

Omagh chosen for unique survey into education system

A UNIQUE survey into the education system in Northern Ireland is to be carried out this month in Omagh by Queen's University in conjunction with Newcastle and Stanford University USA.

The poll will give a scientific random sample of 600 parents of children of school age living in the Omagh area the opportunity to voice their considered opinions on the challenges facing education policy in Northern Ireland.

Initial opinions will be sought in January through a door-to-door survey conducted by Ipsos-MORI, one of the largest survey research organisations in the world and part of the event and its results will be broadcast on BBC Northern Ireland (Hearts and Minds) on the 1st February 2007.

With the education policy in Northern Ireland facing new challenges with the introduction of a new curriculum, the possibility of increased cross-community sharing and cross-sectoral collaboration and declining enrolments, the poll hopes to reveal what parents

think about the choices available if they were fully informed about the competing arguments.

Independent researchers from Newcastle University, Queen's University, Belfast, and Stanford University USA will try to answer these questions by conducting Northern Ireland's first 'Deliberative Poll' in the North, and Omagh has been selected as the most suitable location.

Dr David Russell, a Fellow at Queen's University Belfast, who is part of the research team explained why Omagh was chosen.

He said, "Omagh has been chosen for a number of reasons; it allows that slightly urban/rural dimension to be brought in and as it is a typical market town in Northern Ireland with a relatively mixed population, it represents almost all of the sectional educational interests in Northern Ireland."

Explaining the process Dr David Russell continued: "With all the educational changes that we face in Northern Ireland, we will be undertaking a unique project, called a 'Deliberative Poll.'

"Throughout the month of January the research

company MORI will be contacting in the region of 600 parents of school age children in the Omagh area and will be issuing them with a questionnaire on their attitudes towards different educational options that they may face."

Following the door-to-door survey parents will be sent a briefing document detailing some possible approaches for delivering education. On January 27, 2007, the parents will take part in a day of deliberation. This invitation-only event will be held at Omagh Further Education College. The purpose is to afford parents the opportunity to discuss the briefing document with each other under controlled conditions and to ask policy experts and representatives of the key stakeholders any questions they may have. Once the day of deliberation has finished, the parents will be surveyed again by Ipsos-MORI. This second survey will capture the parents' considered opinions at the end of the process.

Dr David Russell added: "As part of the process, BBC's Hearts and Minds will be making a programme that will be screened on February 1 fol-

lowing the event at Omagh College. They will follow a number of parents through the entire process as well as holding a studio debate as well as looking at the actual findings of the poll."

The researchers are now inviting local, regional, national and international media to attend the day of deliberation. The research team includes Ian O'Flynn, Newcastle University, Tony Gallagher, Queen's University, Belfast, David Russell, Queen's University, Belfast, James Fishkin, Stanford University and Robert Luskin, Stanford University and the University of Texas, Austin.

The researchers have generated this document in consultation with key stakeholders including the Department for Education, the Western Education and Library Board, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and Comhairle Na Gaelscola'ochta.