expenditure and a complication of administrative machinery, while on the latter, the teachers pointed out that, in the past, local committees responsible for the enforcement of school attendance in small areas had not been particularly successful.

However, if this organization concurred with the proposal of the county council to establish one regional committee for the county, its officials also suggested a scheme for the formation of five small committees in the event of the education authority being unable to accept responsibility for the entire area.<sup>3</sup>

By the end of October 1924, the various urban and rural district councils in County Down had been supplied with copies of the proposed scheme for education in the county, and reaction was generally in favour of a single county administration. Nine councils from all parts of the county approved initially, while other councils and technical committees approved on condition that all powers and duties in relation to technical instruction be vested in a sub-committee, the majority of whose members would be appointed by the urban council.

With the exception of Dromore Urban District Council in mid-Down, outright objections to the Ministry's proposals were confined to the northeast of the county. Those councils and technical instruction committees opposed the scheme for a single county area on the grounds of size, insufficient local involvement, representation, finance, and provision for technical instruction. The Newtownards Technical Instruction Committee, for example, asserted that smaller committees controlling portions of the county would be more familiar with the educational needs of the district, and in the smaller areas, parents and other members of the community would take more interest in education. Financial matters, they contended, could be effected more efficiently and economically, although no suggestion on their means of achievement was offered. Since this committee dealt solely with technical instruction, its principal concern was that branch of education. Without doubt, technical education had progressed under the urban schemes and much success must be attributed to the acquaintance of members with local needs especially in respect of industry, and in the facility of direct access to the Ministry of Education (Newtownards Technical Instruction Committee, 1924).

Holywood Urban District Council suggested that the county should be divided into suitable regional areas as propounded by the Minister of Education, each with a population of approximately 40,000, and that the constitution of any regional committee should not exceed 15, of which eight would be appointed by the county council, four by urban districts and three by rural districts.

3 The teachers advised that regional committees should exercise jurisdiction over areas situated within one county only and by this, a reduction of three committees from the eight proposed in the Ministry's scheme would be effected. Suggested headquarters of these areas were Belfast, as the education authority held some of its meetings there, Banbridge, Downpatrick, Newry and Newtownards.

Perhaps one of the most emphatic protests against Down County Council's scheme was voiced at the December meeting of Bangor Urban District Council (*County Down Spectator*, 1924). Sir Thomas Wilson, chairman of the Bangor Technical Instruction Committee, reported that, in the opinion of his committee, it would be prejudicial to the interests of individual districts if the control of education were to be vested in a single authority for the entire county. Sir Thomas referred to a recent speech by Stanley Baldwin and the British Minister for Education, both of whom had expressed the view that education would be more efficiently administered at a local level.

Members of Dromore Urban District Council, when they met that same month, reasoned that if a single committee were to consist of 21 members on the basis of 11 elected by the county council, six elected by rural councils, and four by urban councils, this meant that the two latter bodies would have only one representative on the committee for every two councils. Local representation, it was suggested, might be negligible and thus detrimental to the educational requirements of their district. Members were concerned that if the county council would strike a rate for the whole county, towns with a large urban population like those in the north-east, might be so influential that progress would be confined to such districts. For this reason, the Dromore council passed a resolution in favour of several regional areas for the county.

Some of the local councils that opposed the county council's scheme proposed alternatives of their own. Others, for example, Newry Urban District, which had significant involvement in technical education, gave conditional approval. At a joint meeting of the Newry council and the technical instruction committee from that town, a request was forwarded to the Ministry of Education as follows:

(1) That there be one Regional Committee appointed by the Education Authority for the entire County of Down and that this Committee shall delegate to a sub-committee [as referred to in Article 12 of the 4<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Education Act (NI) 1923], all their powers and duties in relation to Technical Education in the said Urban District provided that the Urban District Council decide to relinquish in favour of the Education Authority their powers and duties in respect of Technical Education.

(2) That the constitution and powers of the said sub-committee shall be analogous to those of the existing Technical Instruction Committee, and that the appointment of a majority of the members of the sub-committee shall be in the hands of the Urban District Council.

Further, that in the event of effect being given to the foregoing provisions, this meeting recommends the Urban District Council of Newry to



consider favourably the relinquishing to the Education Authority its powers and duties in relation to Technical Education, in accordance with Section 23 (2) (ii) of the Act, subject to a satisfactory agreement being entered into between the Council and the Regional Committee in regard to the finances of the sub-committee, but in the meantime we recommend the Council to retain full control of its Technical School and all its powers and duties in relation to technical education. (*Newry Reporter*, 1924)

In his remarks on the resolutions, the Very Rev Dr W. G. Strahan, a local Presbyterian clergyman and former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, said that the Act had been brought into existence to co-ordinate education, and that relations between primary and technical education might take a considerable length of time to be resolved. Dr Strahan felt that in order to achieve such co-ordination, autonomy was a major factor, and, in his opinion, this could be more advantageously achieved under an authority representing the whole county. The single authority, according to the views of the Newry council, would be broadly representative of a large area, and would therefore include technical schools in different districts, all of which would be in a position to rival each other in presenting the best provisions for their town. This 'healthy rivalry' would intensify interest in the local school.

On finance, this council approved of the equal rate burden throughout the county, which would be the policy if a single education authority were to operate. The council further suggested that if the salary of a Director of Education were spread over the whole county, it would amount to a smaller proportion than salaries of various secretaries and clerical staffs within smaller areas.<sup>4</sup>

#### THE COUNTY COUNCIL'S DEBATE WITH THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

The scheme proposed by the Down County Council was subjected to the closest scrutiny by the Ministry of Education. Correspondence between central and local government officials reveals an intransigent attitude on the part of each. Arguments which the Ministry had employed some months earlier were once again enumerated and elaborated: efficiency and economy in administration, with the avoidance of the proliferation of sub-committees, would provide a much more suitable administrative arrangement than a series of such committees fully responsible to the central education committee, which in turn would be responsible to the county council as the education authority. The

<sup>4</sup> The term 'Director of Education' was not used officially by the Down County Council until 24 April 1925.

Ministry again criticized the idea of a single authority on the grounds that the area for which it was responsible was too large.

In December 1924, the Ministry was still resisting the council's proposals. However, a suggestion was mooted by the former that a conference would be welcomed to ascertain whether agreement could be reached on issues which might secure the main objectives of the county council and at the same time make preparations for the co-ordination of all forms of education in the county (Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland, 1924). The proposed meeting was scheduled for 20 January 1925 and the Ministry, in preparation for it, drew up an internal memorandum listing the principal arguments in favour of the scheme forwarded by the county council and those in support of smaller regional committees (Down County Council, 1925b). It is interesting to note that the Ministry, while still wishing to impress on the council the advantages of the latter, nevertheless demonstrated a degree of flexibility towards the county scheme at this stage. Indeed Lewis McQuibban, Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Education, wrote:

I do not suggest that the Education Act cannot be worked by a single county committee with suitable sub-committees, but if such a single county committee is inevitable then I think we ought to insist that the Scheme shall contain such provisions as will in effect secure local administration as far as possible. (Down County Council, 1925b)

The county council remained firm in its opinion that the establishment of a single regional committee for the whole county was in agreement 'with the letter of the Act,' in which there was no provision to the contrary. In correspondence on this issue, the Ministry referred repeatedly to 'the intention of the Act,' which was, according to the council, 'not always easy to ascertain' (Down County Council, 1925a). However, in this respect, public statements by the Minister himself could be interpreted as lending support for the council's stance. In moving the Second Reading of the Education Bill in the Northern Ireland Senate, the Minister stated:

I may tell the House that in the Scheme of the Ministry of Education, which we made out with great care and trouble, we did set up one County as the education authority under the county council, with only one committee, which shows to Hon. Members that there is no necessity to rule out the idea of the County Councils operating through a single committee alone in any county. Our six counties differ to a very large extent in size, and while there are small counties there are also very large counties and I am not yet sure that the county councils in our large counties can operate with more than one. However, this is a matter for

discussion...it is a matter of arrangement between the county councils and the Ministry, and I need hardly say I anticipate no difficulty in the matter, but I am confident that when the time comes we shall be able to bring about an arrangement that will be in accordance with the desires we have in the direction of education and yet in accordance with the wishes of the County Councils themselves. (Northern Ireland, 1923c)

Similarly, in a speech delivered at the Ulster Reform Club on 9 November 1924, Lord Londonderry, said:

The county councils then in their capacity as local education authorities will appoint what we have named regional committees for the general administration and control of education throughout the county area. That is to say, wherever we bring the Act into force the county council concerned will closely examine the existing educational facilities throughout the county area, the means of communication, the geographical features, and all other matters which would affect the administration of education. In accordance with the conclusions at which they arrive they will map out their county area into regions – it may be a single region for the whole area, perhaps two or more – and submit their proposals to the Ministry for approval. (*Belfast News-Letter*, 1924)

The question of the suitability of a single county district for education purposes regarding 'population, rateable valuation, geographical considerations and existing or prospective educational facilities' was fully recognized by the council in framing its scheme. Members were satisfied from local knowledge that the needs and circumstances of all parts of the county in relation to education were identical and did not require differential treatment. There was, however, one reservation: the provision of technical instruction in the urban districts was to continue as far as possible under the existing arrangements. In the event of urban technical committees deciding to come under the authority of the regional committee, they should be appointed as local sub-committees, but the general question of local sub-committees, according to the council, did not appear to arise in determining whether there should be one or more regional committees. The council affirmed that, for example, if five regional areas were established, each comprising from 80 to 100 schools, the local administration in such matters as school attendance, employment of children, provision and management of schools, heating, lighting, repairs, sanitation, and general upkeep of school premises could be carried out efficiently by the regional committees without the assistance of local committees for schools or groups of schools within their area. It was pointed out by the council that if this were the intention, no special

provision had been made in the Act for the establishment of such school attendance committees with important functions of school management.

The time factor was also a matter for concern. The scheme was forwarded to the Ministry of Education for its approval on 27 October 1924, and by the second half of January 1925, no decision had been reached. The council was by this time becoming impatient and indeed asserted that it would not accept any responsibility for the Ministry's delay in dealing with the scheme. After a meeting between the council and the Ministry on 20 January 1925, the latter agreed to issue a confirming order on the understanding that certain amendments were incorporated in the scheme. These included clauses concerning increased membership of the regional education committee beyond the statutory limit of 15-21 members to 35, and others relating to matters such as the submission of financial schemes, the dates when urban and rural councils would elect representatives to the regional committee, and the mechanism by which the county council would appoint the regional education committee.<sup>5</sup>

The Ministry also recommended changes to Part 1 of the schedule in which the constitution of the regional education committee was outlined. Initially, the council proposed to establish a committee consisting of 18 members appointed by the county council and one member appointed by each of the urban and rural district councils. While the Ministry raised no objection to this allocation of membership, it would be possible for local bodies to raise such questions concerning the adequacy of their representation. Therefore, the Ministry suggested that the council afford special consideration to this question. Membership, however, remained as initially proposed, although the other amendments were adopted unanimously at a meeting of Down County Council on 30 January 1925 and, within a few days, the following notice was published in the local newspapers:

#### COUNTY OF DOWN

To wit

Notice of intention to make an Order approving and confirming a scheme for the establishment of a regional area and the constitution of a Regional Education Committee therefor under the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 1923.

Whereas in sub-section 6 of Section 2 of the Education Act (NI) 1923, it is enacted that before making an Order for confirming a scheme for the establishment of regional education committees as framed by an education authority the Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland shall

<sup>5</sup> Report of meeting between members of Down County Council and the Ministry of Education, 20 January 1925 (PRONI, ED 13/1/29).

cause the proposed Order to be published for such period and in such manner as the Ministry may consider necessary in order to make the same known to the education authority and all other persons interested and shall consider any objections and representations respecting the proposed Order and may cause a local inquiry to be held if it the said Ministry of Education sees fit to do so.

Now therefore the Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland in accordance with the provisions of the said section hereby gives notice to education authorities and all other persons interested that on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of February 1925, by virtue of the powers conferred upon it in that behalf by the said Act it will proceed to make an Order confirming the scheme for the establishment of a Regional Education Committee within the County of Down as set forth in the Schedule hereto annexed unless before the date hereinbefore mentioned such objections or representations respecting the proposed Order are received from the said education authorities or persons interested as in the opinion of the Ministry require that the said scheme or any part thereof be further considered.

Dated this 2<sup>nd</sup> day of February 1925

L McQuibban  
Secretary<sup>6</sup>

The Ministry of Education had notified local councils of the order and a major objection was received from the Town Commissioners of Downpatrick. The 12 commissioners had been elected on 15 January 1922 for three years. However, on 11 June 1924, the Ministry of Home Affairs for Northern Ireland issued an order constituting the town of Downpatrick an urban district from 1 April 1925.

Downpatrick had a population of approximately 3,000. It was the county town and had five public elementary schools and one important technical school, yet the county council's scheme ignored the urban district of Downpatrick which would be in existence before the proposed regional education committee. No provision was made in the scheme for any representation of the new Downpatrick Urban District on the regional education committee either during its first term of office or subsequently. Nevertheless, after having reconsidered the matter, the council suggested that, provided the Ministry of Education raised no objections, the scheme would be altered by the addition of one representative of the new urban council to the regional committee, provided that the total membership of this committee be

6 Notice of Order for establishment of a regional education authority for County Down (PRONI, ED 13/1/29).

increased from 35 to 37 and the number of county council representatives be increased from 18 to 19 in order to give the county council a majority. The scheme was amended accordingly and the Down County Regional Education Committee came into existence on 1 April 1925.

The first meeting of the new committee was held on 3 April 1925 and The Right Honourable Viscount Bangor was unanimously elected chairman. One of the first tasks was the appointment of a secretary to the committee, and the salary, duties, and conditions of appointment were discussed and agreed. These may be summarized: (i) the preparation of agenda for all meetings of the education committee and its sub-committees, as well as the minutes thereof; (ii) the conduct of all the correspondence of the education authority; (iii) the control and co-ordination of the administrative staffs of the authority connected with elementary, secondary and technical education, medical inspection, school attendance and other educational services existing or to be established under the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 1923; (iv) the preparation of, and, when approved, the carrying out of the educational and financial schemes of the authority, including the preparation of all financial and other returns required by the Ministry; (v) the co-ordination of educational services in the area so far as this is within the power of the education authority; (vi) advising the education authority generally as to educational policy; (vii) such other constructive and administrative work as the developments of education generally under the Education Act, 1923 may entail upon the authority (County Down Regional Education Committee, 1925).

The salary for this position was fixed at £500 per annum and an additional travelling allowance of five pence per mile was offered, provided this did not exceed £200. Candidates were expected to possess good educational qualifications, including a degree in Arts or Science, and experience in both educational and administrative fields. The post was non-pensionable and the appointment could be terminated on three months notice from either side. The position was advertised, applications were received, a short-list was drawn up, and five candidates were requested to attend for interview at a meeting of the education committee on 1 May 1925. David C Quail, aged 25 years, a graduate of Queen's University, Belfast and mathematics master at the Belfast College of Technology was appointed Secretary to the committee and Director of Education.

The first term of office of the Down County Regional Education Committee was to be terminated on 30 June 1927 and members of a new committee were to be appointed according to the specified rules in the scheme – by the county council and the rural district councils at their first meeting held after their triennial election, and by members of the urban councils at special meetings held

in the same month as the first meetings of the new county and rural councils. This was, therefore, the time for reassessment. The Ministry of Education had stated in January 1925 that the appointment of a single regional education committee for the county area was sanctioned provisionally for a limited period and now this sanction was to be continued for a further term of office under a new committee (Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland, 1925).

#### DUTIES OF THE COUNTY DOWN REGIONAL EDUCATION COMMITTEE

A new and prodigious task faced this regional education committee. One of its primary duties was to initiate a survey of existing educational facilities in the area and to compare these with requirements. Public elementary education was to be a priority and the duty of the committee involved the provision of sufficient accommodation in public elementary schools for every child of school age. But free education for children attending such schools, while taking precedence over other forms of education, was not the only duty. The committee was expected to take responsibility for secondary and higher education through a system of scholarships to enable young people of 'exceptional promise' to undertake further studies at secondary schools and ultimately at a university. Opportunities for further education for pupils who were unable to secure places in secondary schools were to be provided at classes in technical instruction.

In practical terms, duties of the Committee involved the building of new schools, accepting the transfer of existing schools from clerical or lay management, assisting in the provision and upkeep of voluntary schools, and establishing technical instruction classes where necessary. In addition, the committee was required to provide for the care and education of afflicted children, for medical and dental treatment of children attending public elementary schools, and for food and clothing for 'necessitous children.' Compulsory school attendance had to be enforced, and the committee was also responsible for the oversight of children in employment outside school hours, as well as the provision of facilities for religious instruction in schools under the committee's authority.

The regional education committees were permitted to appoint various sub-committees to assist them in their multifarious duties, and at a meeting on 5 June 1925, the following were established for County Down: Finance, Law and Transfer of Schools; School Attendance and School Committees; Technical and Higher Education; and Medical Inspection and Care of Afflicted Children. Each member of the regional committee was appointed a member of at least one of the first three sub-committees. The sub-committee for Medical Inspection was to consist of 12 members, four being nominated by each of the other three sub-committees.

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE COMMITTEE'S WORK  
DURING THE EARLY YEARS OF ITS EXISTENCE

Education in Northern Ireland progressed steadily in most areas during the early years of local education authority administration. There were 18 such authorities: two county borough committees at Belfast and Londonderry, 13 committees responsible for very small areas in Counties Antrim, Londonderry, and Tyrone, and three single county authorities in Armagh, Down, and Fermanagh. The last group proved to be the most successful and progressive of the provincial authorities, as some of the smaller committees were too small to operate efficiently and attract personnel of high calibre. Indeed, the 13 regional committees appointed their secretaries on a part-time basis only. The choice of a single area for County Down proved to be a significant one, as the 1947 Education Act (Northern Ireland) provided for the establishment of one local education authority for each county. Thus, continuity was ensured and development after 1947 could proceed with minimal delay.

The County Down authority undertook its task in a most systematic and efficient manner. Since no precedents existed for the local administration of education in the country, each authority was obliged, with advice from the Ministry, to take the initiative to implement the requirements of the new legislation.

Careful planning is demonstrated in the work of this committee, particularly in its attitude to school accommodation. The report of the Director of Education, although not completed until July 1928, provided a most valuable basis from which to plan. This survey was commended by the Ministry of Education as it was one of the most comprehensive documents produced by any education committee in the province (Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland, 1929-30). But such a document is of little value unless its proposals are put into practice. In this respect, attempts to amalgamate schools and to provide new buildings, especially for public elementary and technical education, were effected very creditably.

By 31 December 1931, the County Down authority had not only provided for the building of nine new schools costing £66,000 to accommodate 2,261 children, but had also carried out improvements on 106 'transferred' schools at a cost of £42,990.<sup>7</sup> These figures reveal a genuine attempt to improve school accommodation in the county. Many local education authorities provided only a very small number of new schools and carried out few improvements.

7 Under the terms of the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 1923, existing schools (the majority being under church control) were invited to transfer control and management to local authorities. This proved to be a contentious issue with religious instruction being at the centre of the debate.



In general, the single county committees were responsible for greater progress in school provision during the early years and the County Down Committee far surpassed all other local authorities in this duty (Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland, 1931-32).

One third of the school accommodation in existence in Northern Ireland in 1921 had, by 1931, either been superseded by new schools or brought up to modern requirements. In County Down, there were 359 schools at the close of 1931. This shows a reduction of 24 from 31 December 1924 just before the establishment of the local education committee. By 1931, just over one-third of the total number of schools in the county was housed in new or renovated buildings, which demonstrated the County Down committee's achievements to be equal to the average of the entire province.

In England and Wales, the Hadow Report of 1926 on *The Education of the Adolescent* brought about a fundamental reorganization of the educational system by replacing the all-age elementary schools by junior and senior schools for children aged up to 11+ and between 11+ and 14 respectively. When this report was published, the possibility of its application to Northern Ireland was considered, but it was decided that the time was not ripe for such a radical reorganization.

The local education authorities in England had been established for 24 years and by 1926 approximately half of the elementary schools, containing considerably more than half of the school population, were under their direct control. The education authorities in Northern Ireland had been in existence in the county areas for about one year and very few, if any, public elementary schools had been transferred to their control.

The work of the Northern Ireland local education authorities in relation to secondary education was generally confined to the award of a limited number of scholarships and grants to improve existing accommodation. But while priority was given to the development of the public elementary sector, the County Down committee endeavoured to organize several senior elementary schools in the larger urban areas. The new 'central' schools in Bangor and the Movilla Public Elementary School in the neighbouring town of Newtownards are examples of this experiment, which not only helped to effect amalgamation, but also permitted more specialized training and laid the foundation for the secondary intermediate schools which followed the passing of the Education Act (Northern Ireland) in 1947.

By 1931, the majority of secondary schools in Northern Ireland were voluntary schools under separate boards of governors, although four had been transferred to education authorities. Two of these were in County Down – Newry Intermediate and Regent House, Newtownards. Apart from the award of

scholarships, the expenditure in relation to secondary education in the county was limited to improvements at these schools. The Ministry of Education considered that secondary school provision was adequate throughout Northern Ireland with the exception of the Downpatrick area. The County Down committee had, however, planned to build a new school in that town and it was opened on 5 September 1933.

Technical education had really been under local control for many years before the passing of the 1923 Education Act. Hence, the local education committees were able to build on this to provide a most efficient system. In County Down, most of the existing schools were quickly transferred to the education authority and this facilitated planning and progress. Proposals for improvements in technical school accommodation were extensive, but due to priority being afforded to public elementary school provision, only one new technical school was built by 1930. Alterations to existing schools were carried out and various sites for new schools were acquired.

Though the early years of the County Down Committee were spent on formulating schemes for the administration of education throughout the county, medical and welfare services were not neglected. Until the passing of the 1923 Education Act, few attempts had been made to deal with the health and physical condition of school children. Section 47 of that Act imposed on the education authorities the duty to provide for periodical medical and dental inspection of all children attending public elementary schools in Northern Ireland and to make arrangements for the treatment of any problems diagnosed. The regulations made in accordance with the Act, amongst other matters, provided for the appointment of medical officers, dentists and nurses to assist the authorities in operating the scheme (*Medical Inspection and Treatment of School Children*, 1924). After a rather uncertain beginning, within a very short time the County Down medical inspection system proved to be one of the finest in the province. All local authorities in Northern Ireland carried out the duty of arranging medical inspections, although in several areas only part-time officers were employed. The County Down authority also fulfilled its obligation of making provision for the education of 'afflicted' children in its area, of enforcing compulsory school attendance, and was one of only three local authorities responsible for providing meals to 'necessitous' children.<sup>8</sup>

8 Under Section 54 of the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 1923 the terms 'afflicted child' and 'afflicted children' referred to those within one of the following categories: (i) blind, deaf and dumb children; (ii) crippled children; (iii) epileptic children; (iv) mentally defective children.

An important factor in the administration of local education authorities was the size and homogeneity of their areas. In a borough, where the area of administration was compact, it was relatively easy to develop a sense of common interest. On the other hand, the county education committee had to administer a wide and varied area which might include large market towns, seaside resorts, villages, and thinly populated areas. In these circumstances, many small schools were required and it might prove more difficult to sustain local interest and to co-ordinate the work of various institutions. These difficulties determined the technique of the local administration since their solution called for an adaptable organization which could function evenly and with vigour for the greatest benefit of the many and differing communities which it served.

The County Down authority undertook these tasks with breadth of vision and a determination to bring that vision to reality. Such could not be achieved immediately. Nevertheless, the initial development and work of this committee proved to be the most extensive of all the provincial authorities and laid a firm foundation for the future development of education in the new, devolved state of Northern Ireland.

#### REFERENCES

- Belfast News-Letter*, 10 November 1924.  
 County Down Regional Education Committee. (1925). *Minutes, Appendix A*, 3 April (PRONI, LA3/7AB/1).  
*County Down Spectator*, 6 December 1924.  
 Down County Council. (1924a). Letter to the Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland, 15 September (Public Record Office of Northern Ireland [PRONI], ED13/1/29).  
 Down County Council. (1924b). Memorandum, 25 August (PRONI, ED13/1/29).  
 Down County Council. (1924c). Minutes of a Special Meeting, 24 October (PRONI, ED13/1/29).  
 Down County Council. (1925a). Letter to the Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland, 16 January (PRONI, ED13/1/29).  
 Down County Council. (1925b). Notes, 20 January (PRONI, ED13/1/29).  
*Medical inspection and treatment of school children*. (1924). SR & O (NI), No 71.  
 Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland. (1924). Correspondence to Down County Council, 19 December (PRONI, ED13/1/29).

- Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland (1924a). Letter to Down County Council, 17 September (PRONI, ED13/1/29).
- Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland (1924b). Letter to Down County Council, 9 October (PRONI, ED13/1/29).
- Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland. (1925). Letter. 27 January (PRONI, ED13/1/29).
- Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland (1929-30). *Report*. HC 211, p. 27.
- Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland (1930-31). *Report*. HC 242, p. 30.
- Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland (1931-32). *Report*. HC 269 Part II, Section IV, Table 12.
- National Teachers' Organisation (County Down). (n.d.) Printed statement (PRONI, ED13/1/29).
- Newry Reporter*, 4 December 1924.
- Newtownards Technical Instruction Committee. (1924). Letter to the Ministry of Education, 29 November (PRONI, ED13/1/29).
- Northern Ireland. (1911). *Census of Population*.
- Northern Ireland. (1923a). *Education Act*.
- Northern Ireland. (1923b). *Parliamentary debates: House of Commons*. Vol III, 17 April.
- Northern Ireland. (1923c). *Parliamentary debates: Senate*, Vol III, cols. 148-149, June 4.