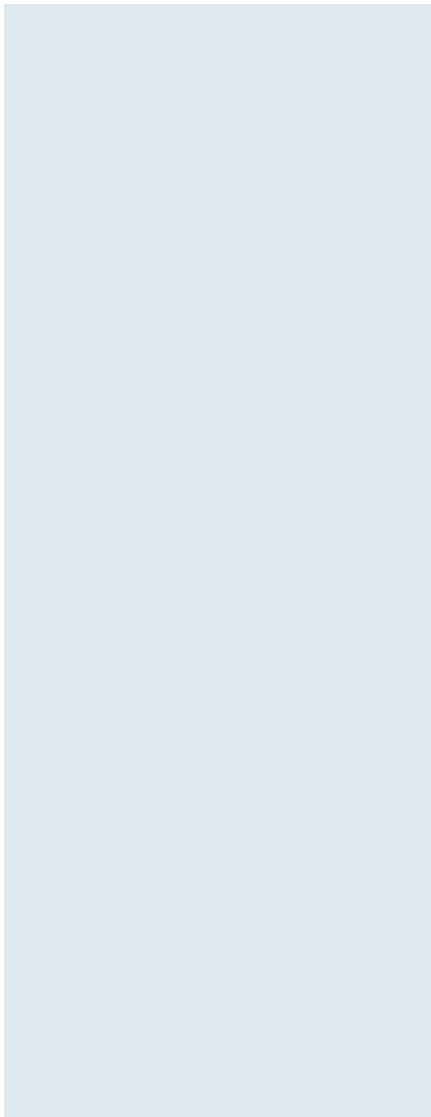




... children, their world, their education

INTERIM REPORTS



COMMUNITY SOUNDINGS

The Primary Review
regional witness sessions

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PRIMARY REVIEW INTERIM REPORTS

COMMUNITY SOUNDINGS

The Primary Review regional witness sessions

October 2007

This is the first in a series of 32 interim reports from the Primary Review, an independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England. The Review was launched in October 2006 and will publish its final report in late 2008.

The Primary Review is supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and directed by Robin Alexander.

A briefing which summarises key issues from this report has also been published. The report and briefing are available electronically at the Primary Review website: www.primaryreview.org.uk. The website also contains information about other reports in this series and about the Primary Review as a whole.

We want this report to contribute to the debate about English primary education, so we would welcome readers' comments on anything it contains. Please write to: evidence@primaryreview.org.uk.

The Community Soundings were undertaken by the Cambridge team of the Primary Review with additional support from members of the Review Advisory Committee and staff of the schools, local authorities and other organisations concerned. Anonymity was a condition of participation, so we are unable to name the base schools or witnesses. However, they know who they are and we hope that they will accept our sincere thanks for their time, hospitality and wisdom. We are also grateful to our contacts in the local authorities and schools for their hard work and negotiating skills in engaging the interest of witnesses and ensuring their presence on the day.

The 87 witness sessions were planned, chaired and recorded by Primary Review team members Robin Alexander, Catrin Darsley, Christine Doddington, David Harrison, Linda Hargreaves and Ruth Kershner, with invaluable help at some of the sessions from Advisory Committee members Sheila Dainton, Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer and Gillian Pugh, and from Hilary Hodgson and Jo Rideal of Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

This report was written by Robin Alexander and Linda Hargreaves.

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the Primary Review team and participants at the Community Soundings witness sessions. They do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Esmée Fairbairn Foundation or the University of Cambridge.

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COMMUNITY SOUNDINGS

The Primary Review regional witness sessions

Overview

This report presents and discusses findings from the 87 regionally-based witness sessions which comprise the Primary Review Community Soundings. The Community Soundings are one of several strands of evidence on which the Review will draw in preparing its final report, which is due to be published in late 2008. This and the other interim reports listed in Appendix 3 are being published while the Review is in progress in order both to stimulate debate and to provide information which we believe to be of public interest.

The Community Soundings, which took place between January and March 2007, entailed meetings with those involved in the day-to-day work of primary schools (teachers; teaching assistants and other support staff; teachers; senior managers; heads; and – notably – children themselves), together with parents, school governors, and representatives of the wider community (local authority officials and elected members; representatives of statutory and voluntary agencies concerned with children's welfare; employers; religious leaders; community leaders; the police; legal officers; and members of groups who are perceived to be marginalised by the education system, such as migrants and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities).

The meetings explored questions arising from the Review's ten designated themes (Appendix 1) together with matters which witnesses themselves wished to raise. The analysis which follows summarises what emerged from the 87 sessions constituency by constituency, starting with children and moving out from the classroom to the school and the wider community. Regional differences are then noted, and the report ends by identifying, from this one strand of the Review's evidence, those issues and questions which we propose to take forward to the National Soundings. These are scheduled for Autumn 2007 and will initiate the process of assessing the Review's evidence as a whole in preparation for the writing of the final report in 2008.

In spite of our careful attempts to elicit and record difference, what is striking about the Community Soundings is the extent of consensus which they reveal, especially in the key areas of educational purpose, curriculum and assessment, the condition of childhood and society, and the world in which today's children are growing up. This tendency to consensus on the big issues transcends both constituency and location.

What is no less striking is the pessimistic and critical tenor of much that we heard on such matters. Thus, we were frequently told children are under intense and perhaps excessive pressure from the policy-driven demands of their schools and the commercially-driven values of the wider society; that family life and community are breaking down; that there is a pervasive loss of respect and empathy both within and between generations; that life outside the school gates is increasingly insecure and dangerous; that the wider world is changing, rapidly and in ways which it is not always easy to comprehend though on balance they give cause for alarm, especially in respect of climate change and environmental sustainability; that the primary school curriculum is too narrow and rigid; that the curriculum and

children's educational careers are being compromised by the national tests, especially the Key Stage 2 SATs; that while some government initiatives, notably *Every Child Matters*, are to be warmly welcomed, others may constrain and disempower rather than enable; and that the task facing teachers and other professionals who work with children is, for these and other reasons, much more difficult now than it was a generation ago.

In contrast, the primary schools themselves provided unfailingly positive and dynamic settings for children's development and learning, and were highly valued by children, parents and the wider community. This is worthy not so much of note as of celebration.

Negative responses might suggest negative questioning, or that respondents have been unduly influenced by the pessimistic tenor of the news stories of the day. The report examines both of these possibilities but finds that the questioning at witness sessions was open rather than pointed, that witnesses frequently referred to local issues rather than a generalised climate of opinion, and that the voices represented here are both authentic and - in view of their consistency across 87 sessions and nine very different regional venues - representative of a wider national mood.

The report is structured as follows:

- I: Purpose, context and methodology of the Community Soundings.
- II: Findings from the witness sessions, constituency by constituency.
- III: Regional differences and the question of data quality and representativeness.
- IV: Issues and questions to be taken forward to the National Soundings.
- Appendices: Primary Review themes, evidence and interim reports.

I – THE COMMUNITY SOUNDINGS: PURPOSES, LOCATIONS AND PROCEDURES

The Community Soundings in the context of the Review as a whole

The Primary Review has four strands of evidence: submissions, soundings, surveys of published research, and searches of official data. The different strands are designed to balance opinion seeking with empirical data; non-interactive expression of opinion with face-to-face discussion; official data with independent research; the local with the national; the national with the international.

In turn, the soundings strand has two parts. The *Community Soundings* are regionally-based one or two day events, each comprising a sequence of discussions with representatives from schools and the local communities they serve. Their aim is to explore matters central to the Review's remit with those at the education system's point of delivery. The National Soundings consist of more formal meetings with national organisations. They explore issues and questions arising from the evidence thus far, as the Review team prepares for the final stage of data analysis and the drafting of the Review's main report. The Community Soundings took place between January and March 2007; the National Soundings are scheduled for autumn 2007. (For further information about the evidential strands see Appendix 2).

This report identifies the issues raised and explored during the Community Soundings. Nearly all of the 87 witness sessions were recorded not once but three times: on audiotape, by simultaneous typed transcription, and in note form. Each session ended with the scribe reading the notes to witnesses to ensure that they were happy to confirm them as an accurate session record, and then making any requested changes. Our report is based mainly on these participant-validated session summaries, though some responses are quoted verbatim and these are signalled in the usual way. The tapes and transcripts will be drawn on more fully, for detail and illustration, in the Primary Review final report.

Selecting locations, constituencies and witnesses

To engage with grass-roots opinion the Community Soundings needed to reach well beyond the usual array of metropolitan experts and activists with the actual or imagined ear of government. To this end, we aimed to locate the soundings in areas which between them illustrate something of England's diversity of geography, economy, culture and social circumstance; and to give credence to 'community' in the strand's title we needed to talk to groups both inside and outside the schools in which the soundings were to be based.

In determining the location of each sounding, we started with a broad geographical spread of English regions, including the London conurbation, whose size and uniquely diverse character dictated more than one sounding. Next, we cross cut regionality with rural/suburban/inner city differences to narrow the geographical field, balancing these with socio-economic and cultural/ethnic characteristics. We then worked with local contacts to identify our sounding base schools, aiming to cover different school types: primary, infant, junior, first, middle and secondary; with nursery, without nursery; larger and smaller; community, foundation and voluntary.

Given that all these variables had to be reflected in just nine regional locations (though some soundings had more than one base) the result could not, and did not, claim to be statistically

representative. However, we believe that our sampling has captured in sufficient measure the diversity which the exercise required.

We pressed the same point when identifying constituencies of opinion. We aimed to meet members of all the groups most closely involved in the day-to-day work of primary schools: children, teaching assistants and other support staff, teachers, senior staff and heads. Moving out from the schools we would then meet governors, parents, heads of other schools in the area, and a range of community representatives. While the school constituencies would be constant across all of the soundings, the community representatives would vary according to the additional themes on which individual soundings chose to concentrate. Meeting heads of other schools would enable us greatly to extend our tally of school involvement – in all, we met heads from 70 schools during this one strand of the Review – and to test the representativeness of what we heard in the base schools.

Figure 1 Community soundings: locations, constituencies and witnesses	
Community soundings	9
Regions	London (3), North East (1), North West (1), Midlands (1), Yorkshire (1), South East (1), South West (1)
Witness sessions held	87
Witnesses	618 plus 139 at an associated conference (757)
By constituency	<p><i>Within the sounding base schools</i></p> <p>Pupils (197)</p> <p>Teaching assistants and non-teaching staff (64)</p> <p>Teachers (72)</p> <p>Senior management team members (34)</p> <p><i>From the wider communities</i></p> <p>School governors (34)</p> <p>Parents (74)</p> <p>Head teachers from local schools (60)</p> <p>Other community representatives (83)</p> <p><i>Plus</i></p> <p>Participants in the conference linked to Sounding 7 (139)</p>

In identifying constituencies, we wanted to give due prominence to the voices of children, parents, those who find themselves marginalised by education and/or society, and groups outside schools who have a legitimate interest in what goes on within them – employers, faith leaders, police, elected councillors and representatives of statutory and voluntary social services, for example. If the community soundings have a bias, it is towards communities under stress and schools succeeding against the odds, because at a time of rising national concern about social cohesion and children’s welfare we believe that this Review has a particular duty to address the challenges which schools and communities face in such contexts.

Having identified appropriate base schools in each of the chosen regions, we then specified our needs in terms of the witness sessions – constituencies, participants, foci – and left it to

our local agents to approach witnesses and propose timetables. Following any necessary negotiation on these arrangements they were confirmed. Figure 1 provides an overview of the locations, constituencies and numbers of witnesses.

Procedure

Each sounding took a minimum of one day, and several lasted for two. The witness sessions – anything from six to fifteen per sounding – lasted for between 45 and 60 minutes. Cambridge team members, assisted at three soundings by members of the Advisory Committee, shared the roles of chair, scribe and rapporteur. Sessions started with a brief account of the Review and an explanation of the sounding purposes and procedures. They ended with the rapporteur checking his/her summary with participants to ensure that it was a correct record.

The Primary Review as a whole is framed by three broad perspectives – on children, the societal and global context, and education itself – and by ten themes¹. Under each of the thematic headings are listed questions designed to open up discussion along *present* and *future* dimensions: that is to say: ‘What is happening now and how well are we doing?’ and ‘What does the future hold and how should things change?’ The perspectives, themes and questions are listed in full on the Review website - www.primaryreview.org.uk - and they provided our starting point for the discussions.

As noted, the witness sessions contained ‘core groups’ common to most or all of the soundings (children, teaching assistants, teachers, senior management, governors, parents and local heads), and ‘thematic groups’ which differed from one sounding to the next. Thus the questions, too, tended to follow a similar pattern with the core groups, always allowing for variation to reflect local circumstances (for example the pros and cons of two-tier and three-tier systems in sounding 3, or the impact of selective secondary schooling in sounding 8). The thematic questions, naturally, were very different for each of the thematic sessions, to enable us to explore, for example, the needs of the physically disabled (sounding 5) the situation of vulnerable children in the context of ‘Every Child Matters’ (sounding 4) or faith, race, identity and education (sounding 9).

The communities, schools and witness sessions

We now briefly describe the context within which each sounding was set, and provide details of the sessions held and the number of witnesses at each.

Community Sounding 1 (London) took place in an area of London characterised by cultural and ethnic diversity, economic inequality and pockets of considerable social disadvantage. The sounding was based in a 306-pupil 3-11 community primary school whose pupils come from a wide variety of ethnic and national backgrounds and over half of whom speak English as an additional language. An increasing number come from Eastern Europe, the Baltic Republics and Russia, and from various African countries, notably Somalia. Many are transitory, starting or leaving during the school year. Over 40 per cent of the pupils are entitled to free school meals and the proportion of SEN pupils is higher than average. The

¹ 1- Purposes and values, 2- Learning and teaching, 3- Curriculum and assessment, 4- Quality and standards, 5- Diversity and inclusion, 6- Settings and professionals, 7- Parenting, caring and educating, 8- Children’s lives beyond the school, 9- Structures and phases, 10- Funding and governance. See Appendix 1 for further details.

school was rated 'outstanding' in its most recent Ofsted inspection. It has a strong commitment to combining high academic achievement with a broad curriculum in which creativity is especially prominent, and to fostering a sense of community founded on mutual respect and support. There were eight witness sessions (the numbers of witnesses at each session are shown in brackets):

<i>School</i>	<i>Community</i>
Pupils, mixed (12)	Governors (4)
Pupils, school council (8)	Parents (21)
Teaching assistants (5)	Head teachers from other schools (5)
Teachers (12)	
Senior management team (3)	

Community Sounding 2 (London) took place in an affluent suburb on the southernmost fringe of the London conurbation. The sounding was based in a very large (680-pupil) 3-11 community primary school with an average number of children with special educational needs and an above average number with statements of SEN, and a very small proportion (0.5 per cent) requiring language support. The school was rated 'very good and successful' in its most recent Ofsted inspection and as a mark of excellence was made a Beacon School by DfES/DCSF, from which it gained substantial additional funding to work with other schools and help them to raise their educational standards. It has also achieved Activemark status for its work in sports, and a gold Artsmark award as well as an Investors in People award. Pupils at the school perform at well above average in the Key Stage 1 and 2 national tests. The school has developed an integrated curriculum which is built on Foundation Stage principles. Many older pupils receive private coaching to prepare them for competitive entry examinations to state grammar and independent secondary schools. There were seven witness sessions:

<i>School</i>	<i>Community</i>
Pupils (12)	Governors (5)
Teaching assistants / support staff (5)	Parents (7)
Teachers (8)	Head teachers from other schools (2)
Senior management team (3)	

Community Sounding 3 (North East) took place in a large and generally affluent commuter village to the west of Newcastle-on-Tyne. The sounding base was a 9-13 middle school with 605 pupils. Most of its pupils are white British and enter the school with attainment levels well above national average. The proportion with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is low, as is the number whose first language is not English or who take free school meals. The choice of a middle school allowed the team to explore questions of transfer and continuity and to discuss the relative merits of two-tier and three-tier systems. The latter, pivoting on 8-12 or 9-13 middle schools, are disappearing fast, and in this community a strong campaign has been mounted against the local authority's decision to move to a two-tier system, which is believed to have been taken on cost rather than educational grounds. The school is very committed both to raising pupils' awareness of global issues and to equipping them to think and act sustainably. In this it is strongly supported by parents and governors. Alongside these and the core sounding questions the team explored the relationship between education, social change, the world of work and lifelong learning with local employers and representatives from further and higher education. There were nine witness sessions:

<i>School</i>	<i>Community</i>
Pupils, school 'Eco-action' group (11)	Governors (4)
Pupils, school council (15)	Parents (5)
Teaching assistants (6)	Head teachers from other schools (6)
Teachers (4)	Thematic session: adulthood, the world of work and lifelong learning (7)
Senior management team (4)	

Community Sounding 4 (Yorkshire) took place in a market town in Yorkshire which retained mining as its main employment for some years after it disappeared elsewhere in Britain during the 1980s, but which now faces high levels of unemployment and social deprivation. The sounding was based in a 345-pupil 4-11 Church of England primary school whose pupils come both from the centre of the town and two large estates on its outskirts. Most pupils are of white European origin, but a small though fast-rising proportion come from migrant families (mainly from Poland and Lithuania) and speak English as an additional language. A high proportion have special educational needs, and many of these have emotional and/or behavioural difficulties which the school attributes in part to family stress arising from unemployment. The school displays particular concern for these and other vulnerable children, and overall was rated 'good' in its most recent Ofsted inspection. Alongside the core elements in the sounding, the Review team explored community, faith, citizenship, identity and social justice with representatives from churches, the local council, pre-school providers, voluntary carers, the police and employers; and childhood vulnerability and the 'Every Child Matters' agenda with representatives of the Church of England, local authority children's services, Ofsted and voluntary agencies. There were eleven witness sessions:

<i>School</i>	<i>Community</i>
Pupils, mixed (11)	Governors (3)
Pupils, school council (11)	Parents (8)
Teaching assistants (5)	Head teachers from others schools (5)
Teachers (4)	Thematic session: community and citizenship (7)
Senior management team (4)	Thematic session: vulnerable children and 'Every Child Matters' (6)
Head, deputy and former chair of governors (3)	

Community Sounding 5 (Midlands) took place in north-west Birmingham, not far from the city centre. The community is culturally and ethnically diverse. The sounding base was a 450-pupil 3-11 community primary school situated in an area of considerable social deprivation. It has a high proportion of children from minority ethnic groups, a higher than average number speaking English as an additional language, and many children qualify for free school meals. The school has an average number classified as having special educational needs but a well above average with SEN statements as the school has a particular commitment to meeting the needs of those who are physically disabled, a group for whom it has provided both extra facilities and specialist support. It attracts such children from considerable distances. The school was rated 'very good and improving' by Ofsted. Alongside the core sounding themes the team explored inclusion, with particular reference to special needs, and the role and condition of the arts and sciences in primary education. To discuss these matters it met representatives from the local authority, voluntary children's agencies and Birmingham-based arts and science organisations. There were nine witness sessions:

<i>School</i>	<i>Community</i>
Pupils (8)	Governors (5)
Teaching assistants and support staff (8)	Parents (5)
Teachers (12)	Head teachers from other schools (5)

Senior management team (2)

Thematic session: inclusion and special needs (6)

Thematic session: the arts, sciences and education (7)

Community Sounding 6 (London) took place in a part of the London conurbation which is socially and ethnically highly diverse. The sounding base was a very large (717-pupil) 3-11 foundation primary school. 85 per cent of its pupils come from ethnic minority groups, well over half the pupils speak English as an additional language and about one quarter of them start school with little or no English. In all, some 37 languages are spoken in the school. There is also a transient element in the school population, comprising migrants, refugees and members of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities². The school has a language and communication centre and through the entrepreneurial flair of its head has secured considerable additional income to fund a private nursery, a sports centre and a hall of conference standard (all of which in turn generate more income), an ICT suite and a nursery/foundation stage centre. The additional income has also enabled the school to build up a strong teaching and support staff body and to achieve an establishment level well above the national norms. With an extra teacher for every year group the school is able to secure specialist strengths across both the curriculum and key stages. The school was rated 'outstanding' in all aspects in its most recent Ofsted inspection. Alongside the core sounding issues the team explored school finance and facilities. There were six witness sessions:

School

Pupils, school council (10)

Teaching assistants and support staff (8)

Teachers (8)

Senior management team (6)

Community

Parents (5)

Head teachers from other schools (8)

Community Sounding 7 (South West) took place in two communities in the far south-west of England. One was a Devon market town whose outward attractiveness in an area of scenic beauty belies high levels of local unemployment traceable partly to the 2001 epidemic of foot and mouth disease - from which local farming has still not recovered - and partly to the closure of a factory and problems faced by other local employers. The base for this part of the sounding was a 283-pupil 7-11 community junior school whose pupils start Key Stage 2 with lower than expected levels of attainment. An exceptionally high proportion (35 per cent) have special educational needs, mostly behavioural difficulties. Many come from families facing stress, instability, alcoholism and sometimes domestic violence. The school was rated 'good' in its most recent Ofsted inspection, and places considerable emphasis on inclusion, creativity and education for sustainability. Alongside the core Review issues the team explored inclusion with representatives of statutory services and local agencies, and responses to social change with local employers, youth support and extended school officers, and local authority and police representatives. The other community was a seaside town in Cornwall, a county in which there are significant populations of both Travellers and recent migrants from Eastern Europe. The situation of these two groups provided the focus for discussions with Travellers and migrants themselves as well as with those, mainly from schools and local authorities, who work with them. In this, the largest of the soundings, there were fifteen witness sessions:

School

Pupils, mixed (7)

Community

Governors (7)

² Further references to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, individuals or young people will be encompassed under the ethnic group of 'Travellers'.

Pupils, school council (12)
 Teaching assistants and support staff (10)
 Teachers (9)
 Senior management team (3)
 Head and deputy (2)

Parents (10)
 Head teachers from other schools (7)
 Local authority (1)
 Thematic session: education and social change (11)
 Thematic session: inclusion – statutory and voluntary agencies (2)
 Thematic session: inclusion – Travellers (7)
 Thematic session: inclusion – migrants (8)
 Thematic session: inclusion – workers with Travellers and migrants (139)

Community Sounding 8 (South East) took place in a Kent coastal town with an ageing population and high levels of unemployment following the closure of the cross-Channel ferry service and the loss of related industries and services. The sounding base was a secondary modern school, chosen to allow the team to explore both primary/secondary transfer issues and the impact of selective secondary schooling, Kent being the largest remaining selective local authority. (Primary school year 6 pupils take the ‘Kent Test’ in January and the Key Stage 2 SATs in May; in between, a decision is taken about which secondary school they will go to). Half of the school’s 762 pupils are on the register of special educational needs and one third - well above the national average – are entitled to free school meals. Under a dynamic new head the school had recently been removed from special measures and was rated by Ofsted as showing signs of marked improvement. Its buildings are due to be replaced by a specialist academy. Alongside the core issues and the particular question of primary/secondary transfer – which the team were able to discuss with school staff, local primary heads and with students from years 7, 8, 10 and 11 – the sounding focused on pupils experiencing difficulty at school, those for whom English was an additional language, and the relationship between schooling, adult life and employment. In the latter context the team met employers and representatives from institutions of further and higher education. There were ten witness sessions:

School
 Pupils and parents, Y7 (10)
 Pupils, Y8 (8)
 Pupils, Y10 (7)
 Pupils, Y11 (11)
 Pupils, ESOL (5)
 Teachers (5)
 Senior management team (5)

Community
 Head teachers from other schools (4)
 Thematic session: onward from school - employment and adulthood (5)
 Thematic session: onward from school - further and higher education (4)

Community Sounding 9 (North West) took place in a former cotton town in Lancashire, now a city, in a socially deprived area with an exceptionally high proportion of families from minority ethnic backgrounds, originally from Pakistan and north-west India. The sounding was based on two sites, a 295-pupil 3-7 community infants school and a 336-pupil community junior school. The most prominent feature of both schools is the high proportion of pupils – 80 per cent – who speak English as an additional language, the main home languages being Gujarati, Urdu and Punjabi. With the arrival of more recent migrant families from Europe the number of home languages has increased still further. Both schools were rated ‘good’ in their most recent Ofsted inspections. In addition to the usual range of school-focused soundings the team explored the role of the local authority, and issues of community, faith and identity with Muslim, Jewish and Christian leaders and with representatives of the city council, the police, the local racial equality council, sports and other organisations. There were twelve witness sessions:

School

Pupils, infant school council (12)
 Pupils, junior school council (27)
 Teaching assistants and support staff (12)
 Teachers (10)
 Heads (2)

Community

Governors (5)
 Parents (13)
 Ex-pupils (4)
 Head teachers from other schools (8)
 Thematic session: faith and education (4)
 Thematic session: community, identity
 and social change - LA representatives (5)
 Thematic session: community, identity
 and social change – community
 representatives (7)

Analysis and reporting

As indicated earlier, of the three independent reporting sources for the 87 witness sessions – audiotape, transcript and participant-validated summaries – we have chosen to base this interim report on the last, since our purpose is to report the substance of the discussions rather than their actual language. Having said that, the flavour of views expressed is sometimes best conveyed by direct quotation and in such cases we use the usual convention. The account covers all 87 sessions.

Because we were working mainly with second-order data (the session summaries) it was not appropriate to attempt electronic or quantitative analysis. To do so would have implied a level of precision and fidelity in the summaries which they could not fairly claim, notwithstanding the fact that they had been approved by those present. Instead, we worked on the data manually, and have indicated relative strength of opinion verbally rather than numerically.

Bearing in mind the defining emphasis on the regional and local in the community soundings strand, and the thematic structure of the Review, the summaries could be analysed in three ways.

- By *constituency* (children, teachers, parents and so on). Constituency analysis allows us to draw out the distinctive views of the various groups, looking across all nine soundings.
- By *location* (midlands, north-east etc). Geographical analysis enables us to register local concerns in a coherent way, preserving the separate character of each sounding, but also noting differences in perspective on such local concerns among the various constituencies.
- By *theme*. Thematic analysis allows us to relate the data to the three perspectives and ten themes which frame the Primary Review as a whole. This mode of analysis is clearly essential in order that we can align and compare data from the Review's distinct evidential sources – the submissions, community soundings, national soundings and research surveys.

To prepare for this report we have done all three, but because our most immediate need was to identify the issues we would take forward to the National Soundings, we have concentrated on teasing out issues across constituencies and locations rather than discussing differences between them. Thus, in Part II we present our analysis by constituency, using the Review themes loosely and occasionally noting geographic variation. In fact, on certain matters there was a certain consistency in response which transcended both location and

constituency. This is discussed in Part III, where we also consider the strengths and limitations of the particular kind of evidence which the community soundings have elicited. In Part IV we identify what appear to be the central concerns about the condition and future of primary education arising from this one strand of the Primary Review's evidence. These concerns, mostly framed as questions, we shall take forward to the Review's next stage.

For analytical purposes the list of perspectives and themes has been extended so as to differentiate important sub-themes. These are listed in Appendix 1.

II – FROM CLASSROOM TO COMMUNITY: CONSTITUENCY VIEWS

The constituency analysis is presented by working from the classroom outwards, thus:

School witness sessions

1. children
2. teaching assistants
3. teachers
4. senior management teams

Community witness sessions

5. governors
6. parents
7. head teachers from other local schools
8. other community representatives

1. CHILDREN

There were 19 witness sessions involving a total of 197 children. In addition, several sounding base schools had used the approaching event as an impetus for working with children on some of the Review themes, and we saw the outcome of this activity in school assemblies, displayed on walls, and in subsequent submissions.

In several of the schools we met school councils or their representatives. Elsewhere the groups had been chosen to represent different year groups. We note in passing that the discipline of participation in school councils, which are a recent development, has clearly given many of the children involved considerable skill and confidence as advocates and critics, especially when they are encouraged to move beyond the stock agenda of school meals and uniforms to discuss educational matters of perhaps greater weight. The experience of these 19 sessions with children in different parts of England has amply justified our decision to give prominence to children's voices in the Primary Review as a whole.

The wider world

The soundings programme as a whole was pervaded by a sense of deep pessimism about the future, to which children themselves were not immune. Many expressed concern about climate change, global warming and pollution, and optimists were balanced by those who felt that governments were not doing enough to respond to the urgency and magnitude of the challenges. Some children also deplored the gulf between the world's rich and poor. In the words of one child: 'America consumes, Africa wants'. There was also unease about terrorism.

The children were no less anxious about those local issues which directly affected their sense of security – traffic, the lack of safe play areas, rubbish, graffiti, gangs of older children, knives, guns. Some were also worried by the gloomy tenor of 'what you hear on the news' or by a generalised fear of strangers, burglars and street violence. Inevitably, perhaps, these fears were most prominent in the inner-city communities.

Yet where schools had started engaging children with global and local realities as aspects of their education they were noticeably more upbeat. In several schools children were involved in environmental and energy-saving projects and the sense that 'we can do something about it' seemed to make all the difference. This more positive outlook was most evident in the school whose environmental activism was spearheaded by an 'Eco-action' group with representatives from each year.

The potentially uneasy relationship between school and what lies outside its gates was manifested nearly everywhere by levels of security which would have been inconceivable at the time of the Plowden enquiry, forty years ago. Yet once inside the building there was nothing gloomy about school life as we observed it. Whatever is happening in the wider world, and whatever their anxieties about the future, these children spent their school days in communities-within-communities which unfailingly sought to celebrate the positive.

Inevitably, children talked about new technologies. Their response ranged from the classic futurology of robot teachers and hologram libraries to a more considered awareness that new technologies gave them access to information unavailable to previous generations but that people should guard against excessive reliance on computers: 'Use your brain, otherwise you will get lazy and obese', warned one. Elsewhere children emphasised the advantage of the practical over the virtual. Children who worked out of doors (as in the Forest School which featured prominently in the Devon leg of the south-west sounding) were enthusiastic about the opportunity to 'actually go out and do things'; others contrasted going on school trips with looking at a picture in a book or on the web, 'because you're seeing things, feeling things, *real* things.'

Priorities for schools

In light of the above, children's views of educational priorities highlighted the development of generic capacities for managing life in a changing world: learning how to learn, preparing for life, developing relationships, handling responsibility, citizenship, life skills, financial management and generally 'thinking about the future'.

Yet they did not dismiss the existing curriculum, and in one school children nominated as many priorities as there are subjects. It was more that they wanted the approach to the established curriculum to change: 'Literacy and numeracy are important, but not all of it's equally important'; 'Today's curriculum will continue to be important, but it's the way that we tackle it which will change.' There were also frequent calls for mandatory modern foreign language teaching at primary level, though no consensus on which languages should be taught. And children were committed to breadth: 'Teach the basics' urged one, 'but not at the expense of other subjects.'

Good schools

Our questions about the features of good schools produced widely varying responses, but there were two constants: equity and empathy. Children wanted schools (and teachers) to be fair, to care for their pupils and to encourage them to care for each other. They valued being part of a community, and the interaction which community at best encourages: 'We can say what we think', 'It's good to hear what's on other people's minds.' School councils were welcomed, especially when they were able to meet independently as well as with the teachers.

Many responded positively to the physical properties of schools and to the facilities they provided: interactive white boards, class libraries, PE equipment, musical instruments.

It is interesting to note that when we talked to those who looked back on primary education from a secondary vantage-point, some questioned the class-teacher system, and argued the importance of variety on the grounds (a) that it is *ipso facto* desirable and (b) that 'we can succeed with some teachers but not others.'

Good teachers

Equity and empathy were given even greater emphasis when children identified the characteristics of good teachers. Such teachers:

- 'are firm but fair'
- 'are trustworthy'
- 'are available when you need them'
- 'are understanding – we can talk to them about personal matters'
- 'understand how you feel, but don't intrude'
- 'understand our difficulties in learning'
- 'give encouragement'
- 'listen to all of us – don't just choose the same children.'

and

- 'we can ask them questions and talk to them without embarrassment.'

However, in one school there was some discussion about equity strictly pursued, and pupils argued that 'some children know more than others and don't need as much help so it's a waste of time.'

Good teachers also:

- 'make learning fun'
- 'explain things in advance so that you know what a lesson is about'
- 'explain things clearly'
- 'take time to explain things properly'
- 'turn teaching into problem-solving rather than just give information'
- 'make sure it's not in too big steps'
- 'know a lot about their subject – unusual facts'
- 'give us permanent records of what we learn.'

The recurrent emphasis on clarity and structure – watchwords in the continental pedagogic tradition if not the Anglo-Saxon one - is instructive. Children value teachers who make it clear precisely what they are doing and why, and don't leave them guessing; and who find ways of structuring and sequencing what is to be taught. They are obvious enough preconditions for effective teaching, but evidently are sometimes neglected.

What we don't like

There was less universality and more local immediacy about children's dislikes: cold school dinners, inconvenient buildings, a school's policy of healthy eating (of which, contrary to the popular image, many other children approved), malodorous toilets. Again, though, equity and perceived injustice loomed large:

- 'teachers who don't recognise you'
- 'teachers who moan at you'
- 'bullying and fights'
- 'punishments'

- 'gangs of older children'
- 'attention-seekers'
- 'being inside when it's sunny.'

But inequity has a subtler complexion too. Children commented that 'Those who don't understand aren't asked', which reflects either a teacher's concern not to expose to the public gaze an individual's difficulties, or a failure to realise that if a question is carefully constructed with the learning of the individual respondent in mind such difficulties need not be exposed. Children also perceived a gender bias, noting what is arguably worth investigating as a possible general tendency: 'Male teachers pick girls because they think girls are brighter; female teachers pick boys.'

Three rather more specific matters surfaced. The first was testing and especially SATs, with which we deal below. The second was homework and a repeated sense that in some form or another school dominates too much of children's lives (this was especially so for those Muslim children in the North West sounding who were also attending mosque school each evening). Thirdly and perhaps surprisingly given the current renewal of advocacy for this traditional mainstay of primary classroom organisation, being seated in groups. Children were concerned that ability groups labelled them, that they fostered distraction and time wasting, and that they allowed teachers to concentrate on some groups at the expense of others.

Assessment and SATs

The children were more ambivalent about SATs than any other constituency that we met during the community soundings. SATs were 'scary', made them nervous and anxious, and put them under pressure. But equally:

- 'tests tell teachers, and us, how we are doing'
- 'parents want them'
- 'children should be tested to show that they have done well and have been listening'
- 'tests help children know what they have learned'
- 'we need SATs to find our potential, and gaps in our understanding.'

Yet they understand that the stakes may be high:

- 'it's important to do well for secondary school'
- 'tests get us into private schools' (sounding 2, in an affluent area where many parents preferred private secondary schooling for their children)
- 'high grades give you confidence.'

And, from ex-primary pupils in the selective secondary school:

- 'Tests concentrate on the high flyers. The rest are written off before they get to the SATs. The teachers are not available to help the rest of us.'

Transfer and system structure

One of the reasons why we included a secondary school in the community soundings programme was so that we could hear about the experience of primary/secondary transfer

from pupils themselves. The older students recalled their nervousness at the prospect of changing schools, their fear of older children, of losing friends and – frequently – of getting lost in schools which were almost always far larger than their primaries. They also deplored the extent of repetition in Year 7 of work done in Year 6. Yet some suggested that when carefully prepared for and handled, transfer was worse in prospect than reality.

We shall see that teachers and parents in our one middle school were strong advocates of the three-tier system. Children, again, were ambivalent. Some welcomed the gradual progression afforded by a three-tier system and the sustaining of a ‘human scale’ for the greater part of their school career. Others countered that three tiers meant two transfers rather than one.

2. TEACHING ASSISTANTS (TAs)

Teaching assistants - we met 64 of them in eight witness sessions - work with teachers, yet as much in a quasi-parental as an academic capacity. They are members of the school staff yet, unlike many teachers, they tend to live in the same neighbourhood, and indeed the same streets, as the children. Many have, or have had, children at the schools in which they work. Teaching assistants, therefore, had much to say about children’s home lives, and their responses to our questions were strongly shaped by local circumstance.

Childhood and the wider world

Where the children were worried about global warming, TAs deplored the loss of mutual respect, quality of life and parental influence, the rise in bad language, and the general sense that ‘society doesn’t function as well as it did.’

They were especially concerned about two trends:

- The pervasive influence of electronic media and gadgetry – television, mobile phones, the internet, play stations - over which parents have little control, and through which children have access to material which the TAs regarded as ranging from the ‘unsuitable’ to the ‘pernicious’.
- What, by TAs and others, is summed up as a ‘loss of childhood’: a combination of pressure from school, parents, peers, media and commerce, combined with the increase in marital breakdown and family instability. Many TAs – and parents – harked back to a golden age (which in view of their relative youthfulness cannot have been so long ago) when they roamed the streets, fields and woods unsupervised and without regard for traffic or strangers, and had ample time to do so.

Parents

Though many TAs are parents themselves, many of those we met appeared not to have a high opinion of the parents of the children with whom they worked. There were several variants of this deficit view:

- parenting which was judged by any criteria to be inadequate, and for which remedial parenting classes were recommended;

- parents who do not fulfil their side of the unstated compact between home and school which requires parents to concentrate on socialisation while schools deal with education;
- parents who have low aspirations for themselves and their children and do not value education;
- mothers (sic) who put career or income before parenting;

A different kind of deficit, but without moral overtones, was the language difficulties faced by parents who are from ethnic minorities and/or recent migrants.

Priorities for schools

TAs wanted schools to concentrate on the 'basics' of literacy, numeracy and ICT, but not to confine their priorities to these. No less important were the 'life skills' of communication, successful relationships with others, and independent thinking, and TAs were particularly concerned that schools should arrest a perceived decline in the quality of children's spoken language.

In conjunction with these instrumental goals TAs also stressed the need for schools to be caring, welcoming and supportive, and like many others they regarded children's happiness as not so much an Epicurean good as the basis for effective classroom learning.

Problems

Opposing this vision, TAs believed, were government policies and initiatives, headed by SATs, an overcrowded national curriculum and the national strategies. Many of the TAs worked with children with special needs, and they were particularly critical of the failure of the SATs to accommodate the circumstances of such children.

Working inside the classroom also gave TAs a particular perspective on what is usually presented as a problem for teachers rather than children – the 'overcrowded' national curriculum. Not only - TAs felt - did teachers have insufficient time to teach what they believed to be important, but for the same reason children were being forced to abandon their work without finishing it. TAs believed that this was a growing problem and that children themselves were dissatisfied about it.

What TAs do

Of the many changes to primary schools since Plowden, the rise and rise of teaching assistants is one of the more striking. A substantial part of these witness sessions was spent discussing the TA role. All groups identified a transformation from the initial concept of a 'classroom assistant' who undertook quasi-secretarial tasks like cutting paper, mounting children's work and, just occasionally, hearing children read. Now, TAs are much more closely engaged both with teaching and the professional world of teachers.

All the TAs we met regarded themselves, notwithstanding their different contracts and relatively poor rates of pay, as full members of their school's professional teams. They were usually party to teachers' planning meetings, and fulfilled a variety of roles, from providing general teaching support to working with individual children with special needs, acting as learning mentors for children with behavioural difficulties, and providing language tuition

for EAL children. TAs were frequently left in charge of the whole class and those assigned to Years 2 or 6 undertook various SAT-related roles.

Typically, many TAs had responsibility for individual children with special educational needs, a legacy of the period before workforce reform. Now, however, they were combining this work with a range of general roles, in some cases to the perceived detriment of one or both roles, SEN and general.

The TAs believed that because they knew many of the parents personally they were uniquely placed to mediate between home and school, and that their principal function was to concentrate on nurturing the well-being on which children's successful learning depends. Thus they emphasised their moral and social roles, and the time spent on counselling children and sorting out their personal and interpersonal problems.

For work of such diversity TAs believed they were neither adequately trained nor adequately paid, though several said that qualifications were irrelevant and that 'you learn on the job.' But the convergence of the roles of teacher and teaching assistant exacerbated the TAs' sense of injustice over the sharp discrepancies in pay and conditions, and their belief that they were, in effect, 'teachers on the cheap.'

Finally, the teaching assistants, like the teachers, believed that there should be at least one TA for every class.

3. TEACHERS

We met 72 teachers in nine formal witness sessions, one session for each regional sounding. In each sounding base school we spoke informally to many others, and we met a further 100 or so teachers at the Cornwall conference which formed part of the South West sounding. Elsewhere the teachers came mainly from primary schools, but we also met, at the third and eighth soundings, middle and secondary school teachers.

The wider world

Like the teaching assistants but unlike the children themselves, the teachers responded in local or at most national terms to our questions about the world in which children are growing up. They deplored:

- loss of community;
- the national obsession with celebrity and with values which are transient and morally questionable rather than fundamental and morally sustainable;
- media elevation of inappropriate role models;
- individualism and consumerism, which they saw as working directly against their preferred emphasis on community and environmental responsibility;
- the power and pervasiveness of ICT, which - in the words of one teacher - meant simply 'less speaking and listening.'

They welcomed:

- children's growing global, social and environmental awareness, admittedly through the same media, and their desire to make a difference rather than remain spectators.

Home and school

Like the teaching assistants again, teachers were concerned about:

- low parental aspirations;
- unsettled home backgrounds;
- parents passing the socialisation buck to schools;
- parents' unwillingness or inability to provide educative experiences for their children or to introduce educative materials into their homes.

yet also, in some homes:

- parental over-protection;
- parental pressure;
- parental obsession with the 3Rs.

Priorities for education

Teachers overwhelmingly emphasised the importance of generic dispositions and skills:

- social and communicative skills;
- autonomous thinking, criticality and the capacity to make reasoned choices;
- communal and civic awareness and disposition;
- the development of a rounded personality;
- mental health, a balanced outlook on life, and strong self-belief.

The curriculum

In relation to such goals, teachers found the current primary curriculum, framed as it is by the National Curriculum and the Primary National Strategy:

- excessively narrow;
- over-prescriptive;
- over-structured and rigid, especially at Key Stage 1;
- unable to accommodate to local circumstance;
- concerned with content at the expense of skill, and the 3Rs at the expense of play and creativity.

Assessment

The teachers were no less critical of the current assessment regime. About the Foundation Stage profile teacher opinion was sharply divided - some saw it as 'excellent', others as 'excessive'- but on the Key Stage 2 tests they were unanimous. SATs:

- put children and teachers under intolerable pressure;
- are highly stressful;
- constrain the curriculum, especially in respect of the arts and humanities;
- subvert the goal of learning for its own sake;
- undermine children's self esteem;
- run counter to schools' stated commitments to a full and rounded education;

- turn the final year of primary schooling into to the wrong kind of educational culmination – a year of cramming and testing;
- disadvantage those children whose parents cannot afford to pay for private SAT coaching.

It was particularly helpful to talk to middle school teachers about SATs, because middle schools straddle the KS2/3 divide and can therefore differentiate the impact of SATs from children's growing anxiety about transfer to secondary schools. In their view, the SAT 'effect' is the greater of the two pressures.

The teachers did not deny the importance of formal assessment – far from it. However, they wished to shift the emphasis from tests to teacher assessment, and to detach pupil assessment from school accountability.

Inclusion

A certain degree of unease attended the discussions of inclusion. In relation to children with special educational needs (Review sub-theme 5b) the issues were training, resources and support. Broadly, all three were deemed inadequate for what primary schools are required to do.

In relation to cultural diversity, teachers spoke of the difficulty of balancing inclusion and shared values with respect for different faiths and cultures. In this they mirrored the wider English dilemma of multi-culturalism.

Workforce issues

Teaching assistants are universally valued, not least in support of inclusion. Teachers agreed with the TAs themselves that roles have converged and the latter are now full members of schools' professional teams, and they wanted more of them: one TA per class.

4. SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAMS

There were eleven sessions with school senior management teams (SMTs), involving 34 heads, deputy heads other senior staff from the sounding base schools.

The wider world

SMTs voiced similar concerns to other groups about the society and world in which today's children are growing up, focusing especially on the perceived pressures of consumerism, declining public safety, media violence and precocious adolescence, and on the 'emotional baggage' which children bring to school from disturbed homes. Senior staff spoke graphically about the latter, which in one school was believed to affect 30% of children and in another well over half of them. They also gave specific instances of children shunted from one care placement to another, and of the growing number of children forced to take on quasi-adult roles to help their single parents.

No less disturbingly, whereas we noted earlier that children were by far the most optimistic of our witnesses, one SMT believed that older primary children themselves are becoming increasingly worried about the future.

Values and aims

Not surprisingly, SMTs believed that a large part of task of their schools was to provide the security and stability which in their view many pupils lack at home. It was clear that if community was in decline outside the school gates, it was alive and thriving within them, and we have already noted how children themselves valued the sense of community which their schools provided. One SMT expressed the countervailing values of school precisely and starkly: selfishness, retaliation and survival outside the school; caring, mutual respect, negotiation and arbitration within it. (Governors and parents also argued for schools to celebrate and model community). In similar vein, primary schools should:

- value the individual
- raise self-esteem
- encourage inter-generational respect and co-operation
- model relationships.

and in the classroom teachers should:

- set high expectations
- encourage collaboration, questioning, resilience
- give every child a context for success.

Curriculum

The curriculum, too, was seen as providing a compensatory impetus, and no aspect of it more than creativity. Every SMT, while accepting the centrality of literacy and numeracy, believed that recent policy had pursued these to the detriment of breadth, balance and creativity. Some pressed the argument further, claiming that the National Curriculum was irrelevant, that content was far less important than skills and that ‘experiential learning’ and ‘the creative curriculum’ offered more viable alternatives.

We were also made aware of a resurgence of interest in cross-curricular thematic work – ostensibly encouraged by QCA and the national strategies, though some SMTs were cynical on this score. In some schools, the approach was expressed as nostalgia for the curriculum of the Plowden era.

Assessment

There was again strong opposition to SATs - ‘invalid’, ‘demoralising’, ‘detrimental’ and much more - though SMTs clearly accepted their moral as well as statutory obligations on this score and asserted that despite their distaste for SATs they were doing their utmost to maximise children’s success in them.

Quality

SMTs had little time for Ofsted inspections or the Primary Strategy as routes to enhanced educational quality, though they did welcome the opportunities for networking afforded by the latter.

Instead, they stressed the value of local initiatives and teacher development. Good teachers, in their view:

- are flexible and reflective;
- 'get inside the child's mind' through interaction and feedback and hence scaffold their understanding;
- plan carefully but are willing to take risks;
- are caring and approachable and sustain a sense of fun in learning.

Structures

The discussion about ages, stages and structures had a very local complexion, especially in Sounding 3, where schools and parents were campaigning against the local authority's decision to abolish middle schools; in Sounding 8, where discussion with the SMT and indeed other professionals was dominated by the local policy of selective secondary schooling, and in Sounding 7, where the SMT claimed that their school was the second-worst funded school in the sixth-worst funded English local authority. We return to these local issues later.

5. GOVERNORS

We met 34 representatives of seven governing bodies.

Childhood and the wider world

Again we encountered the by now familiar anxieties:

- the pressures on children and childhood;
- family breakdown;
- the corrosive impact of individualism and materialism;
- the loss of community;
- the environment.

But governors added a wider community perspective. They talked of the pressure on parents of the high cost of housing, and in an education system in which academic achievement is paramount they were concerned about what primary schools might do to prevent their former pupils joining the ranks of the NEETs – those not in education, employment or training.

Values and aims

Given that governors have a statutory responsibility in the formulation of school aims, what they said on this matter closely coincided with what we heard from teachers and SMTs: the importance of developing children's self respect, independence, self-confidence and love of learning; the need for children to be aware of and respect diversity in gender, culture, race, religion and sexual orientation; the essentially communal and reciprocal character of school life.

Assessment

Governors added one new point on statutory assessment to those already registered: a belief that while SATs may successfully differentiate levels of pupil attainment they also

discriminate against children most in need of support: those with special educational needs, those whose home circumstances provide neither the motivational nor the physical conditions for homework, and those who lack the emotional resources to cope with the pressure of testing.

Governors, local authorities and 'their' schools

School governors looked both inward to the school and out to the next level in the national hierarchy of governance, the local authority. Their views of the latter varied widely. One group of governors felt that their local authority had reduced its level of school support to the point where its continuing validity was in doubt. Yet the same LA was seen as exerting residual power by withholding vital resources needed for SEN children. Another LA was perceived as keen to retain power against the tide of devolution and was accused of being dictatorial and contemptuous of local parental and professional opinion in its handling of school reorganisation. Two predominantly rural LAs were believed to be structurally and attitudinally incapable of responding to pockets of real and substantial deprivation – what governors called inner city circumstances in a rural environment – of a kind to which urban local authorities are historically better-placed to respond. The consequences, in terms of financial support, were direct and serious because the LAs did not have either the infrastructure or the funding formulae to discriminate positively to the extent that the levels of social and educational disadvantage required.

It must be added that elsewhere governors' views of local authorities was less combative and the division of responsibility appeared to work well. However, over and above the specific location of the seat of power and/or funding, governors in general favoured more devolution and less central control and intervention. They did not appear to accede to the view, generally perceived to be implicit in the 1980s LMS reforms, that their task was to serve as an instrument of school accountability to central government. These governors identified, first and foremost, with their schools, and in fulfilling their responsibilities for goals, staffing and performance management it was clear that most of them listened closely to the teachers had to say on these and other matters. They also noted how much their role had expanded in recent years: several schools had not just governing bodies but also a proliferation of sub-committees concerned with finance, staffing and other matters.

Governors had a strong missionary spirit: they said they were there both to develop a strong and strategic vision for their schools and to fight for the school's interests against the local authority or any other body which they believed threatened those interests. (In separate discussions, several heads expressed gratitude and admiration for the vigour and political skill with which their governing body chairs pursued such campaigns). Governors also *knew* their schools and many were frequent visitors and participants. There was nothing dutiful about the affectionate farewells of the children in one sounding school for the chair of governors who had been elevated to be Dean of the nearby cathedral: indeed children from the school were the stars at his installation ceremony.

6. PARENTS

There were eight witness sessions for parents, involving 74 parents in all.

Children and the wider world

Parents, like other groups, tended towards the negative in their assessment of the world in which their children were growing up. Our questions on this matter were carefully and neutrally phrased and could equally have encouraged positive responses, but it should be noted that opinion may well have been coloured by the publication in February 2007 (midway through the community soundings programme) of the UNICEF report on the wellbeing of children in 21 of the world's richest countries – a study which placed Britain at the bottom of the league table.³ Thereafter, many groups, not just parents, referred to this report, and indeed to others, such as the Stern report on the economic impact of climate change,⁴ of a generally pessimistic hue.

Yet publicity for reports such as these cannot be blamed entirely for the pervasive pessimism, especially as many of the matters on which parents commented were much more local. Further, pessimism was rife from the outset of this exercise, before the appearance of the UNICEF report.

Among the local problems with the greatest immediacy were:

- road safety;
- poor local recreational and transport services;
- pervasive and threatening levels of aggression among older children;
- drugs, knives and guns (especially at soundings in Birmingham and London);
- other parents' abdication of their responsibilities.

Parents felt that they had to keep their children under close supervision in order to secure their safety, yet were unhappy that this was necessary. Like the teaching assistants, they were nostalgic for the childhood freedoms they themselves had enjoyed.

Values

One word – 'respect' – was used more frequently by parents than by any other group. In meeting after meeting parents deplored the loss of respect in society, especially among the young, and therefore commended, as guiding values for schools:

- respect for oneself;
- respect for peers and adults;
- respect for other generations;
- respect for difference;
- respect in the use of language;
- respect for courtesy and good manners;
- respect for the environment, both globally and locally.

Some parents saw the problem not just as disrespect as familiarly manifested in public rudeness or loutishness, but as a more subtle loss of the nuances of interpersonal dealings and the language which attends them, an all-embracing familiarity regardless of whether it is merited or welcomed, and an absence of the traditional sense of what forms of address are appropriate to what circumstances.

³ *Child Poverty in Perspective: an overview of child well-being in rich countries*, UNICEF 2007.

⁴ *The Economics of Climate Change: the Stern Review*, Cambridge University Press 2007.

Curriculum and assessment

Parents wanted schools to foster literacy and numeracy. They saw literacy in particular as the basis for all that follows. Yet like other groups they were worried by too narrow a focus on the basics, and the need for breadth and the pursuit of communicative and social skills. At several sessions parents echoed their children's call for the mandatory teaching of a modern foreign language at the primary stage. Others, while accepting that ICT skills must be mastered, argued that children should learn 'traditional as well as electronic communication' and indeed that talking and discussing were an all the more vital antidote to children's obsession with mobile phones and texting.

Many parents questioned the need for primary pupils, especially the younger ones, to be required to do homework.

Parents were at least as hostile towards SATs as other groups. They deplored the 'pressure' of SATs, especially in Key Stage 2. Some claimed that too much emphasis on tested achievement in a narrow range of competences leads to a 'mental shutdown' and can put children off education altogether. Others, referring specifically to younger children or those with special needs, believed that they may be neither ready nor emotionally prepared for such demands. Some even noted a relationship between SATs, league tables, house prices and hence the social character of whole communities. In such circumstances, as one parent commented, 'SATs only benefit estate agents.' What parents really needed to know was (i) whether their children were progressing satisfactorily, (ii) what problems they were encountering, (iii) whether they were happy.

Yet there was a certain ambivalence here, because parents also recognised that SATs were a passport to success. Nowhere was this more marked than in Sounding 2, in an affluent south London suburb, where the session palpably changed gear when parents ceased deploring the pressure to which their children were subject and acknowledged that they were partly responsible, not least in paying for regular private coaching to maximise their children's chances of achieving Level 5 in the KS2 SATs, which in turn would lead to success in the entry examination for independent secondary schools.

Good schools and good teachers

But not all children are destined for either Level 5 or independent schools, and parents wanted schools to value and encourage all children, not just the high flyers, to treat them as individuals, to make learning fun, and to provide an environment which is safe, happy and secure.

Parents also saw the school as providing – or as needing to provide - an antidote to those societal trends that worried them most. Thus, the school would offer an alternative to wall-to-wall television. It would teach children to exploit computers and the internet for information rather than mere entertainment. It would encourage children to interact rather than watch, and to use words rather than images. Above all, it would foster the communal values and model the communal relationships which parents and other witnesses believed were in decline elsewhere.

Home and school

When parents talked of their own roles and of relationships between home and school they revealed further tensions. The first concerned their desire to support their children's education in the home. Several parents felt that their children's developmental needs were best served by their staying at home but that they were financially obliged to go out to work or were under social pressure to do so. This was most notably and anxiously voiced by parents who had come to Britain from continental Europe. Some of these believed that they had entered a culture where it was socially unacceptable to remain at home looking after their children and that recent policy managed to convey the view that pre-school provision did a better job than parents.

The second area of tension was in home-school relations. Parents welcomed schools' 'open door' policies and their readiness to involve them in school activities. But they were worried by the falling-off of such opportunities as children grow older, and those parents with children in secondary as well as primary schools believed that close parent-teacher links were as necessary for adolescents as for five-year olds.

A further slant on this matter emerged at a very lively meeting in the final sounding which was attended by thirteen parents (nine mothers and four fathers), nearly all of whom were Asian Muslim. The issue here was the perceived failure of schools to encourage fathers to become actively involved in their children's education. Some fathers felt that the problem was less paternal reluctance than the schools' preparedness to accept offers of help from mothers but not from fathers. The issue is clearly complicated by assumptions, from which in this case teachers and TAs may not have been immune, about gender, parenting and educating. It deserves to be unpacked further.

As a footnote to both this particular sounding and the well-known methodological hazard of the research procedure influencing the character of what is researched, we have to report that this group of parents there and then decided to lobby the head teacher for a parent-teacher association.

Ages and stages

On the strength of these soundings, the starting age for primary schooling is a contentious issue. In the parents' witness sessions it was given immediacy by the presence of parents from countries where children do not start formal schooling until age 6 or 7 – France, Poland, Russia, the Baltic Republics and many others. Without exception these parents thought that the English starting age was too young: one, from France, called it 'cruel'.

Parents who had known nothing else were more sanguine, but not universally so. This was because while not objecting to 4/5 as a statutory school starting age they were concerned about the suddenness with which children could find themselves pitched into the 3Rs regime. Even these parents preferred a more gradual transition, with a continuing emphasis on play and the development of social and motor skills.

There are three separate issues to be unpacked here, then: the character of pre-statutory and early statutory education; the statutory starting age; and the timing and manner of transition from the characteristic tenor of early years education to the more formally structured curriculum. The issue is now complicated by the fact that the Foundation Stage overlaps pre-statutory and statutory provision.

Parents in several of the soundings expressed concern about the transfer from primary to secondary school, suggesting that age 11 was too soon to transfer, that children of that age did not have the maturity to cope with the demands of secondary school or were too young to be exposed to the influence and antics of the older secondary students. Some felt that preparation for between-school transfers and within-school transitions was inadequate. Those in sounding 3 - based on a middle school - strongly supported middle schools and hence a pattern of schooling which can seamlessly bridge Key Stages 2 and 3 and counter the Year 7/8 'dip' (but which, by the same token, splits Key Stage 2). Parents in Sounding 7 suggested that combining Years 6, 7 and 8 in a 10-13 school would be the most appropriate response to children's developmental needs as they move from childhood to adolescence.

7. LOCAL HEAD TEACHERS

As well as meeting the heads of the sounding base schools we organised witness sessions for heads of other schools in each community. There were nine such sessions, involving heads from 60 schools other than the 10 base schools. Across the community soundings programme as a whole, therefore, we met the head teachers of 70 schools. The sessions were very wide-ranging, and within this evidential strand of the Primary Review they provide an important methodological check on over-dependence on the views of teachers and heads from just 10 base schools. We would argue, in fact, that the 70 heads speak for much larger numbers, because of all the professional groups involved in primary education head teachers are among the most successfully networked across their local authorities - whether through the emerging cluster arrangements or informally - and indeed nationally through their unions. Through such networks they develop a strong collective consciousness. Sociologically, where class teachers are 'locals', heads are more likely to be 'cosmopolitans'.

Aims and values

The heads trod the by now familiar territory:

- love of learning
- learning how to learn
- life skills
- social and emotional development
- communication
- building relationships
- self-confidence

Less familiarly, some stressed the need for schools to be a conscious counter-culture, opening children's eyes to the downside of 21st century life as characterised by so many other witnesses, and helping children towards a sense of critical independence and larger moral purpose. What these heads advocated was an education which didn't merely reflect social trends, for better or worse, but got children to stand back from them, examine them critically, and make up their own minds about them.

Curriculum and assessment

The National Curriculum again came in for criticism as being monolithic and inflexible and attending too little to creativity and the generic skills of communication and problem solving. This criticism, though familiar, is of a piece with the idea of school as a counter-

culture. Heads were chafing at the bit of convergence and compliance – on the children’s behalf as well as their own.

While familiarly criticising SATs, heads more carefully qualified the usual blanket condemnation in four ways:

- KS2 tests would be far less problematic if they were not distorted by being made to double as instruments for public accountability; the issue is partly the character of the tests, but more urgently the way they are used.
- The tests massively distort the curriculum, and hence children’s education. Year 6 is now, often from September onwards, the ‘SAT year’ and some heads said that the pressure was washing back into Year 5. They believed that it is possible to devise a model of assessment which delivers the necessary information on children’s progress, is congruent with the curriculum as intended, and does not have these damaging consequences.
- Rather than national tests there should be, rather as in Scotland, a national item bank of test items on which schools could draw and which they could tailor to their needs.
- Though children, parents and teachers need summative information on children’s attainment at key points in their educational careers, the most educationally productive form of assessment is formative, low key and grounded in day-to-day teaching.

Teachers and teaching assistants

Of all the groups involved in the community soundings, the local heads offered the fullest commentary on primary teachers, what they are required to do and how well they are trained.

The heads, in similar vein to other groups, believed that good teachers

- plan carefully, yet also
- take risks
- are flexible
- are equally concerned with every child in their care
- are enthusiastic
- are caring.

Poor teachers, in contrast

- are over-dependent on worksheets and other ready-made resources
- relate successfully to only some of their pupils
- are inflexible
- follow national directives rather than their own judgement.

While commending the quality and dedication of the teachers in their schools, many heads believed that they were becoming de-skilled by over-reliance on DCSF/national strategy prescription, and that younger teachers, in particular, were trained merely to implement national strategy requirements and lacked the skill or will to improvise. No less critically,

their training was focusing on classroom skill acquisition and neglecting the study of psychology and pedagogy in which such skill needs to be grounded. (Ironically, during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s the criticism was the other way round: too much theory, too little classroom skill).

In the matter of raising the standards of teaching, Ofsted was seen as more of a hindrance than a help, because it was believed to require compliance rather than analysis and debate. Teaching will improve, these heads argued, if ownership of the debate about it is returned from DCSF and Ofsted to the teaching profession. In any case, more than one head went as far as to doubt the competence of some Ofsted inspectors even to check on compliance.

Heads were happy with the increased flexibility which the presence of TAs allowed, especially now that TAs themselves undertake varied roles. Though there was some concern in other groups that the boundaries between TAs and teachers were becoming excessively blurred – and, as voiced by TAs as well as teachers, this concern reflected a deeper anxiety that TAs might become cheaper alternatives to teachers – heads themselves seemed content to insist that TAs provide pastoral support while teachers educate. In light of the general insistence that social and emotional development are central to the view of what, at the primary stage, ‘education’ means, this demarcation may not hold much water.

Being a head in large and small schools

There is little doubt that since Plowden the task of primary headship has changed almost beyond recognition. Heads confessed to being under considerable pressure while yet they sought to deflect pressure from children and teachers.

Their central complaint was that such pressure, often of a bureaucratic kind, was supplanting their proper tasks of educating children and providing educational leadership. The problem of enforced withdrawal from the classroom was seen to be most acute in large primary schools, and heads who worked in local authorities with both large urban and small rural schools argued that the use of the same term - ‘head teacher’ - to describe the persons responsible at these extremes was misleading, and that rural head teachers faced few of the pressures of their urban colleagues.

For their part, rural heads pointed out that while the heads of large schools are able to delegate to deputy heads, assistant heads, heads of year and curriculum leaders, not to mention administrators, bursars and secretaries, they are obliged to undertake all the work of such people themselves. They argued that while the scale of the operation may differ, the range of responsibilities for heads of all schools is broadly similar, and this places on the heads of small schools pressure of a different kind, the multi-tasking demands of running a school and working with external agencies at the same time as carrying all the responsibilities of teaching a class part-time or even full-time, and a mixed-age class to boot.

Responses to other recent developments

Every Child Matters. The heads welcomed the new legislative framework, though they felt that it created considerable extra work – in one extreme estimate, 90 per cent of a head’s time might be spent on 10 per cent of the pupils. Heads were generally unimpressed with extended schools, which they felt had been foisted on them without adequate discussion. They believed that a day lasting from 8 am to 6 pm was far too long for both children and

teachers. Others suggested that the strategy was just another example of schools being made to deal with wider social ills.

Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA) time (teachers' entitlement, since 2005, to 10 per cent of their timetabled teaching time for PPA). Heads of smaller schools complained at the disproportionate and potentially destabilising impact of PPA on school budgets.

The changing roles of local authorities. Heads echoed the comments of governors about the variable extent and quality of local authority support. They also believed that while local authorities continued to make demands on schools they were less likely to offer leadership or vision.

Clustering. School clustering has become a feature of the drive to raise standards, maximise resources, encourage collaboration, and devolve responsibility so that local authorities can take on a strategic rather than interventive role. Like other initiatives they provoke mixed reactions. Heads of rural schools complained that geography and an absence of infrastructure makes rural clusters difficult to sustain. Heads of schools of all sizes noted the heavy demands of cluster meetings and activities on time, budgets and heads' workloads (since some end up managing clusters as well as schools).

Ages and stages. Elsewhere we have noted concerns about the starting age for statutory schooling and – in one local authority – the debate about the merits of two-tier and three-tier systems. Until we met the local heads in that authority the balance of argument on the latter was mostly in favour of middle schools, because they were believed to protect children from many of the undesirable pressures to which they are subject as they approach and enter adolescence. Heads of secondary schools, however, are less convinced, believing that pupils are better served if transfer coincides with the end of a key stage, and that transfer at age 13 (i.e. in the middle of KS3) adversely affects pupils' performance in KS4 assessment.

8. OTHER COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES

We held fifteen witness sessions on themes of particular relevance to the areas in which the soundings were located. These were attended by 83 representatives of a wide range of groups and organisations: other educational phases, local authority officers and elected members, employers, chambers of trade, statutory agencies, voluntary agencies, police, magistrates, faiths, Travellers, migrants, the disabled, arts organisations, local projects of various kinds. Together, these 83 witnesses, all of them from the wider society outside the school gate, offered a glimpse into the diversity and challenge of the world with which schools must engage if they are to succeed.

The account below identifies the main issues which emerged across the fifteen sessions as a whole.

Children, childhood and families

Children today were regarded as vulnerable. They – and especially adolescents – were believed to be socially isolated and even within their families cut off from other generations. Yet the contrasts in children's lives were thought to be massive and widening. Those born into familial stability and economic comfort fare well, exceptionally so in many cases. For others, deprivation is profound and multi-faceted: economic, emotional, linguistic, cultural.

Our community witnesses believed that the accident of birth profoundly and often cruelly divides the nation's children.

Though they were convinced about the adverse impact of local economic circumstances on family life, the community witnesses were also ready to pinpoint poor parenting as a major problem. Bearing in mind that many of the community representatives at these sessions had a particular interest in children and families with problems, in trouble or at risk, we relay here their perception that too many parents:

- fail to teach their children the rudiments of good behaviour and mutual respect;
- in their own habits model the consumerism and materialism which schools seek to counter and therefore undermine the school's moral and social agency;
- are over-indulgent;
- do not control their children's access to highly inappropriate electronic material;
- show little respect for social institutions – education, the law, government – and those who work for them;
- provide little by way of a positive moral and behavioural framework for children, and leave such matters to the school;
- have little in their homes which is intrinsically educative, whether materially (books, for example) or intellectually (intelligent and informed conversation).

As with other groups, there was a *leitmotif* of childhood innocence lost. Several groups registered the findings of the 2007 UNICEF report on childhood well-being as shocking in the extent of the identified gap between Britain and neighbouring countries, though not surprising in its substance. As far as they were concerned, UNICEF had merely confirmed what in British society was now only too evident.

Culture and social change

The familial inadequacies that the community witnesses deplored were seen as a reflection of prevailing values and trends in society as a whole: selfishness, materialism, disregard for the needs and rights of others. The point has been amply expressed in our account of what other witnesses said and does not need to be laboured.

Several groups extended the net more widely, and spoke of their concern about the impact on today's and tomorrow's children of climate change and global warming – not just environmentally but because of its economic and social consequences. In any event, they believed that the employment prospects of today's children looked increasingly uncertain. In certain soundings – the north east, south east, and south west, for example – the loss of traditional local industries posed a more immediate and urgent challenge. Witnesses believed that despite local regeneration initiatives ambitious and able children would seek work elsewhere and the community would lose out. This point was most strikingly expressed in the sound-east sounding, where witnesses suggested that the town's main export was graduates. Here, proximity to London was also a factor.

The impact of migration

The other major theme was in a stricter sense cultural. We have noted the presence in many of the sounding base schools of recent migrants from a wide range of countries, as well as representatives of longer-established communities originating in the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent. Witnesses were concerned about the consequences of the current

waves of migration: the rapid change in the character of established communities, the risk of communal tension, especially where jobs are at stake and affordable housing is in short supply. They also suggested that the situation was changing so fast that Home Office and DfES/DCSF figures on migration were likely to be not so much approximate as wildly inaccurate.

Many of our parent witnesses were themselves migrants, and we have already noted their reaction to the perceived British view that mothers ought to be at work and that formal education should start as early as possible. In one sounding, migrants came together to identify their concerns more systematically:

- Language is the biggest issue. Though their children rapidly learn English, they themselves do not and therefore have difficulty communicating with schools, and schools with them. Further, while schools and local authorities are geared up to the longer-established alternative languages and have well-developed EAL support services, there may be little or no provision for languages such as Polish, Lithuanian or Russian – even French, despite its historical place as the principal modern foreign language in secondary schools. The future of Britain, said our migrants, is multi-lingual, and this needs to be reflected in support services for parents, EAL support in schools and in the school curriculum.

The situation varies regionally and locally. For example, Leeds has a fast-growing population from Serbia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, and we were told that one entire Polish village has moved to Chapeltown. Cornwall has significant numbers from Poland, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, Thailand and Colombia. In urban areas migrant numbers may be relatively concentrated and need can be readily assessed and support provided, but in rural areas they are dispersed, with the result that funding and support may be spread too thinly to be useful, or it may be withheld on grounds of perceived cost-effectiveness. We were told that many of the migrant groups are suffering considerable hardship.

- The second issue is mobility. Public education is premised on the assumption of a stable population entering school in September and remaining there, but migrants arrive at different times of the year and many groups undertake seasonal work and their stay is temporary. The education system needs to take steps to accommodate to the new reality of a constantly shifting population. Three groups are particularly vulnerable to structural inflexibility: migrants, Travellers (see below) and ‘looked-after’ children.
- Thirdly, there is the cultural challenge. Schools are committed to multi-culturalism, but the complexity and fluidity of the emerging cultural scene can no longer be accommodated in the time-honoured fashion merely by telling children about Divali and Eid.

Travellers and other marginalised groups

We also met Travellers and those who worked with them. They feature in the recent Equalities Review final report⁵ as among those suffering the severest discrimination and prejudice in British society. They are also, of course, highly mobile and therefore likely to be disadvantaged because of a lack of continuity in schooling. Despite the efforts of those who

⁵ *Fairness and Freedom: the final report of the Equalities Review*, February 2007.

work with Travellers on behalf of schools and local authorities, we heard of considerable prejudice inside schools as well as outside. Teachers, suggested one group, simply don't know enough about the Travelling culture, and it is high time that they took the trouble to find out.

That culture poses challenges over and above mobility - principally high levels of parental illiteracy and a sharp segregation of gender roles which militates against female educational aspirations. There are also challenges of a more concrete kind: Travellers noted that the increasing use of homework in primary schools disadvantaged Travelling children because they might lack (a) space to undertake it, (b) the level of parental education on which informed parental support depends, (c) the home computing equipment and internet access which many schools and families take for granted.

It is also clear that the Travelling population is highly diverse culturally, occupationally and attitudinally, and that some groups feel that they are unfairly tainted by the reputation of others.

As with migrants, provision for Travellers is most effectively marshalled in areas where there are substantial concentrations. The rural-urban divide has a largely hidden aspect which is a long way removed from the disparities complained about landowners and vocal organisations like the Countryside Alliance – or, from a different angle, by those urban teachers who speak disparagingly about 'leafy lanes' schools luxuriating in tranquillity and affluence.

Established ethnic minorities and the challenge of identity

The final sounding took place in a predominantly Muslim Asian community, and in soundings in London and Birmingham we visited schools with substantial numbers of children of Asian and Afro-Caribbean origin. Community witnesses were impressed with what schools achieved in fostering both common goals and a respect for difference. The vagaries of EAL provision apart, the problem lay outside the schools rather than within them. At the final sounding police and other community representatives portrayed a city physically divided along ethnic lines, and were deeply concerned about cohesion and relationships across this ethnic divide, compromised as they had been by the demonising of Islam in the wake of the terrorist attacks on New York, Washington and London, and by the radicalising of young Muslims in response to British and American foreign policy. Some of our witnesses spoke of a climate of growing fear and suspicion.

Yet, somehow, primary schools themselves were felt to be steering a sensible course in a situation of considerable sensitivity, and the educational values and purposes commended in such circumstances were broadly similar to those we encountered elsewhere: a strong emphasis on community, mutual respect and affectivity, and on generic skills for learning, for employment and for life.

Faith and education

Religion is an inescapable element in the current cultural melting pot. At one session we met Jewish, Muslim and Christian religious leaders. For them, faith was both a fact of cultural life and a necessary part of education. Like the issue of ethnicity, this matter will demand our close attention in the later stages of the Review, but for the moment we flag up a salient pointers from these witnesses.

- Faith can and should be respected from the outside, regardless of personal belief. The issue is not religious education but a recognition that faith of one kind or another is intrinsic to culture and that it needs to be respected, whatever form it takes.
- The major faiths, and certainly the monotheistic ones, have a great deal in common, and this common ground should be emphasised as core values to which schools and children can subscribe.
- The common bonds of faith also tend to make parents happier to send their children, in the absence of their own faith school, to a school of another religious denomination.
- Yet some faiths, notably Judaism and Islam, were seen to have a character which was less readily assimilable. A rabbi distinguished between parents who send their children many miles each day to the nearest Jewish school (for only 70 are available nationwide) and the thoroughly assimilated 'Anglican Jews' - as he called them - who keep religion and education apart and are happy as long as the neighbourhood school attended by their children strives for achievement and provides the children with a clear moral framework.
- Many Muslim children are attending both regular schools and madrasahs. The issue here was felt to be not just the possibility of diverging values but also excessive demands on children's time and energies, especially when they also have to do homework.
- Sex education is problematic for some faiths because (a) it places in the public arena what they prefer to treat as private, and (b) it may run counter to their moral codes.
- Faith is not just about theistic belief. With faith goes a world-view which can encompass everything from custom to morality, from how relationships should be conducted to how knowledge should be conceived. One familiar face of this universality in the Islamic context is *sharia*; another, and an important Jewish perspective on the current rather vague advocacy of 'community', is *kehilla*.
- Opinion was divided on the virtues and problems of faith schools. Fears of segregation and sectarianism were countered by the claims that these had been stoked by the media and that faith schools were neither indoctrinatory nor divisive.

Aims and values

As we have noted, the various community witnesses, including those representing faiths and ethnic minorities, signed up to a similar prospectus of educational aims to those identified by other groups, though perhaps with a greater emphasis on what some might call 'real world' values:

- basic skills but not at the expense of a rounded education;
- personal qualities of respect for others, empathy, tolerance, flexibility;
- a clear ethical framework;
- generic skills of communication, information handling, problem solving;
- a proper respect for the practical;
- learning how to learn;
- citizenship;

- environmental understanding;
- economic awareness.

Curriculum and assessment

Like other witnesses, those from the local communities tended to deploy the by now familiar pathology:

- an over-crowded and inflexible National Curriculum;
- a perceived, and perceivedly mistaken, government obsession with a narrow instrumentality of educational purpose at the primary stage;
- the need for, and loss of, both the arts in education and generic concern with creativity, self-expression, curiosity, speculation and the search for meaning;
- the fragmentation of subjects and the importance of cross-curricular enquiry;
- the excessive pressure and adverse personal consequences of SATs.

To this there were two major additions:

- In the south-east sounding, which was based in a secondary school, we were told that primary school standards were low, that their heavy emphasis on literacy and numeracy was not delivering the required results, and that they were not training children in the habits of hard work. Employers, both here and elsewhere, believed that the inadequate levels of basic literacy and communication skill recently deplored by both employers and universities could not be attributed to secondary schools alone and that the proper foundation for these must be laid by primary schools.
- In the context of our meetings with members of ethnic minorities and with religious leaders, and indeed with other groups, there was concern that education should help to foster 'British' identity, yet also an acknowledgement that in our society identity is a very problematic concept. Not one of our witnesses reached for the stock solutions of the Union Jack, British history as traditionally configured or knowledge of the rules of cricket.

Schools, other agencies and the funding context

These sessions included many witnesses from statutory and voluntary bodies concerned with children's well being, and from groups beyond the conventional purview of *Every Child Matters*. All believed that the latter is a significant and important development, but some wished to make multi-agency working an even more fundamental part of primary school life. The police emphasised their own role, and in one sounding location the police authority was assigning a beat officer to every secondary school. Arts organisations stressed the value to schools of working with artists, theatres and musicians, as did schools themselves, though they were distressed that neither time nor funding permitted them to take full advantage of what was on offer, and that this was to the disadvantage of all concerned – children, teachers and artists.

It is clear that funding disparities between schools and local authorities are a source of considerable discontent for those who believe they are disadvantaged by current arrangements. Representatives contrasted the application of funding formulae in different LAs, and we have already noted that junior schools suffer the consequences of the KS1/KS2

differential because unlike 5-11 schools they cannot vire across Key Stages (when age-weighted pupil units – AWPUs – were first introduced it was believed that older primary children require less resource than those in early years or secondary education). Witnesses also complained that rural and small town schools in contexts of local deprivation or high unemployment miss out on the funding and infrastructure which are available for schools in large cities which face similar challenges; and we noted earlier that there is a similar urban/rural discrepancy in the resourcing of support for Travellers and migrants.

III – DISCUSSION: FROM LOCAL TO NATIONAL

Regional difference and national commonality

In an enquiry whose full title is *Primary Education in England*, the geographical spread of the Community Soundings signalled our wish to counter the impression sometimes conveyed by a London-dominated media and a Westminster-based government that the capital is representative of the country as a whole and that its preoccupations matter above all others.

At the beginning of this report we listed the regional locations for the Community Soundings and the conditions which, in a cultural rather than a statistical sense, we hoped to sample. Yet in spite of our careful attempts to elicit and record difference, what is striking about the Community Soundings is the extent of national consensus which they reveal, especially in the key areas of educational purpose, curriculum and assessment, the condition of childhood and society, and the world in which today's children are growing up. Thus, wherever we went we were likely to hear:

- that children are under intense and perhaps excessive pressure from the policy-driven demands of their schools and the commercially-driven values of the wider society;
- that family life and community are breaking down;
- that there is a pervasive loss of respect and empathy both within and between generations;
- that life outside the school gates is increasingly insecure and dangerous;
- that the wider world is changing, rapidly and in ways which it is not always easy to comprehend though on balance they give cause for alarm, especially in respect of climate change and sustainability;
- that the primary school curriculum is too narrow and rigid;
- that both the curriculum and children's educational careers are being compromised by the national tests, especially the Key Stage 2 SATs;
- that some government initiatives, notably *Every Child Matters*, are to be warmly applauded but others may constrain and even disempower rather than enable;
- that the task facing teachers and other professionals who work with children is, for these and other reasons, much more challenging now than it was a generation ago.

We shall pull together these common concerns at the end of this report as questions for the next stage of the Review. They prompt two observations. First, it is probably not wholly surprising that we should encounter a fair measure of agreement in the educational arena, for in the key domains of curriculum, assessment, standards, pedagogy and teacher training, centralisation has increasingly produced standardisation, especially since 1997 and the introduction of the Government's national strategies for literacy (1998), numeracy (1999) and primary education as a whole (2003). It is perhaps more surprising that there should be a similar measure of agreement on the wider social issues, because these are more susceptible to local variation and, notwithstanding the convergence resulting from economic and informational globalisation, England remains a country of exceptional cultural, demographic and topographical diversity.

Second, had there *not* been this degree of consensus on the central educational and indeed social issues, it would have been difficult to claim for the Community Soundings any more than that they recorded the random views, frozen in time, of 757 people in 87 witness sessions in ten different locations. As it is, we can assert with a fair degree of confidence that

soundings taken in parts of the country other than those visited would have elicited similar if not identical opinions, and that this strand of the Primary Review's evidence speaks to the national as well as the local.

The implications of this are of considerable importance as we set the findings from the community soundings alongside the 30 commissioned surveys of published research and the much larger body of data which comprises the 550 submissions which the Review received between October 2006 and April 2007. For while the submissions also tap local and regional opinion, a high proportion of them come from organisations whose membership and remit are national.

That said, there were some regional differences of local preoccupation and emphasis within the framework of shared concerns. Some examples follow.

Education and employment

The soundings in the North East and South East were conducted in schools catering for pupils beyond the primary age range. In terms of measured attainment the students in these schools were some way apart. In both cases, the community witness sessions focused upon what lies beyond school: the certainty of adulthood and the uncertainties of employment and lifelong learning. In both soundings, community witnesses lamented the decline in employment opportunities following the collapse or migration elsewhere of local industries and with them the traditional routes into employment through apprenticeship. The vacuum left by the loss of these pathways, which for decades had served those children referred to as 'less academic', reinforced concerns about the narrow academic focus of the curriculum. In these soundings, as it happened, there also was strong resentment of the way local authority policies and interventions were frustrating the schools' attempts to fulfil their larger social aims.

Responses to the situation varied with the schools' level of performance however, with greater optimism emanating from the 'high performing' school. Positive ideas for remedial action centred on the importance of communication, with an emphasis on conversation between schools and other parties, the need for intergenerational working and cooperation, and greater local independence to solve educational problems. Underlying the views of witnesses seemed to be a sense that the 'gap' in educational attainment between the highest and lowest performing pupils, to which recent government policy has paid considerable attention, is aggravated partly by local circumstances and partly by the curriculum which schools are obliged to follow. Both, but for different reasons, lie outside the control of the school.

Structures and phases: middle schools

A singularly local issue in one sounding was the local authority's decision to move from a three tier to a two-tier structure, in spite of strong and active local opposition. The majority of the sounding's witnesses supported the existing three-tier school structure. They argued that it facilitated cross key-stage continuity; protected children from premature exposure to adolescent behaviour and peer pressure; avoided the developmental double whammy of school transfer coinciding with the onset of puberty; provided a more appropriate scale within which to meet the needs of early adolescence; and offered better facilities for Years 4 and 5 children alongside access to specialist teaching for those in Year 6. The governors in particular resented the preparedness of the local authority to disregard local views and the

fact that it had the power to do so, notwithstanding the requirement that it should consult widely and responsively before implementing such a far-reaching change in policy. Local head teachers, on the other hand, had to come to terms with the inevitability of reorganisation and, in consequence, added their voice to local calls for better communication between schools. Their response was more pragmatic. In any case, we found that while advocates of middle schools believed in the efficacy of transfer at age 13, our secondary school representatives were not so happy with the idea of 13-18 upper schools.

Interestingly, parents in a number of other soundings commended a return to the middle school system to reduce the trauma of primary–secondary transfer and segregate younger children from the influence of teenagers. Contemporary anxieties are in this case prompting a desire to reinstate a pattern of schooling with which an earlier generation had decided to dispense. The middle schools may have disappeared but the anxieties have not, and for this reason we suggest that the issue is of much more than local interest.

Parenting and educating in urban communities

The considerable local differences in parents' responses to common concerns in the three London soundings belied their geographical proximity, and in this sense London may well be a microcosm after all – of urban life, at any rate. Two of the communities were ethnically, socially and economically highly diverse, and included a substantial proportion of transient families. The third was an affluent and essentially white British monocultural suburb. Ofsted had judged all of the sounding base schools in the three communities to be very successful. In all three soundings, witnesses expressed similar concerns about loss of community, loss of childhood innocence, their children's safety and, especially, the academic, commercial and peer pressures to which today's children are subject.

At that point parental views began to diverge. Those living in the most advantageous material and financial circumstances that we sampled, who had the wherewithal to be financially independent of benefits, argued that the government should provide incentives for mothers to stay at home while their children are young. Yet though they had the greatest opportunity to be involved in their children's schooling they did not appear to see parental involvement in school as a priority. Instead, they concentrated, through extra-school activities and private coaching, on maximising their children's prospects of success in the KS2 SATs and the entry examinations to independent secondary schools, thus in effect creating a parallel schooling system, reducing their dependence on the official school and in the process raising interesting questions about who in a 'value added' standards regime actually adds the value and what the Ofsted school inspection ratings in such circumstances really mean.

In contrast, parents in one of the more economically deprived London communities saw the school itself as the best available solution to local social and economic challenges. They wanted greater parental and community involvement, much more open access to the building and its facilities throughout the year, and especially a broader, more open and less rigidly instrumental curriculum. They valued space in school for stressed children to 'chill out', to learn Tai Chi, and to participate in artistic activities, and they spoke of the importance of making time to read and play with their children. These parents, it was clear, valued and needed the school for much more than its educational provision, as conventionally defined.

The third London parents' witness session revealed yet another model, prizing the importance of high aspirations, cultural awareness and curriculum breadth. Parental involvement in the school was strong, as was school involvement in the community. For this school exploited its size and location to generate income to provide facilities for community use and ploughed the profits back into the construction of better school facilities, including a sports centre and a nursery, and into enhanced staffing.

Three of the soundings took place in primary schools which included many children with statements of special educational needs. All three of these also served areas of economic deprivation. The Birmingham sounding took place in an inner city setting, whilst the other two, in Yorkshire and the South West, were in market towns in rural local authorities. Inadequate funding for children with special needs was an issue in all three places, but especially in the market towns. As explained elsewhere in this report, one of these schools was in an otherwise well-off and high achieving local authority, and despite local levels of deprivation was not eligible for the resources provided for schools similarly situated in a neighbouring urban authority. The other lacked funds because as a junior school it was disadvantaged by the funding formula's weighting against children at Key Stage 2.

Strong concerns about children's home lives and the difficulties inherent in making contact with parents were expressed in all three of these soundings, but most acutely in the Yorkshire and South West communities, where the schools in question had strategies in place to tackle this, and to engage with hard-to-reach parents.

The Birmingham sounding was conducted in a school with an average number of children deemed to have special educational needs (SEN), but a higher than average number of statements of SEN resulting from the attractiveness to families further afield of its specialist facilities and expertise in supporting children with physical disabilities. Here the parents made a particular plea for the establishment of a parental network that could provide mutual support to cope with the demands of caring for physically disabled children. They were also concerned about the lack of parental involvement at secondary level, suggesting that bringing parents into school would help to reduce the behavioural problems which are an increasing challenge to secondary teachers and pupils alike.

We noted earlier that the parents' witness session in the North West sounding ended with the parents deciding to press for the formation of a parent-teacher association. Participants in this meeting raised culturally-specific issues about fathers' lack of visible involvement in their children's education and, surprisingly perhaps, this resonates with the concern about maternal roles in the very cultural different context of affluent south London. Indeed, at various points during the Community Soundings programme we encountered a sense of unease or tension about the question of whether parents (which was to say, though not always, mothers) should stay at home while their children are young. It was most forcibly expressed by mothers who had recently arrived in Britain from other countries. They found the notion that mothers of very young should return to work hard to accept.

Also culturally specific were the discussions about the relationship between faith and education in a community which was both predominantly Muslim but also multi-faith, and in which in any event faith mattered a great deal. In this sounding we were made aware of the pervasiveness of Islam in the everyday lives of the children, both inside and outside school. At the same time, at our session with senior Muslim, Jewish and Anglican Christian witnesses there was total unanimity about the need for children and families to respect both religious diversity and the place of religion, any religion, in the development of individual

and collective identity. We were given examples of local inter-faith events and initiatives, both at school and in places of worship, which provided a powerful corrective to recent claims that multi-culturalism is a discredited and unworkable ideal.

Co-operation and competition in rural communities

Moving out of the towns and cities, we met a number of head teachers of rural schools, if not in our sounding base schools then in the sessions with local heads which were a feature of every sounding. Their concerns about the pressure and diversity of their tasks, and the difficulty of delegating more than a handful of them, if that, are reported in Part II. Since the 1988 Education Reform Act, and indeed since much earlier in some areas, small and rural schools - the two are not necessarily synonymous - have formed co-operative clusters to provide mutual support and share resources, including staff, for example to meet the increased need for curriculum specialists. Recent policies such as Every Child Matters, extended schools and workforce reform were in principle welcomed by these head teachers, but they were concerned at the lack of adequate local infrastructure and support to enable the policies to be properly implemented in small schools, which were already struggling under the weight of earlier initiatives.

Even when clustering is feasible, as we learned at the Southwest sounding, there may be a mismatch between geography and values. Educationally or philosophically, the closest school may not be the most appropriate one with which to work; and the school which is most compatible educationally may be too far away. It follows that heads were also anxious about the implications of any school clustering or federation which was enforced rather than voluntary. This development, indeed, is problematic at several levels. In a small school the personalities of the few adults present are significant variables, and shotgun marriages between schools are a recipe for conflict. Further, village schools are more likely to be community schools in a real rather than a merely titular sense, and the relationship between school and community may be subtle, complex and deeply embedded historically – and therefore acutely vulnerable to administrative solutions to perceived problems of cost-effectiveness devised by County Hall officials with limited knowledge of communal particularities.

The matter is further complicated by a policy culture, reinforced by the Primary National Strategy, which promotes school co-operation through networking and federation, yet at the same time uses the apparatus of testing and performance tables to make schools compete with each other with the expressed intent of promoting ‘choice’ and driving up standards. These aims do not seem readily compatible, especially when the decline or closure of local services is making many rural communities less and less viable for families with young children, and the pool of available pupils for which village schools must compete is shrinking.

While the national educational debate remains firmly fixated on the undeniable challenges of living, teaching and learning in England’s cities, the Community Soundings remind us that England’s smaller primary schools, and the rural communities in which most of them are situated, face their own challenges. These are not pallid or scaled-down versions of urban problems but circumstances of a wholly distinctive kind. The demographics here are revealing. In 2006, of England’s 17,504 primary schools 2,586 - or nearly 15 per cent – had fewer than 100 pupils, while 44 per cent - approaching half - had fewer than 200. Small schools are a significant element in the national fabric of primary education.

Stability, change and transience in school intakes

We have noted the ubiquity of migrant children and families and a deep concern that the fast-changing demography of migration is better understood locally than by central government. As a result, it is clear that a pattern of schooling premised upon the relative stability of its intake is being called increasingly into question, and that resourcing in respect of matters like language provision may not be keeping pace with need.

This, without a doubt, is now a national challenge, and a typical day's press coverage shows that its ramifications reach well beyond primary schooling. Yet it is also a very local issue, for the pattern and extent of migration varies widely from one part of the country to another. This matter is discussed in Part II, but in the context of this section's exemplification of local issues, we would particularly note our witnesses' view that resource and infrastructure deficiencies are most acute in areas where migrants (and indeed Travellers) are dispersed rather than concentrated. This adds to the list of largely unacknowledged pressures on schools outside the major conurbations.

The Community Soundings as data

We turn now from the question of the relationship between the local and the national in the Primary Review Community Soundings to a broader consideration of their status as data.

The suggestion that opinion does not count as data in a national enquiry needs to be confronted immediately, for it is commonly voiced. We noted at the beginning of this report that the Review balances different procedures and kinds of evidence: opinion-seeking with the published outcomes of more conventionally systematic enquiry; non-interactive expression of opinion with face-to-face discussion; official data with independent research; the local with the national; and material from England with that from other UK and international sources.

This drive for balance must not be interpreted as an admission that one kind of data is intrinsically superior to another, for all have both strengths and limitations; and, especially, methodological balance isn't about compensating for the supposed weakness of 'mere' opinion by providing what some call 'hard' data – which, as it happens, is often nowhere near as unassailable as that epithet seeks to imply. Balance in the Primary Review is about accessing different voices, different perspectives, different values, different diagnoses, different kinds of evidence, different ways of making sense of the same range of phenomena in the pursuit of richer portrayals of the problems and a deeper understanding of how they might be addressed. Such a notion of balance takes us far beyond the relatively crude and frequently misconceived opposition of the 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' in educational and social research.

What, then, of the particular data arising from the Community Soundings? In one sense the authenticity of the messages conveyed in this report is undeniable. This is what children, teachers, parents, community representatives and many others have said to us, with the frankness that we hope is a reflection of both our independence and the way the sessions were conducted. If these witnesses tended towards the pessimistic and critical – and this indeed was one of the most striking features of the Community Soundings programme as a whole – this is how they felt.

Against the claim of authenticity it could be argued that the gloomy tenor of many witnesses' comments reflected an excess of susceptibility to the tone of the news during the period when the soundings were being undertaken. Indeed, we noted earlier that some of the children themselves acknowledged this. It has even been intimated that the Community Soundings procedure may have been biased. Why, we were asked when we first aired emerging findings from this strand at a meeting attended by a senior government official, had we chosen not to celebrate New Labour's educational achievements?

Our answer to this implied charge is clear. Our task in the Community Soundings was to ask, listen and report. It was not our task in this particular strand to assess the impact of past or present government policies, still less unquestioningly to endorse them, though if our witnesses did so we would record that fact. We held these 87 sessions in different parts of the country because we wanted to know how ordinary people close to the educational action were thinking, and because we believed that their views, whatever they were, had a right to be counted as evidence. No less important, we believed it to be both methodologically and democratically essential to balance official views of educational realities, achievements and needs with alternative accounts.

As for the power of the media, it is true that climate change and global warming were frequently in the news during the soundings period - though not, as it happens, in the tabloids, and we consider it implausible that we ended up talking mainly to *Independent* or *Guardian* readers. It is also true that our witnesses' concern about childhood pressure and stress coincided with the publication of the UNICEF report on childhood well being. However, that report appeared in February 2007 and pressure and stress were prominent talking points from the first sounding several weeks earlier, indeed at the very first witness session at that sounding, which was with a group of parents. Childhood pressure and stress had also been much discussed well before that, and this was reflected in the decision of the Children's Society to launch its Good Childhood Enquiry, whose timescale coincides with ours.

In turn, politicians themselves might be credited or blamed for the over-use of the word 'respect' which peppered many of the witnesses' discussions of the condition of Britain's social fabric (see, for example the summary of parents' views in Part II), and the media have also made much in recent months and years of the supposed deterioration in public behaviour and morality, focusing - it must be noted - on the conduct of the young on the streets rather than their elders in their homes, offices and pubs. Yet for those of our sounding witnesses who also spoke of this the problems were real, and they were making their lives increasingly difficult. Further, their views were confirmed, with due professional sobriety, by the police officers who attended three of the sessions for community representatives.

It is true, then, that the community soundings were framed by a gloomy and often sensationalising media and political discourse. But many of the problems of which our witnesses spoke were much more local and concrete than this, and for every witness who may have been repeating what he or she read in the papers about - say - the decline in social cohesion, there were others with specific tales to tell of encounters which they or their children were experiencing as everyday local realities. Equally, it is unwise to dismiss the hostility to SATs as mere anti-government froth when it is voiced in such direct terms as we heard it; when it comes from parents who care as passionately about their children's welfare as teachers are sometimes accused of caring about their own; and when it is backed by evidence from other sources.

This takes us to the nub of the matter. The community soundings yielded a particular kind of evidence. As we have been at pains to emphasise whenever explaining the Review's methodology, we have striven overall for an evidential balance of opinion and what is empirically demonstrable, of independent research and official data, and of the local, national and international. The community soundings elicited opinion. They were grounded in immediate experience informed by whatever sources opinion is ever informed by, whether reliable or unreliable. However, bearing in mind the combined weight of professional and personal experience in these soundings, and the exceptionally generous array of perspectives and voices, it would be both foolish and arrogant to dismiss this strand of the Review's evidence as 'mere' opinion.

By their nature, therefore, the soundings contained assertions which may or may not be sustained by reference to data from published research and inspection, or from the databases of Ofsted and DfES/DCSF. They reflected the preoccupations of the moment – as, strikingly, when witnesses insisted on responding to our carefully framed questions about the national future by talking about the local present. Although we attempted to cover the ten Review themes, there are obvious and substantial gaps in what we heard as well as disparities and vagaries in emphasis. Thus, from the session summaries one might conclude that SATs and the assessment of pupil learning are synonymous: this, manifestly, is not the case, or if it is so then something has gone badly wrong with the way primary education is conceived and conducted. Yet the fact that so many witnesses elide assessment and SATs tells us something significant about current educational consciousness and culture, and about the impact of recent policy on the curriculum and daily lives of children and teachers.

Meanwhile, the findings of the Community Soundings must be respected for what they are: the opinions of people who are intimately involved in the lives and work of children, primary schools and the communities they serve. This, for better or worse, is what these people say and how they feel.

There is a final angle on the matter of the prevailing tone and tenor of witnesses' comments. Pessimism turned to hope when witnesses felt they had the power to act. Thus, the children who were most confident that climate change need not overwhelm them were those whose schools had decided to replace unfocussed fear by factual information and practical strategies for energy reduction and sustainability. Similarly, the teachers who were least worried by national initiatives were those who responded to them with robust and knowledgeable criticism rather than resentful compliance, and asserted their professional right to go their own way. There is an important lesson from such empowerment for governments with centralising tendencies, as well as for primary schools themselves. Given that some witnesses complained that primary teacher training courses train for compliance with the national strategies and little more, there is also food for thought here for teacher education institutions and the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA).

Of course, not even the most enterprising school can reverse some of the social trends which worried many of our witnesses. That being so, these Community Soundings have implications for social and economic policy more generally, and for public attitudes and values, not merely for DCSF and the schools.

IV – ISSUES FOR THE NEXT STAGE OF THE REVIEW

We now list questions arising from this strand of the Primary Review which we propose to take forward to the National Soundings and beyond. The rest of the material will of course not be lost, for this report stands as a substantial body of evidence in its own right, and will feed the deliberations leading to preparation of the Review's final report. The questions are presented without discussion, for it is the discussion of the questions by others that we are chiefly interested in.

We must emphasise that the Community Soundings alone will not determine the agenda for the National Soundings and that we are undertaking a similar extrapolation exercise with the 30 commissioned research surveys and the 550 submissions.

The national and global context

1. What perspectives on the wider world should primary schools be providing? How should primary schools and the primary curriculum respond to those particular global challenges - climate change, environmental sustainability and international poverty and injustice - about which witnesses voiced the most consistent concern?
2. In a context of growing uncertainty about future employment prospects, what kind of a foundation of knowledge and skills should primary schools be providing? Is it sufficient to continue with the established formula of the 3Rs plus science and ICT?
3. If, as witnesses tell us, there has been a loss in recent years of social cohesion, community and concern for others, and a growth in selfishness and materialism, how might primary schools both help children to cope with the adverse consequences of these changes and play their part in redressing the balance?
4. Recent and continuing patterns of migration are making England more diverse culturally and linguistically than ever, yet some are arguing that multi-culturalism has failed and that what is now needed is a much greater emphasis on common values. How should primary schools respond in their own values and practices?
5. How might schools strike the best balance between protecting children from the dangers which some of them may confront outside school and overprotecting them?
6. How should schools help children to exploit the educative potential of ICT while developing their capacity to use it with critical awareness and discrimination?

Children and childhood

7. Are children as relentlessly and unprecedentedly under pressure both inside and outside school as many witnesses claim? If so, what should be done to address this?
8. Are today's children growing up too soon? Is 'childhood innocence' something genuinely to be reclaimed before it is too late, or merely a misplaced nostalgia for a way of life which was never enjoyed by more than a minority? If the pressure of premature adolescence is a genuine problem, how might schools respond?

9. Does the *Every Child Matters* agenda represent the best available way of securing children's well being, identifying children at risk and protecting them from harm? Are its stated aims and outcomes as they should be? Are its strategies and procedures viable and effective? Are the various agencies working together in children's interests as intended? Do primary schools have the resources and support they need in order to play their own part in realising the *Every Child Matters* vision?
10. How can schools and other agencies most effectively address the needs and circumstances of that part of the school-age population which is mobile, especially looked-after children and the children of migrants and Travellers?
11. Is it the case that the profile of identified special educational needs is changing, with a rise in the incidence of behavioural difficulties? Why is this? Are current SEN and inclusion policies able to meet these changes? Is SEN provision equitable, both geographically and in relation to the range of needs which are identified?
12. Are school councils effective as means of articulating children's concerns, or merely tokenistic? Are the voices of all children being heard in schools, or only some of them? If the latter, whose voices remain unheard? What can be done to make 'children's voice' a genuinely equitable movement which empowers children as learners and future citizens?

Parenting, caring and educating

13. Is the quality of parenting in serious decline, as some witnesses claim? Are parents indeed taking less and less responsibility for their children's social and moral upbringing? Do they indeed care less? Or are parents themselves under unprecedented pressure and in need of support, as others insist?
14. Can schools and other agencies help to raise the currently low educational aspirations which some parents have for their children? If so, how?
15. If these are genuine trends, how should schools and other agencies respond? What, ideally, should be the division of responsibilities between home and school? How can a relationship of trust, mutual respect and mutual support between home and school best be achieved?

Aims, values and curriculum

16. Has recent policy over-emphasised the instrumental function of primary education? Has it adopted too narrow a view of what is most 'useful' for later education and for life? What should primary education be most fundamentally about?
17. Are the global and social issues referred to above the proper concern of primary schools, or are they best left until the secondary stage? What other imperatives – developmental, social, cultural, moral, economic, practical, creative - should the primary curriculum address?
18. Given that few witnesses disputed the importance of literacy and numeracy yet that most also argued that primary education should be about much more than this, and that creativity and other necessary aspects of young children's education have become casualties of the post-1997 'standards' drive, what should the primary curriculum look

like? In what, precisely and all rhetoric apart, do curriculum breadth and balance reside? What is a rounded primary education?

19. What is the validity of the current tendency to reject knowledge and seek to reconfigure the primary curriculum as skills? Why was this urge much more strongly expressed by primary teachers than by any other witnesses, including children and employers? How well founded is this trend in professional thinking?
20. What is the place of religious faith in primary education?
21. Should differences between the curriculum experienced by younger and older primary pupils be a matter of degree, or should the early and later primary curriculum have a fundamentally different character? How should the former articulate with the foundation stage 'six areas of learning'?
22. Does the idea of a single national curriculum need to be replaced by something more flexible? What, in curriculum matters, should be the balance of national prescription and local variation?

Assessment

23. What is the proper solution to the SAT 'problem' as perceived with near-unanimity by our witnesses – that is, excessive pressure on children and teachers and an unacceptable degree of distortion of the primary curriculum and of educational values and processes generally? Abandon SATs altogether? Divest them of their school and system accountability functions and return them to the task of assessing the progress of individual children? Move from national tests to a national item bank from which schools are free to draw as they deem appropriate?
24. Is what is formally assessed in primary schools what needs to be formally assessed?
25. Is the widely supported goal of assessment for learning compatible with high-stakes testing?
26. What do (i) pupils, (ii) teachers, (iii) parents, (iv) local and national government need to know about the progress and achievement of primary pupils? What assessment system best meets these various needs?

Learning, teaching and teachers

27. Is there common ground in the attributes of effective teaching and teachers identified by the different witness groups, including children? How far do experiential and common-sense notions like 'flexibility', 'enthusiasm', 'high expectations' and 'knowing your subject' relate to the findings of pedagogical research? Is it possible to arrive at a viable synthesis?
28. Have the post-1997 teaching initiatives of the present government constrained or even de-skilled teachers to the extent claimed by some witnesses? How well founded pedagogically are these official initiatives?

29. What is the force of the complaint that there has been too much emphasis recently on teaching and too little on learning? Does the complaint have substance or is it merely a slogan? If it signals a demonstrable tendency, how can the balance be redressed?
30. Are primary teachers adequately trained for the job they do? Do the training requirements focus on what matters? Do they neglect areas which are important? Do they concentrate on compliance at the expense of laying the foundations for autonomous and critical expertise? Are the standards of entry to courses of initial training high enough? Is the standard of NQT entry to the profession high enough?
31. Do current arrangements for primary teachers' continuing professional development adequately support their transition from novice to expert?
32. Is the progressive blurring of the boundaries between teachers and teaching assistants desirable? Are there some tasks which only teachers should undertake, and if so, what?
33. Are teaching assistants adequately trained and paid for the work they are required to do?
34. Is workforce reform, as currently envisaged and enacted, delivering genuine improvement in the quality of learning and teaching in the classroom?

Schools, structures, ages and phases

35. Are children in England required to start their compulsory schooling at too young an age?
36. Is there an educational and/or developmental case for revisiting the three-tier system, despite the fact that it is now almost defunct?
37. How can transfer between schools be handled in a way which is as stress-free as possible for the children concerned, and which sustains rather than interrupts their educational progress?
38. Are primary heads asked to do too much, or to perform too wide an array of tasks? Where should their time and expertise be concentrated? How can they be enabled to do so?
39. How can small schools have access to the mutual support afforded by clustering without losing their individuality?

Funding and governance

40. How can the apparent inequities in funding between local authorities, and the anomalies in funding formulae between schools, be eliminated?
41. How can school funding be made more rapidly and accurately responsive to the uncertain demographics of migration?
42. What can be done to achieve greater consistency in the infrastructure and support provided by local authorities?

43. Given that the evidence about the impact to date of the National Literacy, Numeracy and Primary Strategies is not nearly as conclusive as their advocates claim, and that our witnesses themselves disagree about the strategies' efficacy, what is the truth about the quality, implementation and impact of these high-profile and expensive initiatives?
44. Is the day-to-day work of primary schools excessively controlled and constrained by central government, as witnesses claim? Will the 'flexibility' and 'freedom' offered by the Primary Strategy be sufficient to discount such claims or should the balance of national, local and school be radically reconfigured? Does the notion of a national strategy or agency defining the precise nature of school-level freedoms embody a certain contradiction?

APPENDIX 1

THE PRIMARY REVIEW PERSPECTIVES, THEMES AND SUB THEMES

The Primary Review's enquiries are framed by three broad perspectives, the third of which, primary education, breaks down into ten themes and 23 sub-themes. Each of the latter then generates a number of questions. The full framework of review perspectives, themes and questions is at www.primaryreview.org.uk

The Review Perspectives

- P1 Children and childhood
- P2 Culture, society and the global context
- P3 Primary education

The Review Themes and Sub-themes

- T1 Purposes and values**
 - T1a Values, beliefs and principles
 - T1b Aims
- T2 Learning and teaching**
 - T2a Children's development and learning
 - T2b Teaching
- T3 Curriculum and assessment**
 - T3a Curriculum
 - T3b Assessment
- T4 Quality and standards**
 - T4a Standards
 - T4b Quality assurance and inspection
- T5 Diversity and inclusion**
 - T5a Culture, gender, race, faith
 - T5b Special educational needs
- T6 Settings and professionals**
 - T6a Buildings and resources
 - T6b Teacher supply, training, deployment & development
 - T6c Other professionals
 - T6d School organisation, management & leadership
 - T6e School culture and ethos
- T7 Parenting, caring and educating**
 - T7a Parents and carers
 - T7b Home and school
- T8 Beyond the school**
 - T8a Children's lives beyond the school
 - T8b Schools and other agencies
- T9 Structures and phases**
 - T9a Within-school structures, stages, classes & groups
 - T9b System-level structures, phases & transitions
- T10 Funding and governance**
 - T10a Funding
 - T10b Governance

APPENDIX 2

THE EVIDENTIAL BASIS OF THE PRIMARY REVIEW

The Review has four evidential strands. These seek to balance opinion seeking with empirical data; non-interactive expressions of opinion with face-to-face discussion; official data with independent research; and material from England with that from other parts of the UK and from international sources. This enquiry, unlike some of its predecessors, looks outwards from primary schools to the wider society, and makes full though judicious use of international data and ideas from other countries.

Submissions

Following the convention in enquiries of this kind, submissions have been invited from all who wish to contribute. By June 2007, nearly 550 submissions had been received and more were arriving daily. The submissions range from brief single-issue expressions of opinion to substantial documents covering several or all of the themes and comprising both detailed evidence and recommendations for the future. A report on the submissions will be published in late 2007.

Soundings

This strand has two parts. The *Community Soundings* are a series of nine regionally based one to two day events, each comprising a sequence of meetings with representatives from schools and the communities they serve. The Community Soundings took place between January and March 2007, and entailed 87 witness sessions with groups of pupils, parents, governors, teachers, teaching assistants and heads, and with educational and community representatives from the areas in which the soundings took place. In all, there were over 700 witnesses. The *National Soundings* are a programme of more formal meetings with national organisations both inside and outside education. They will take place during autumn 2007 and will explore key issues arising from the full range of data thus far. They will aim to help the team to clarify matters which are particularly problematic or contested and to confirm the direction to be taken by the final report. As a subset of the National Soundings, a group of practitioners - the *Visionary and Innovative Practice (VIP) group* - is giving particular attention to the implications of the emerging evidence for the work of primary schools.

Surveys

30 surveys of published research relating to the Review's ten themes have been commissioned from 69 academic consultants in universities in Britain and other countries. The surveys relate closely to the ten Review themes and the complete list appears in Appendix 3. Taken together, they will provide the most comprehensive review of research relating to primary education yet undertaken. They will be published in thematic groups from October 2007 onwards.

Searches

With the co-operation of DfES/DCSF, QCA, Ofsted, TDA and OECD, the Review is re-assessing a range of official data bearing on the primary phase. This will provide the necessary demographic, financial and statistical background to the Review and an important resource for its later consideration of policy options.

Other meetings

In addition to the formal evidence-gathering procedures, the Review team meets members of various national bodies for the exchange of information and ideas: government and opposition representatives; officials at DfES/DCSF, QCA, Ofsted, TDA, GTC, NCSL and IRU; representatives of the teaching unions; and umbrella groups representing organisations involved in early years, primary education and teacher education. The first of three sessions with the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee took place in March 2007. Following the replacement of DfES by two separate departments, DCSF and DIUS, it is anticipated that there will be further meetings with this committee's successor.

APPENDIX 3

THE PRIMARY REVIEW INTERIM REPORTS

The interim reports, which will be released in stages from October 2007, include the 30 research surveys commissioned from external consultants together with reports on the community soundings and the submissions prepared by the Cambridge team. They are listed by Review theme below, although this will not be the order of their publication. Report titles may be subject to minor amendment.

Once published, the interim reports, together with briefings summarising their findings, may be downloaded from the Review website, www.primaryreview.org.uk.

1. *Community Soundings: report on the Primary Review regional witness sessions*
2. *Submissions received by the Primary Review*
3. *Aims and values in primary education. Research survey 1/1 (John White)*
4. *The aims of primary education: England and other countries. Research survey 1/2 (Maha Shuayb and Sharon O'Donnell)*
5. *The changing national context of primary education. Research survey 1/3 (Stephen Machin and Sandra McNally)*
6. *The changing global context of primary education. Research survey 1/4 (Hugh Lauder, John Lowe and Rita Chawla-Duggan)*
7. *Children in primary schools: cognitive development. Research survey 2/1a (Usha Goswami and Peter Bryant)*
8. *Children in primary schools: social development and learning. Research survey 2/1b (Christine Howe and Neil Mercer)*
9. *Teaching in primary schools. Research survey 2/2 (Robin Alexander and Maurice Galton)*
10. *Learning and teaching in primary schools: the curriculum dimension. Research survey 2/3 (Bob McCormick and Bob Moon)*
11. *Learning and teaching in primary schools: evidence from TLRP. Research survey 2/4 (Mary James and Andrew Pollard)*
12. *Curriculum and assessment policy: England and other countries. Research survey 3/1 (Kathy Hall and Kamil Özerk)*
13. *The trajectory and impact of national reform in English primary education. Research survey 3/2 (Dominic Wyse, Elaine McCreery and Harry Torrance)*
14. *Curriculum alternatives for primary education. Research survey 3/3 (James Conroy, Moira Hulme and Ian Menter)*
15. *Assessment alternatives for primary education. Research survey 3/4 (Wynne Harlen)*
16. *Quality and standards in primary education: national evidence. Research survey 4/1 (Peter Tymms and Christine Merrell)*
17. *Quality and standards in primary education: international evidence. Research survey 4/2 (Chris Whetton, Graham Ruddock and Liz Twist)*
18. *Monitoring, assuring and maintaining quality in primary education. Research survey 4/3 (Peter Cunningham and Philip Raymont)*
19. *Children, identity, diversity and inclusion in primary education. Research survey 5/1 (Mel Ainscow, Jean Conteh, Alan Dyson, and Frances Gallannaugh)*

20. *Children of primary school age with special needs: identification and provision.* Research survey 5/2 (Harry Daniels and Jill Porter)
21. *Children and their primary education: pupil voice.* Research survey 5/3 (Carol Robinson and Michael Fielding)
22. *Primary education: the physical environment.* Research survey 6/1 (Karl Wall, Julie Dockrell and Nick Peacey)
23. *Primary education: the professional environment.* Research survey 6/2 (Ian Stronach, Andy Pickard and Elizabeth Jones)
24. *Teachers and other professionals: training, induction and development.* Research survey 6/3 (Olwen McNamara, Mark Brundrett and Rosemary Webb)
25. *Teachers and other professionals: workforce management and reform.* Research survey 6/4 (Hilary Burgess)
26. *Parenting, caring and educating.* Research survey 7/1 (Yolande Muschamp, Felicity Wikeley, Tess Ridge and Maria Balarin)
27. *Children's lives outside school and their educational impact.* Research survey 8/1 (Berry Mayall)
28. *Primary schools and other agencies.* Research survey 8/2 (Ian Barron, Rachel Holmes, Maggie MacLure and Katherine Runswick-Cole)
29. *The structure and phasing of primary education: England and other countries.* Research survey 9/1 (Anna Eames and Caroline Sharp)
30. *Organising learning and teaching in primary schools: structure, grouping and transition.* Research survey 9/2 (Peter Blatchford, Susan Hallam, Judith Ireson, Peter Kutnick and Andrea Creech)
31. *The financing of primary education.* Research survey 10/1 (Philip Noden and Anne West)
32. *The governance, administration and control of primary education.* Research survey 10/2 (Maria Balarin and Hugh Lauder)



... children, their world, their education

The Primary Review is a wide-ranging independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England. It is supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, based at the University of Cambridge and directed by Robin Alexander. The Review was launched in October 2006 and aims to publish its final report in autumn 2008.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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