

Scoil Oilibhéir
Stakeholder
Consultation

Executive Summary

Beart de réir bhur mBriathar



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Scoil Oilibhéir commissioned the current stakeholder consultation with the aim of garnering insights into the opinions and deliberations of its primary stakeholders regarding the values, priorities, future direction and orientation of the school. The insights emerging from this stakeholder engagement work package will enable Scoil Oilibhéir to understand the needs, concerns and expectations of those most impacted by any decisions or actions taken.

The Scoil Oilibhéir (SO) stakeholder consultation exercise was carried out between June and September 2017. A comprehensive range of engagement methodologies (focus groups, interviews, online surveys) was utilised to engage SO stakeholders.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

Perceptions of SO staff members, gleaned from two focus group sessions carried out with 12 staff members, can be summarised according to a number of emergent themes. These include:

1. ***Punching Above Their Weight***: a distinct level of pride existed regarding the achievements and everyday functioning of the school despite its small size. This included sporting, musical and creative achievements, dedicated and committed staff and parents, strong academic credentials, limited disciplinary issues and ever expanding extracurricular activities on offer.
2. ***Defining the SO Community***: a need exists to balance the needs and demands of existing Gaeilgóir families in SO with desires to expand the use of the Irish language in Dublin 15 and thus enrol more limited, but enthusiastic and committed, new Irish speakers.
3. ***Geography of Influence***: a contrast was obvious between the internal and external reputation of the school manifesting in a close community feel once inside the school gates yet a perceived lack of connection with the wider Dublin 15 community. The positive, committed and upbeat atmosphere evident internally contrasts sharply with the perceived negative, elitist image held by some members of the wider community.
4. ***Equality in Enrolment***: the current enrolment policy was deemed largely unfair and exclusive, rarely reaching new families or new Irish speakers. The current parental 'interview' process was also deemed problematic and open to deception. The difficulty of objectively measuring family use of, and interest in, Gaeilge was noted, alongside an inability to compare parents at interview stage. Limited fresh intake is believed possible as places fill up quickly with existing sibling and the children of staff children.
5. ***The Diversity Divide***: a level of guilt existed around the current admissions process in terms of the limited multicultural diversity of SO. While socio-economic diversity was deemed to exist, there is a desire to move with wider community trends to include a greater cultural diversity in the school and further language enrichment in the local area.
6. ***Weighing up Expansion Opportunities***: simultaneous opportunities and threats were associated with expanding the school. Desires for increased pupil diversity and the creation of new Irish speaking families conflicted with fears over losing the small community feel of SO and enhancing the 'free loader' effect amongst parents and teachers on consideration of potential expansion. A desire to maintain the standards, atmosphere and ethos of SO in the future was obvious.
7. ***Openness to change***: a distinctive split was evident between the two staff focus groups conducted with a slightly different atmosphere evident in each particularly in terms of their levels of willingness to change and expand SO into the future.

Key themes revealed by a focus group carried out with the SO Board of Management include:

1. **Governing Pride:** numerous positives and strengths of SO were drawn out in the focus group discussion, centring on the small community feel of SO in a Dublin location and benefits this brings in terms of student discipline, parental commitment, positive atmosphere and a high standard of education.
2. **A Narrowing Diversity:** several members of the BoM lamented the past of SO when a strict enrolment policy was not as necessary and there was more flexibility in terms of student admissions (particularly including students from non-Irish speaking families who then thrived in the school and at the language). A distinct uneasiness was obvious concerning the elitist image that the school has gained of late as the diversity of its pupils has narrowed socioeconomically and geographically to a limited middle class, catchment area and number of parental professions.
3. **The Outsider In:** an initial perception of a closed and close SO community can bring negatives when joining the school from the outside, and indeed desire to enrol in SO (fear of a 'clique'). Experiences of being warmly integrated thereafter however suggest that the reality may be different.
4. **Who is the SO Community:** there was significant discussion amongst the BoM on the need to 'balance' two communities when considering the enrolment policy of SO: 1) the established Gaeilgóirs (in essence the current community); 2) new Irish speaking families/those with a passion to learn and commit to SO (the future, desired community for many). Balancing desires for a more multicultural and diverse pupil community but with the same commitment as previous parents and children will be essential to maintain and enhance established strengths of the school.
5. **Enrolment Frustration:** clear feelings of frustration, anger, guilt and uneasiness emerged regarding the current enrolment policy, with a clear unease amongst BoM participants as to the deciding criteria currently utilised. This is particularly heightened for this group as the evaluators and interviewers at the parental meeting stage, with members feeling like they often end up 'fighting for the parents' that they saw in interview and showcasing real disappointment and guilt for those that they cannot award a place to.
6. **Expansion Conflict:** desires to increase access to SO and move away from its elitist image conflict with longings to maintain the quality and calibre of the school, its pupils and parents. A more realistic perception however also emerged in the BoM group that growing the school to a double stream would not significantly dilute SO characteristics, reputation and atmosphere. A perception that there easily would be demand for 60 places while still maintaining committed students and parents facilitated this positive perception.
7. **Floating Religion:** the role of religion in the future of SO represented a significant point of contestation in the BoM priority ranking exercise, with an inability to reach consensus and assign an agreed positioning in a potential new mission statement. For some, religion is tied by, and bound to, the school's current Catholic ethos and responsibility to patrons, with significant doubts over whether this is up for debate in the future. For others, questions remained over the role of religion in framing all of the school's activities. Agreement nevertheless existed that a pastoral care element is important to the future of the school and any new mission statement, tied to the wellbeing of the child as opposed to religion.
8. **A Focus on the Child:** bringing the focus back to the individual child achieving their highest and fullest potential (academically, socially, pastorally and creatively) was given priority in BoM discussions. While there is a lack of desire to judge the child at enrolment phases, the issue of parents being judged at interviews was contentious, particular when some are believed to 'hire' Irish-speaking friends and other relatives to complete this phase. The need for a robust enrolment policy and assessment criteria must not be underestimated in this regard.

Key themes revealed by an online survey carried out with 44 past pupils include:

1. **An Environment for Holistic Growth:** the small size of the school was a positive factor for the past pupils who felt it instilled a feeling of community and togetherness with close relationships developed between all pupils and all teachers. Past pupils felt this facilitated a better learning environment and the provision of excellent pastoral care. Many of the past pupils spoke highly of dedicated teachers that were viewed as going above and beyond their roles to provide a holistic education and a caring, supportive and nurturing environment for the students to learn and develop.
2. **Cultivating a Love of Irish:** past pupils spoke positively about the focus on the Irish language and culture within the school. They were enthusiastic that they had developed a fluency in Irish and a passion for the language as well as mentioning several additional benefits which came with being bilingual. This included a higher level of personal confidence, greater ability to learn additional languages, and having a headstart on the secondary school Irish curriculum. Others made mention to the extra-curricular activities and cultural opportunities that they experienced through the school. It was evident that these past students were still appreciative of the opportunities they were exposed to through SO.
3. **Pride in a 'Highly Regarded' School:** 79.5% of the past pupil surveyed felt that SO had a positive reputation in the wider community. It was evident that past pupils felt a distinct pride in having attended the school; they felt that SO was perceived as having an excellent reputation in the wider community and was in high demand amongst parents for enrolling their children.
4. **Conserve the Community, Language and Culture:** looking towards the future, many of the past pupils expressed their wish for the school to continue as they had remembered it: with an emphasis placed on the Irish language and culture, and to retain the small, community feeling of the school.

Key themes revealed by an online survey carried out with 97 current and past parents of SO include:

1. **Overwhelming Positivity:** parents in this sample were extremely positive about SO in general and their experiences of sending their child(ren) to the school. Parents hugely appreciated that SO enabled their children to learn their native language in an immersive way. Parents felt that SO had helped to ignite a passion and love of the Irish language in their children and also a deeper appreciation of their Irish culture and heritage. Parents referenced a knock-on positive attitude and increased Irish usage within the wider family as a result of a child attending the school. Parents praised the emphasis within the school on the holistic development of their child. They felt that their children's self-confidence, emotional well-being and personal development were improved through the activities on offer in the school and the care shown to them by the staff, who were viewed as going above and beyond their professional obligations.
2. **Community of Partnerships:** parents commented on the special and unique atmosphere in SO – a strong community spirit was clearly evident. Parents were very appreciative of the social integration and involvement of the whole family into the SO community, not just the child. Further fuelling this community feel, many parents referenced what they felt were the many close partnerships which existed within the school including partnerships between the different children in the school (irrespective of age or class); between the children and staff (irrespective of their position as class teacher or not); between the staff and the parents and between the parents themselves (who were all viewed to work together for the best outcomes for the children).
3. **Parents as Key Contributors:** on the whole, parents spoke positively about the strong ethos of parental involvement in SO activities. Parents' voluntary work and help were viewed as

having a central role in ensuring the effective functioning of SO, particularly given the size of the school. Parents were extremely positive about helping out and on the whole found it to be a rewarding experience, enjoying taking part in school events and using them as an opportunity to develop their own Irish. Many parents also found it to be rewarding for their children who they felt enjoyed seeing their parents involved in the school, whilst they also felt it set a good example for them. Some minor tension was evident where some parents indicated that they felt at times it was difficult to integrate with other parents because of perceived 'cliques' and 'closed shops'.

4. **Parental Language Skills:** a major concern aired by parents related to a parental language barrier. Where parents' felt their Irish was not of a high enough standard, this was noted as a challenge as it was perceived to prevent them from integrating fully into the school community. This included at a practical level in terms of helping children with their homework, and a social level in terms of making friends, integrating into the community, and helping out at school activities.
5. **'Local' Community?:** parents felt SO played a role in the local geographical community, but that it could not be argued as 'central' given the sheer size and demographic of the larger Dublin 15 area. Concerns also related to the fact that students attending SO came from many different areas (including outside Dublin 15) and it was unknown what parish the school was technically a part of. The school was viewed to have had established good links with the local community through involvement particularly in local charities and sports organizations.
6. **Mixed Feelings on Expansion:** for many parents, the small, personal, community feel of the school was an enormous positive and contributed to the unique atmosphere perceived. For some parents, the current one-stream system was viewed positively – it facilitated the development of a close-knit community and provided better opportunities to the children at all levels of development (educational, emotional, and social). For other parents, it was felt that SO should expand and provide more places in order to meet the high demand.
7. **Mixed Feelings on Reputation:** parents largely felt that SO was viewed positively in the wider community as being a good school with an excellent reputation for high standards and in high demand by parents seeking a place for their children. There was concern amongst a number of parents that the known difficulty in securing a place in SO had led to negative perceptions and attitudes amongst the wider community. Parents feared that SO was perceived by some as exclusive and elitist; a closed shop and virtually impossible to gain access unless parents have a strong level of Irish.
8. **Mixed Feelings on the Enrolment Policy:** most parents found the enrolment process to be a generally positive experience however the stress associated with the enrolment interview was a sentiment echoed by many. A number of parents indicated that they found the enrolment process to be subjective and the margins between getting a place and not getting a place were viewed as arbitrary. The majority of parents were happy to maintain the current policy – some felt the interview was the best way to ensure the commitment of parents to raising their children through Irish. However, many parents also raised concerns that interview component of the enrolment process did not serve the principles of inclusivity and fairness – it was felt that a parent's (low) level of fluency in Irish was not necessarily an indicator of their commitment to and enthusiasm for the language.
9. **Inclusivity versus Integrity of the Irish Language:** many parents indicated that they would like the enrolment policy to better facilitate the children of current non-Irish speakers or weak Irish speakers to access the School. A number of parents reflected their belief that unless we expand the Irish language to 'new' families and current non-speakers, then the language will never grow. However, other parents noted contradictions between ensuring an ethos of inclusivity and serving the Irish language and the existing Irish-speaking community: SO was

viewed as having a mandate to serve and promote and grow the Irish language, and this meant ensuring current Irish speakers were accommodated.

Key themes revealed by an online survey carried out with 94 parents and prospective parents in the wider community include:

1. **Applications, not Interviews:** with regard to enrolment policies for schools, parents and prospective parents from the wider community preferred an application form and that priority be given to eldest applications. Least favoured elements included an interview with the child and a lottery system approach. Contradicting the enrolment policy of SO, interviews with the parents was not high on the list of preferred options for this sample.
2. **Largely Positive Perception of SO, with some Negativity:** 76.3% of the sample had previously heard of SO, indicating a reasonably high awareness of the school amongst the participant sample. Of these participants, 44.1% rated their general perception of SO as 'positive' and only 4.3% rated their perception of SO as 'negative'. Respondents perceived a friendly, open and community atmosphere in SO and spoke of hearing positive experiences and stories from friends and relatives about the ethos and high standards in the school. A perception existed that while it is an excellent school, it is impossible to get your child into it. It was believed that parents had to have excellent Irish and undertake significant preparations in order to secure a place for their child. There was also a more outwardly negative perception evident amongst a minority of the sample that enrolment to SO was dictated by connections, and that the school was elitist and non-inclusive.
3. **Unsuccessful, Stressful Interviews:** 23.7% of the sample had previously (unsuccessfully) applied to SO. Several participants felt it was a stressful experience, particularly the Irish language interview. A few respondents who had put in significant efforts in preparation felt particularly aggrieved. Some parents were outwardly in disagreement with the interview process.
4. **Applying to SO is a Futile Endeavor:** parents indicated they were put off applying to SO by a perceived requirement that they needed to have strong Irish language skills themselves in order to secure a place and to integrate into the school / support their child. Several of the participants indicated their interest in sending their child to SO, but were put off by the low probability of securing a place and the amount of work which would need to be put in (perceived to be in vain).

Overall, feedback from the stakeholders on their involvement in this consultation was largely positive, with the majority delighted that their voices were heard and the BoM praised for their progressive and proactive approach to transparent and ethical-based decision making. The consultation also acted as an opportunity for stakeholders to pause, reflect and deliberate on their opinions and consider the issues raised in a meaningful way. While generalisations cannot be made that the views held by the sample respondents will apply to all stakeholders (particularly all parents and past pupils), the results provide an insight into the range of attitudes and feelings stakeholders have regarding SO. It also enables an understanding of the different perspectives across different stakeholder groups and uncovers the motivations and factors which underpin their beliefs. Insights can now be brought forward to the next phase of SO Strategy Development where concrete actions and decisions will be made with due consideration of the views obtained. Above all, this consultation has allowed SO to listen to and understand its' wide range of stakeholders, enabling more evidence-based, ethical and inclusive decision-making for the future.

