



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Viability Audit and Area Plans

7 November 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Trevor Lunn
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Mr Jim Clarke	Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
Mr Gavin Boyd	Belfast Education and Library Board
Mr Shane McCurdy	North Eastern Education and Library Board
Mr Gregory Butler	South Eastern Education and Library Board
Mr Mike Donaghy	Southern Education and Library Board
Dr Clare Mangan	Western Education and Library Board

The Chairperson: You are very welcome. We have with us Jim Clarke, the chief executive of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), Mr Gavin Boyd, the acting chief executive of the Belfast Education and Library Board, Mr Gregory Butler, chief executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board, Clare Mangan, chief executive of the Western Education and Library Board, Shane McCurdy, chief executive of the North Eastern Education and Library Board, and Mike Donaghy, head of development planning and support services at the Southern Education and Library Board, because, as we know, unfortunately, we still do not have a board as far as members are concerned in that area. We are delighted that everybody is here. Thank you for making the effort. I know that it was a huge effort for you to come here today, and it is appreciated. I want to place on record our appreciation to you for doing that. It may be that you want to individually make some comments or you might want to just go into questions. Does anybody want to start?

Mr Shane McCurdy (North Eastern Education and Library Board): I will make a few opening comments on behalf of all the chief executives. The Minister commenced the process back in September 2011. It set a fairly aggressive timescale for bringing forward area plans for both post-primary and primary education by March and June 2012. The initial process of that was focused on the viability audit. That was a gathering together, across all sectors, at a point in time, of public information in relation to all schools in the three areas included in the viability audit. Following on from that, we have worked across all the sectors to bring forward a comprehensive position in terms of

potential opportunities for area planning in relation to all the sectors being brought in a comprehensive single document. The post-primary consultation started in July and has just concluded. We are presently considering the detail of the responses to that. We are here at your behest to understand what you want to find out about the viability audit and the area planning process that has flowed from that. We are very happy to take your questions in that regard, collectively or individually.

The Chairperson: Thank you. In terms of the comments and the paper that we received today from Professor Tony Gallagher, whose services the Committee has engaged to give assistance and input to the Committee trying to understand where this whole process is taking us to, have the area plans been able to merge the twin-track approach that has been out there for some time? Obviously, you have the work that was carried out by the Commission for Catholic Education, and you have the viability audit. As I read through all the area-planning reports from the boards, I sometimes wonder whether the concept is interpreted as meaning different things to different people at different times and in different places. How, I wonder, will we ever get one area plan? Perhaps we should have had representatives from the Commission for Catholic Education here, because it will also have a particular view on some things. However, from your point of view as chief executives of the boards and CCMS, have we been able to create an area plan that will merge the boards and enable us to present the Minister with a snapshot or an overview of what the area provision will be in those locations? Does anybody wish to raise their head above the parapet to answer that question?

Mr McCurdy: I will start, again, Mervyn. We recognise each board's historical position, the provision that is there and the work that is ongoing across sectors and authorities to plan for the future. This changed focus by moving us out of the individual management authority roles into a cohesive, comprehensive, intersectoral plan, but sectors differ because of their demography, geography, facilities and buildings and the schools that are there.

As Tony said, to varying degrees, there has been some indication of a coming together in some sectors to look at options for the future. I think that that is not the case in other areas, but colleagues will have their own comments on that. There is a challenge because, at this point, each of the management authorities represents its own specific identities, be they the controlled, maintained, voluntary grammar, Irish-medium or integrated sectors. In that sense, if you are seeking cross-sectoral provision in an area, you must have all the various parties to that proposal signed up to coming together to do whatever is necessary to bring it about. Certainly, at a personal level, I found that one of the challenges with the Department was that we had to operate within the existing management types. So, if there were different management types coming together in that context, we were not able to create yet another version that was all-inclusive. It had to be one or the other.

The Chairperson: Let me give one example, which I will ask the acting chief executive of the Belfast Board and Jim Clarke from CCMS to comment on. The Belfast area plan lists all the schools and all the actions that will have to be taken. It states that the commission is going to do some work; the CCMS is going to do some work; and the board is going to do some work. It is an absolute patchwork quilt. It includes this comment on one school:

"CCMS have progressed a consultation on the closure of St Gemma's by September 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter subject to guaranteed access for current pupils to Catholic post-primary education in the project area."

As far as those comments are concerned, there is no thought of an area plan. It emphasises the continuation of what we have always had, although it may not come under the name of that particular school. So, area planning is not being considered in the way that was envisaged, and shared education seems to be something separate, because the document continues:

"The trustees will continue to keep the issue of Co-education across all schools in the area under review."

But you will keep it under review only after you have decided what to do "subject to guaranteed access". I am not picking this out because it happens to come out of one sector. The phrase that jumped out at me was "guaranteed access". How can we have an area plan that is inclusive and that is based, as the Minister said, on having shared education as one of the options, when one board has said that it will close a school or do whatever it is going to do by 2013, yet those pupils will have to have "guaranteed access" to the same type of educational provision?

Mr Jim Clarke (Council for Catholic Maintained Schools): I do not see what the contradiction is, Chair.

The Chairperson: Jim, the contradiction is that it is a continuation of the same.

Mr J Clarke: No, it is not. It is about offering the choice that is currently there and ensuring that there are sufficient numbers in schools in that area to continue to provide that choice. It also allows parents to make choices —

The Chairperson: Jim, with respect, it does not offer the choice. It is continuing with the same. The document states that pupils must be guaranteed a particular type of education. There is no choice.

Mr J Clarke: It is only on the basis of parents making a choice that that option continues to be available. Parents can make their own choices and take whatever decisions they wish, but they must have the option to be able to make that choice. I do not see the contradiction.

The Chairperson: On that point, what process is being put in place to give parents the opportunity to say that they prefer option A, B, C or D?

Mr J Clarke: Parents can make those choices in relation to a consultation and express their views. The decisions in relation to that consultation have yet to be taken. Parents are perfectly free to make individual choices about their children's education. What you have quoted will simply ensure that that choice continues to be available to those pupils who are currently at St Gemma's.

The Chairperson: Gavin, do you want to comment on the board's overall view?

Mr Gavin Boyd (Belfast Education and Library Board): I will give you the perspective that the board had when it put the document together. The board had the responsibility to pull the document together and a particular responsibility in relation to controlled schools. I regard the document as a statement of where we are at this time, but it recognises the responsibilities of the different managing authorities to bring forward proposals for the various sectors.

Belfast is slightly unusual. We have not only the controlled and maintained sectors but the one large Irish-medium post-primary school, which, effectively, makes up the Irish-medium post-primary sector in Belfast, and a disproportionately large number of voluntary grammar schools, which, effectively, are their own managing authority. The document, unapologetically, reproduces the Commission for Catholic Education's document in relation to Belfast schools word for word. That was part of pulling the process together. The board has a particular responsibility for planning the controlled estate going forward.

I am very struck by what I see going on on the ground and the number of schools that I go into where I find that there are pupils from other schools attending classes, whether that is sixth form provision in a Catholic managed grammar school for children from the controlled school down the road or vice versa. I see that in non-selective schools as well. There is a significant amount of activity going on on the ground. It does not attract any great publicity. However, schools are clearly engaging in the best interests of individual pupils.

The Chairperson: I would be interested to get a general snapshot from each of the boards, across the piece. Obviously, you have to submit your final proposals or area plans — whatever title we give them — by 7 December. The Minister has said that you have to assess or reassess all the responses that you receive. Let us go back to the viability audits: the viability audits went out, they came back, and when the Department looked at them, it said, "Oh dear, these are not what they should be." There was a bit of a ding-dong between you and the Minister. The viability audits went back out again and were eventually resubmitted. Do you see there being a problem when you submit your final proposals or area plans to the Minister? Will they match whatever the Department's intention is or whatever it wants out of the process?

Someone's mobile phone or iPad is causing interference. It is not mine. Thank you.

Mr Boyd: I will kick off from the perspective of the Belfast Board. Our job is to produce documentation based on the guidance that we have been given. It is not to come to any specific predetermined outcome. One of the obvious points that has been made clear to us in Belfast is that populations shift

over time. Even if populations do not shift, populations get older in particular areas. That means that provision has to change. One of the great benefits that we have had out of this exercise is in plotting where every child who attends a school in the city lives. We have identified some interesting trends out of that, which will be very useful for planning for the future. For example, you will have seen in the post-primary documentation that the majority of children who attend selective schools in the city live outside the city and travel into the city. That is a representation of how the population has shifted over some time, and that is a consideration that we, or they, will have to take into account for the future. In non-selective schools, we can see that very, very high proportions of children who attend non-selective schools in the city live in the city. Populations are moving around. I doubt very much whether, at the end of this exercise, we will produce a final document that can be worked to over the next 20 years. I suspect that what we will have is a starting reference point for an organic exercise that will continue to be developed annually.

Mr Gregory Butler (South Eastern Education and Library Board): Area planning is a journey not a destination, and it is important to think in that context. I have been fortunate to be involved in area planning in two geographical areas that are very different. It has given me a unique insight into the particular difficulties and differences between those two areas. When I was looking at the Southern Board, 98% of the people who I was talking about were within the direct control of the Southern Education and Library Board because we have very little leakage outside its area. The South Eastern Board, for example, loses 3,500 pupils into Belfast. The percentage of pupils who live in areas that we plan for is very different, so there are two very different approaches there.

Also, the state of readiness of where people are at is very different. In an area such as the Southern Board, we are able to plan because we have been doing it for a considerable number of years with fairly detailed information for the very reason that I mentioned that we were in control of 98% of the pupils in the area. The variance in the South Eastern Board and the Belfast Board relates to the population changes. As grammar schools in the Belfast area have a decreasing population to pull on, they draw more people in from the South Eastern and North Eastern Board areas. We have an evolving picture that is very different, so planning is very different in those two scenarios.

In a letter accompanying our report, we said that the aim of the SEELB plan is to stimulate discussion and debate. One of the big pluses of the viability audit and the area-planning process to date is that it has got discussion going and got people examining options that they would not have considered even a number of years ago. It has raised public awareness, and that is what I meant about it being a journey. Different people have different starting points on the journey, and different people have different end points to the journey when they reach the end.

With the Department, we have to look at what the purpose of the plan is. For me, the purpose is that we end up with the best education in the proper place, delivering it in particular ways. The problems in the Southern Board area were of population and money. In the South Eastern Board area, because of the drift to Belfast, academic performance in a number of schools is a bigger issue. It is not possible to have a one-size-fits-all approach, because we are dealing with very different parameters across Northern Ireland, to do with the geographical make-up and the make-up of the schools. That is why I say that it is a journey rather than a destination. We will each start at different points and move to different points, and our pace will be different as well. I hope that, when the Minister receives it, he will acknowledge that that is the case.

Dr Clare Mangan (Western Education and Library Board): I will make three points. It has been important to emphasise that the Western Education and Library Board is very aware of the geographical diversity of the board, so, within any area-planning framework, the very specific local needs must be given consideration as part of this process. The Western Board has been very keen to promote sectoral engagement as part of the area-planning process, and that is reflected in the range of sectoral bodies that were part of the Western Board's working group. I will reinforce a point made by one of my colleagues: this is not an end point; this is a process of engagement, and we fully expect that there is a need for continuing engagement well after any closing date. The third aspect of it is that the final area plan itself will be subject to review, because we are aware of changes in demography every few years in terms of where pupils are located. Therefore, I do not think that it is a one-variable issue. It is about being sensitive to the range of variables that impact on the issue at any one given moment in time.

Mr Mike Donaghy (Southern Education and Library Board): I offer the apologies of Tony Murphy, the chief executive of the Southern Board, who is unable to be here this morning.

I endorse what colleagues around the table have said about this being a process. The Southern Board was engaged in discussion and consultation with schools long before 5 July when the area plans were published and will continue to be in discussion and consultation with schools after the final area plan is published. Any proposals arising from the area plan will be subject to the statutory process of a development proposal, which involves specific public consultation on individual proposals — statutory consultation over two months — and a decision by the Minister at the end of the day. This is a point in time in a process, not an end in itself.

Mr J Clarke: Your first question, in many respects, poses a question about the forward arrangements for the Education and Skills Authority (ESA). You have five area boards with different perspectives doing things in different ways. The Catholic maintained sector, working with the commission over the past number of years on the post-primary review, was working as a regional body across all of those five boards and seeing the differences. Tony Gallagher pointed out another difference, which is that the position of the Catholic sector is very much to move away from academic selection. That is less clear across the boards. It is not off the agenda, but it is certainly less clear. The outcomes you get in a selective and a non-selective system will be different. However, the key issue is that it is an iterative process. Some schools are simply not capable of surviving with their current numbers and the resources that they have to deliver the curriculum. We need to take that into account. The key objective in all this should be to ensure that all children have access to a viable education that meets their needs going into the future. The curriculum is really the starting point. The question you must ask is this: are we capable of providing a curriculum that meets those needs and will continue to meet those needs into the future? That is the principle of viability.

The other issue — again, I reiterate what Gregory and some of other chief executives said — is that this is an iterative process. The viability audit was a transparent exercise that simply put on the table information that all of us have used over many years. The post-primary review in the Catholic sector was not produced without access to data and without an interpretation of that data, both as it stands and as it might be affected into the future. The point about demographics is that there are some areas of Northern Ireland where there is a demographic decline, and there are other areas where there is a demographic increase, and we can see that going into the future. The unpredictability of that, perhaps, applies more to the primary sector. However, through this exercise, we are attempting to involve people in a wider range of thinking. You made reference to some schools taking this as a schools defence. We are asking people to do something that is not natural to them in our governance arrangement as it is presently constituted, where a board of governors is, by and large, appointed to one school with the focus on that school. Similarly, the principal is appointed to that school. In this process, we are asking people to take a wider and more strategic view. The point that Tony made about the importance of seeing the contribution that any individual school can make to the community is very important. So, there are a number of strands that we need to look at. We will continue to gather all the information that was in the viability audit. Whether it is put into the public domain in the way that it was through the viability audit is a matter for the Department of Education. However, all that information will be gathered again, and it will be interpreted and inputted to any process that is ongoing from the area-planning process.

Mr McCurdy: The only thing I want to add is that, in any area-planning process, we are constrained by the facilities that we have. We have heard discussion and debate around surplus capacity, spare places and such things, but some of the consideration that may be given to opportunities to reconfigure in a certain area will be dependent on the availability of capital development to facilitate the accommodation of a changed profile of pupils. Even if you have something that is academically curriculum based for the betterment of the educational opportunities for the children, that, in itself, cannot be done as of today because, in some instances, the facilities are not there to facilitate that. So, it is about recognising that, in an area-planning context, there is the need to change with capital investment. As we know, capital investment is constrained. Therefore, it constrains the opportunities and the time frames on which some changes can be brought forward. Again, the viability audit raises issues without any ability necessarily to bring about a solution in a time frame because of the capital facilities that exist as well.

The Chairperson: We could go so many places today, because there are so many issues. With regard to the whole issue of capital, Jim has raised the issue of trying to link all this with the debate around academic selection. Clearly, in your sector, Jim, you have been very unsuccessful in convincing your schools on the way that you should move. Maybe that is why the boards have decided to let it sit. Clearly, an ongoing debate has to be held inside the maintained sector around that issue.

Mr J Clarke: That might be your view, Chairman, but I disagree, and some members around the table might also disagree.

The Chairperson: Well, the facts speak for themselves.

Mr J Clarke: Indeed they do.

The Chairperson: I am not trying to pre-empt what you are going to send to the Minister, but what has the response been? We have heard all sorts of figures. In my board area — I declare an interest — some schools were very good at putting in responses, and I have no doubt that a huge number of responses have been sent to the North Eastern Education and Library Board, but what has been the response from schools and individuals? Do we have a snapshot of the total responses there have been right across each of the board areas?

Mr Boyd: From a Belfast perspective, we have received almost 3,800 responses. We have not analysed those responses yet, and those range from responses from individuals to responses from the teacher unions. There has been a wide range of responses. We have not analysed them all, but I suspect that, contained in those 3,800 responses, there are a few campaigns that I am aware of, and that is fine, where some individual schools have mobilised support.

I listened carefully to some of the earlier discussion about the size of schools, and I hear members' concerns about large schools in Belfast. Typically, we have a number of large schools, and I can tell you that a number of those schools have written in and asked that their size be increased. I think that members would be satisfied that, in their cases, there is no question about the quality of education that is being delivered in those institutions. That is just a practical reflection of budgetary pressures that individual schools are facing at the minute. The fact of the matter is that, in many cases, it is not that difficult to put an extra one, two or three children into a classroom. The same teacher can deliver to a slightly bigger group. That is just a very quick reflection, but we have had many and varied responses, particularly reflecting the fact that we have a number of very long-established voluntary schools that have their own very clear views on how their future should be determined.

Mr Butler: We have had just short of 1,300 responses — 1,281 responses — which we are currently analysing. One of the interesting points, which you highlighted earlier, is that the Nimby scenario — not in my back yard — comes into play quite often. Everybody wants change, but they do not want it to occur in their location. Surprisingly, there are a number of areas where we have seen support for the concepts of what we are trying to do as opposed to the detail. We talked about getting debate and discussion going. People are recognising the need for change, and they are recognising where they want to get to. There may be some discussion about the methodology to get between A and B, but, in a large part of the discussion that we have had, people have actually acknowledged that there is a need for change. For me, that was the big thrust of where we were going with the viability audit. It was to get people to recognise that there was a need for change. In any change, the starting point is an acceptance that there is another way through. We are now looking at how we can explore that over the next period of time.

Mr McCurdy: I was going to ask Mike to comment collectively, but I am certainly conscious that the North Eastern Board has had some 22,000 responses to date. I think that that reflects the chairman's own knowledge of certain degrees of representation that have been received directly.

The Chairperson: I think that the other boards are going to have to get back out and do the process all over again. Are we using the Manhattan system to determine that? If it goes to the Department, will it be 15,000? Sorry, I am being facetious; apologies for that. So, 22,000.

Mr McCurdy: It is 22,000 to the North Eastern Board, but I am conscious that there might be one or two very specific lobbying activities going on there.

The Chairperson: Yes, I am aware of one or two of those. I declare an interest, but I was not totally responsible for all of that.

Mr Donaghy: If the Chair is happy, I can give an overview from the area planning working group meeting that took place yesterday.

The Chairperson: That would be very useful, yes.

Mr Donaghy: The total number of responses to questionnaires in all boards was just over 22,000. There are a further 24,000 of what we described as petitions or lobbies, which could be signed pieces of paper from individual schools. We are looking at in excess of 47,000 responses in total across the five boards. The meeting yesterday looked specifically at how we will analyse those across the five boards in order to adopt a common approach and look at common themes and emerging themes from the responses, so that we are able to provide individual board reports, following a common format, to the Minister by the time agreed.

The Chairperson: If you take 47,000, there is a huge amount of work that has to be done between now and then. Let us be realistic. We have all set political deadlines that have not worked for a variety of reasons. Are we really working to a realistic time frame on this? I know that the boards have been decimated since 2006 because of the vacancy control. There are all the practical issues that you have to deal with in continuing to deliver services for all the schools in Northern Ireland. Are you concerned that you will have the capacity within your boards to be able to analyse and pull together in a meaningful way a fair, accurate reflection of what is being said, and then respond by 7 December?

I think that I have got the answer. *[Laughter.]* Thank you for that. Normally, in the Committee, silence is consent, so I assume that the same applies to witnesses.

Mr Donaghy: I will comment from my board's point of view. We can provide a report by 7 December. However, the issues, themes and proposals emerging from the consultation that would inform that report must also inform the final area plan that the Southern Board would wish to put forward. We need to look at the outcomes of the consultation in order to determine whether those are going to significantly alter what was in our draft area plan that went out for consultation. So, there are two aspects to it: providing a report on what we actually got; and then deciding and determining how or whether that influences what is in the final area plan.

The Chairperson: Can I ask this of Jim? I have read through all the reports on our own board area, and I see that there is a consultation on school A, for instance. I will not name the school, and I should not have done so earlier; I apologise for that. I see that there are consultations on school A and school B. Those are ongoing, and they will not be concluded until December 2013 or February, whenever. How can the boards respond in a collective way, if this is to be the two organisations, the boards and CCMS, coming together to take an holistic approach, when there is still work being done in CCMS and the commission?

Mr J Clarke: And, I suspect, in other areas as well.

The Chairperson: Yes, even in the boards.

Mr J Clarke: Yes. This is an iterative process. We will make some progress, because we have sufficient information on a particular area; we have a range of options that have led to a conclusion. One of the things that is often said about this process is that we have already made up our mind and that the decision is obvious. In many respects, that is people applying their own common sense and logic. They have looked at the evidence and said that there is only one solution, and that just happens to be the solution that, perhaps, emerges. In some areas you have the potential to move forward quickly to a reorganisation that will be sustainable into the future.

Shane made an important point about the availability of capital. Some of the solutions might not be available without some kind of capital investment, so we need that issue to be addressed. We also need to recognise that successful systems have characteristics to them, and that is where looking beyond Northern Ireland is important. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) research states that a social mix is one of the most important characteristics for successful outcomes for education for the entire community. In many areas, we have to look at how we can achieve that mix.

This is a very important aspect of the coming together of the commission's post-primary review process. When that exercise was conducted, it would have been inappropriate for the Catholic sector to have made proposals that would have affected other schools; therefore they were not part of it. This second process has allowed us to engage with the boards and others to look at other possibilities. We have looked at it in your area, Chairman. We have also looked at it in Crumlin, Fermanagh and Ballycastle — although there has been a long history of collaboration in Ballycastle.

There are options. I do not think that we will have a complete area plan. This is a kind of domino effect: when you make a change in one place, it has an effect elsewhere. The purpose of area planning is to see how all those parts can be organised to be sustainable and yet connected to the rest of the system.

Mr Boyd: I want to back that up. Gregory and I are meeting the East Belfast Partnership on Friday morning to talk about education provision in east Belfast. The more we look at it, the more we realise that it reaches across to Dundonald and round the dual carriageway, so it goes across the board boundary. We will be co-operating for the foreseeable future to work with the community to see whether we can find solutions for the wider east Belfast community.

The Chairperson: Jim said that it would be inappropriate for the Catholic sector to comment on the other sector. You heard the earlier discussion. There is a real frustration. It is a real issue, which the Minister is going to have to deal with. The nettle has to be grasped. It seems as though the FE colleges have fallen off the end of the earth. Jim and CCMS may take the view that it is inappropriate for CCMS to comment on other schools, but every one of the schools involved in the area process depends to a lesser or greater degree on further education and higher education colleges with regard to the delivery of the entitlement framework. Earlier, I quoted from comments by colleges who feel as though they have been "ignored". That is their word. How can the system have any sense of comfort that there is a genuine attempt to resolve problems if one of the elements that is helping to address and deliver services in the current system is being ignored? I went through the board's presentation and there is scant comment at most to the work and collaboration of FE colleges. How are we going to resolve that? I asked the Minister one day in the House and he said that I must have been a fly on the wall — a pretty big bluebottle, probably, being swatted — because he said that he and Minister Farry had met that day. That was only a few weeks ago and this process has been ongoing. We have these plans and it just seems as though, yet again, here we go, no connect, yet there will be an impact.

Mr J Clarke: The FE colleges do have a role to play.

The Chairperson: Not according to these plans, Jim, it would seem.

Mr J Clarke: You have to see this from a number of perspectives. Area planning was, essentially, planning for schools. You can provide schools, but you can then provide additionality, if you like, to access elements of the curriculum through FE colleges. In many respects, some schools, although engaging with FE colleges, may not have felt it necessary to put that into their input into our post-primary review process.

There is another point. In many respects, we started out at a disadvantage in the school sector with the entitlement framework, in that the range of applied subjects and courses available was quite limited. The easy point of access to some of those was through FE colleges. However, FE colleges were expensive and a significant draw on the budget of a school. Had it not been for the additional resource provided by the Department, many of those courses would simply never have been funded.

There is a genuine question to be asked about the costs, appropriateness and quality of some of the courses provided by FE. Many schools have made judgements on that over the past number of years; in many cases, it has been a very positive judgement, in other cases less so. However, area planning for a school system is to achieve sustainable schools.

Sustainable schools are there to provide access to the curriculum. Therefore schools should be free to make whatever connections they have in area learning communities with other schools, FE colleges or training organisations. Although there may not be a big headline for FE in some of these reports, the potential for FE to play a significant role is still there but at a curricular rather than reorganisational level.

Mr Boyd: FE provision has changed over the years. Ten years ago, there was a great deal of repeat provision in FE for young people having another go at GCSEs or A levels. Since the introduction of the FE Means Business strategy, provision in FE colleges has changed, so there is not as much duplication. That means, however, that the offer from FE fits in very much with the entitlement framework.

I take Jim's view that area planning should be read on the basis that schools are, in my experience, working effectively with FE colleges to draw down the courses that FE colleges are delivering well and

correctly and which they should be delivering; whereas schools are focusing on the stuff that schools should be delivering, and delivering well. I would be interested to see some of the FE comments, but perhaps the FE sector working with schools is being taken as read in many areas.

The Chairperson: We have been waiting for years for a 14-to-19 policy. Honestly, we have just no idea where it is at. It is out there somewhere in the ether but has never been pulled down and put onto the ground. You talk about repeat provision — you have repeat provision for the simple reason that whenever the Department decided to go down the road of the entitlement framework, it was asking schools that had historically done academic or vocational to do something else that they had not necessarily done but which was being provided by the FE colleges. So, you had that strange amalgam coming out and that is part and parcel of the problem.

That is why I asked in the House yesterday, and I am very disappointed that the Minister has refused to suspend the removal of the funding for FE and the entitlement framework until we get the review of Sir Bob Salisbury and an idea as to where we are going. However, it seems as though it is full steam ahead and remove the funding. What will happen is that you remove the funding, all the entitlement framework will come out of FE colleges and back into schools, and we will be back to square one again. That is not good for our pupils, especially from the 14-to-19 perspective.

Mr Kinahan: I am not sure where to start, but thank you very much.

You may say that I am wrong, but, to go back to what you said at the beginning, Shane, it seems that without an overall plan or long-term strategy you were not able to create a group to pull everything together. Do we now have a group? Is there something that the Committee should be wishing for to make your job of pulling this together easier? It is not just area planning that will be affected; it is the ESA and everything else coming through. Is there something we should be doing as a Committee, or something that we should be pushing for, to make it easier, because there are so many things getting involved in this? That is my first question.

The second comes down to the consultation, which we have been pushing all the way through. Each board has done its consultation probably slightly differently, with different time schedules. Is there something that we should be pushing for to get better consultation, because the teachers and parents whom I see do not really know or fully understand what is coming? Each board has done it differently. I know how you did it in our patch, and I am very grateful for that, because we all understood it. How do we get the consultation down to the bottom so that everyone knows what is going on and gets involved? What do we have to push for? A statutory time limit seems wrong and gives the impression that the consultation is just enforcing a decision that has already been made, which, as we heard from Jim, is not necessarily the case.

Lastly, looking at the numbers and empty places, which we talked about before, I want to know whether we are going down the wrong line. Does the cost of having a few empty places, as Trevor said, matter? A decent number of empty places should be had for flexibility. Should we be weighing that up against the actual cost of the change that we are forcing on the system? Are we right to concentrate on numbers in that way?

Mr McCurdy: A broad range of issues is covered in all those areas. The first relates to group participation and coherence. From the initiation in September 2011, it has been about bringing the various sectors, management authorities and representative bodies together to try to get coherence. We are conscious that any change requires the management authorities responsible for the individual schools party to that change to be agreeable to the change coming forward. Mike referred to development proposals. If that was going to be cross-sectoral, any development proposals must have the consent of the various management authorities being party to them. If you do not have that, you cannot bring forward that proposal of change. I suppose that, in trying to be creative in giving consideration to the possibility of potential reconfiguration, as we were encouraged to be, it is about how we seek to address that aspect of cross-sectoral development proposals.

On the engagement process, I am conscious of the intensity in officer time, certainly in our board, and the approach that we took, which was to embark upon a widespread consultation exercise with principals, chairs of governors and members of boards of governors. I fully take on board, though, that the broader community — particularly parents, but also staff in the schools that are under consideration — is a key component of gaining an understanding of the issues and being able to assess objectively what is in the best interests of the education provision in an area. I am not sure yet whether that is fully understood by parents and staff. There has been, as a consequence of the works

in September 2011, a much greater awareness at the public level of certain issues, but I am not sure whether they fundamentally understand what may be at the core. People react by showing their loyalty to the school that they chose and want to continue into the future.

Empty places are a by-product of how we reconfigure education provision in an area and the curriculum to ensure that every child experiences a good educational opportunity. Statistics and demographics are factors, and circumstances change over time. We try to ensure that there is approximately 10% flexibility in our planning assumptions for any individual facility. That is to give cognisance to changes that can occur. The correlation of that to the total capacity of schools as they stand today is another matter. I wore a different hat when I was in the world of finance and looking at the cost-effectiveness of decisions. Then, decisions on schools often involved looking at the nature of provision in an area but not at the full cost implications, such as inter-school transport costs or the dislocation and relocation aspects of teacher employment. Finance has to be an important dimension in the current operating context, but it cannot and should not be the sole determinant. It is about trying to ensure that we enhance education provision while making the best and most effective use of the available resources.

Mr Lunn: It is good to see all of you here together. Jim, you mentioned the desirability of a social mix, which is a term that I like. Does that include a religious mix?

Mr J Clarke: It should if the community is constructed in such a way. Of course, there is a degree of choice. Shared education is about how communities see themselves in relation to others. We also have issues of class differences here, particularly in education because of selection. When we look at social mix in schools that serve deprived communities, the evidence suggests that 95% of people who live in public housing do so in religious blocks. I regard that as a constraining factor that needs to be challenged. I think that the Catholic sector and the controlled sector, working together, have a much greater opportunity to address that issue than has the integrated sector working alone, because it is another sector. However, we are looking at the outcome, and to answer your question broadly, I would say that a "social mix" should include all the people in an area who wish to attend a particular school being made welcome in that school.

Mr Lunn: For once, I did not introduce the integrated sector. I am going with this line of thought because I am concerned about the level of co-operation across the boards and with CCMS. Originally, the boards were charged with the responsibility of working in close conjunction with CCMS and the other sectors. I get the feeling that what we will get out of this process is five area plans — one for each board — and one for CCMS. To me, that was not the original idea. Close conjunction means co-operation. If you are prepared to accept that social mix includes religious mix, can you take it a step further and indicate whether that close conjunction and co-operation means anything? If the local maintained school is unsustainable, and the best solution is for it to amalgamate with the controlled school, are you prepared to countenance the possibility that the Catholic faith and ethos elements would be catered for and allow that to happen?

Mr J Clarke: We are. There is evidence from elsewhere that that can happen.

Mr Lunn: When you say "elsewhere", where do you mean?

Mr J Clarke: In England, for example, there are joint-faith schools.

Mr Lunn: England is different from here.

Mr J Clarke: It is, but it indicates the basic principle that is there for all of us to look at. A point that Mervyn made when Tony was presenting was the conditions under which some of those arrangements may need to occur. Some of them are governance arrangements, but some of them are practical arrangements, and those can be accommodated. The first thing that we need to do is to get the arguments out. The point made by several of us this morning is that the process has, perhaps, engaged people in a discussion that they have not had before about the cost of the delivery of education, access to the curriculum and focusing, for many parents, on the best deal that they can get for their child. In some areas, particularly in the primary sector in rural areas, the information that we will bring forward will say, and the viability audit has already shown it, is this: into the future, some of those schools are unsustainable. Where you have a pairing between the controlled and the maintained sectors, there are several options that communities need to consider. One of them is that we go to the nearest school of type somewhere else, which is a journey, or we find some way of

accommodating one another's beliefs to see whether we can put together an arrangement that keeps a presence in this particular area, which is a shared presence. We are open to that, but we cannot force it. We can present it as an option, but we need people to buy into it. The last thing that we want to do is to create a wrong outcome — another unsustainable school.

Mr Lunn: You mentioned integrated schools, so let me take you there. Are you satisfied or do you have concerns about the protection of Catholic faith and Catholic ethos in an integrated school? It seems to me from those that I have visited that they are not non-faith; they make appropriate arrangements, particularly with regard to preparation for communion and so on. Do you have a problem with the level of Catholic input into integrated schools generally?

Mr J Clarke: First, I am not a member of the Education and Training Inspectorate, so I am not in and out of those schools and cannot make a judgement. However, in a general sense and speaking personally, I do not think that parents would raise issues about the degree to which faith is recognised in integrated schools. There may be individuals but, by and large, I would say that people are reasonably happy.

Mr Lunn: Yes, I think so too. It is nice to agree with you. Correct me if I have taken you up wrongly, but you did not think that it was appropriate for CCMS to comment on the situation of schools in other sectors. What is the point of a joint process?

Mr J Clarke: I made the point that, during the single process that the Catholic sector conducted, it would have been inappropriate for us to have made proposals that had an impact on other sectors. We had discussions with other sectors during that process, but we thought that it would have been inappropriate to make a proposal. However, this exercise has allowed us to do that, and we have done that in relation to Ballymoney, Crumlin, Ballycastle, and Fermanagh. The process, if you like, supports the point that I think you are trying to make, which is that we should be exploring the options to work across sectors, including the integrated and Irish-medium sectors. I think that the process has merit in that respect.

Mr Lunn: I hope that it has. I hope that this turns out to be a joint effort that produces — even if it has different sections to it — an area plan for each area that means something and which is genuinely cross-sectoral. The impression that I have, and that I have had for years — I have not heard anything to change my mind — is that CCMS's preference is to continue to go its own way, to have its own system, and to produce its own post-primary plan, which it has already done or is in the process of doing. I am looking for evidence of change and compromise here, which I do not see or hear.

Mr J Clarke: One of the things that we all need to recognise is that we have to start from where we are. We have sectors in Northern Ireland. The right of parents to express a preference for faith-based education needs to be made available to them. It would be inappropriate for CCMS or, indeed, any other sector, not to make its offer.

There is a balance, however. I made the point that education should be for children. It must meet quality standards for children and must provide a curriculum that prepares them for a rapidly changing economy. There is also a social cohesion dimension.

The concept of what is a viable school is a starting point. Then you have to look at the demographics. If we were talking about another place, we would focus on the importance of community, but the community in Northern Ireland is fragmented, which makes it more difficult to have that conversation. We should be providing opportunities to allow that option to be available.

The integrated, Irish-medium and voluntary grammar sectors will all defend their positions. The starting point for us in the Catholic sector is to defend the right of a child to have an education that meets their needs. If it can be done through a Catholic school alone, that is an option; however, if it cannot be done through a Catholic school operating alone, we have to look at and support other options.

That is a rational position, and I believe, Trevor, that it does show an openness and willingness to use educational structures to meet the needs of children.

Mr Lunn: Fair enough; thank you. Gregory said that this process is a journey and not a destination, but I must say that most of the journeys that I go on have a destination. *[Laughter.]* You could go on a journey round the world and end up where you started. I am afraid that that is liable to happen here.

Nevertheless, I accept that it is a fluid process and that, even when you get to the destination — and I hope that you all do, jointly — there will be further progress to be made in the years to come.

Mr Butler: That is what life is about for young people; it is a journey.

The Chairperson: I hope that it is not like Columbus's journey. It was said that when he left he did not know where he was going, when he got there he did not know where he was, and when he returned home he did not know where he had been. I hope that that is not the journey that we are on.

Jim, is it appropriate or inappropriate for a parent to make a choice for their child to have a faith-based grammar school education?

Mr J Clarke: At this moment, that choice exists —

The Chairperson: No, no, hold on. I asked you whether it is inappropriate for a parent to make a choice of a grammar school education for their child that is faith-based.

Mr J Clarke: If it does not disadvantage another child, yes.

The Chairperson: You do not allow that privilege when it comes to the other elements.

Mr J Clarke: No, Mervyn. If you put a label on it as the labels exist, the answer is no. However, we understand that parents want the best education for their children. That must be an expression of their desire to have their child educated without a comment or an implication for the education of another child. High standards exist in some, but not all, our grammar schools, and we want to build and maintain that, but we want that access to be available to everyone.

I know that you are trying to put me in a corner —

The Chairperson: Jim, I would never do that; you know me.

Mr J Clarke: I absolutely know that, Mervyn. I should not have said that. *[Laughter.]* We are trying to use our education system to provide opportunity for everyone. That is an opportunity not just for individuals, but for this society and its economy to progress. We can do that best together. I hope that that is a further reflection of the point that I made in response to Trevor.

Mr Sheehan: This is not a question for anyone in particular, but Jim said earlier that people should take away their more strategic view of this process. In our earlier discussion with Tony there was some mention of the criticisms and how there was a danger that that could degenerate into a narrower focus on individual schools or sectors and could develop into a "save our schools" campaign. When Tony was asked, he suggested that there was a lack of understanding of the bigger picture. I will ask you the same question that I asked him. Is there any way that you can bring greater clarity to the whole issue and greater understanding of what is at stake so that it does not become a narrowly focused campaign on saving individual schools?

Mr J Clarke: I think that all of us, including the Committee, the Minister and the Department, have a role to play in this. In the Catholic sector, we started by setting up a PRINCE2 process to try to engage a wide range of opinion and to have a genuine consultation on it. In many respects, that aspiration has been only partially met, because some people got the strategic picture and the concept of providing education for all the children in an area and the idea of that area's connectivity to another. Some people took the opposite view, which reinforced their position. That was taken by not only grammar schools but schools that looked at themselves and thought that they were strong and secure and did not need to worry about the matter.

No matter what we do through this process, there will be that defensiveness. I made the point that our governance requires that defensiveness to a degree. So, I think that issues about governance mean that there is a wider political dimension to this. Even this discussion today, if reported, will add to people's understanding of what we are trying to do. I think that the big message needs to get out that education is not an end in itself. It is not just about providing schools. It is education that contributes to the cohesive society and that drives our economy. I am on record as saying that there is a need for government generally, particularly the economic elements of government, to look at schools when they talk about education, not just at further and higher education.

We must make the connection between the importance of education to our economy and society and the importance of ensuring that young people do not fail at the very early stages of their educational career. If, where that level of failure might be apparent, we take steps to address it and get the big message out there about the importance of education, we will slowly make progress on that. However, I think that schools will be defensive of themselves until it is obvious that they have no option but to co-operate more widely. Secondly, parents will always make choices that meet their specific needs, which in my view, are about quality and convenience. They are also about ethos, and we need to bear all those things in mind. So, if together we can engage in a process that helps people to understand the wider aspiration for this, we will make progress, but it will not be easy.

Mr Butler: Gavin talked about engagement, which we are starting on Friday with East Belfast Partnership. That is a recognition of a number of things. First, schools do not exist in isolation, and, secondly, the boards are sometimes seen as having a vested interest, while the partnerships are seen as more representative of a variety of interests in the community. One of the points in the consultation is that this is not a one-size-fits-all approach. In that case, that community will be looking at not only the changes to the school community but how they would have an impact and the solutions that we will build around those. It may not only be about putting a school in an area but about a wraparound of sites around the school. So, you are looking at a total educational and community experience.

There are different ways of moving about to get the message across. I mentioned that we saw this as one of the ways of getting people to discuss and debate. When people discuss and debate, they start to explore possibilities. That is one element of it that we have started to do with this group. It is about exploring other possibilities and finding out whether there are solutions that maintain a school in the community while raising its standards. This is not about numbers; it is about raising young people's educational attainment and, more importantly, the educational experience in its totality, which enables a young person to move on in society. That is why we have looked at ways of moving on. That can be done not only by engagement with the parents but maybe through a different angle to say that those people need more engagement at local level and can get the message across that we cannot.

Mr Boyd: I will pick up that point and talk about it from the Belfast Board's perspective. That is very much where we have been over the past three or four months, as we have been engaging with school leaders, boards of governors and local representatives. The engagement is always about the quality of education for children, and, as local representatives are increasingly saying to us, we cannot continue doing in some areas what we have been doing for the past 30 years because we cannot afford to lose another generation. There are parts of the city where successive generations of young people are leaving school without an appropriate level of qualifications, with the result that they are therefore likely to disengage from society. We prefer to keep the focus on a discussion about the quality of the educational experience that young people are getting and how that is impacting on their life chances, and then we can talk about how we shape that provision to support communities. I am talking about what is happening in the context of Belfast, which is what Gregory and I are working on the moment.

The Chairperson: On that point, Gavin, is the answer to that problem intervention, integration or rationalisation? I sound like a Presbyterian minister here. If you take the rationale of the area plans, the Department's view is that there are too many schools and that if you make them bigger the problem will be solved. However, if you look at the controlled sector, it is closure, closure, closure. That is the sector that has taken the biggest hit of closures over the past number of years. However, having closed 50-plus schools in the past 10 years, and probably more, have we ended up creating better outcomes in the controlled sector? No. That is because, according to the inspector's report, we still have major issues in certain controlled schools. So, similar to what you have in the Belfast Board area, is it not better to have integrated services and particular initiatives that are not about the size of the school but about the problems in the school? That could address those problems and let other issues, such as whether the school will be there in 10 years, whether it will amalgamate or whether it will become integrated, become secondary to dealing with the problem of the pupils who are going to that school today and who, in some cases, are getting a very raw deal from the system.

Mr Boyd: There are so many issues in that, so I will take a couple. First, I honestly believe that a major step forward over the past number of years has been the discussion and debate on the quality of education. That is because, for generations, education was a secret garden. People did not know or have the information about the quality of the outcomes and the success or failure of young people coming through the system. So, the amount of data that are available, which Jim referred to, as well as the fact that those issues are being widely discussed, are good. Secondly, it is absolutely clear that

closing a school or opening a new building will not in itself improve educational outcomes. We are clear on that, and the chief inspector laid that out very clearly in her report. All the research worldwide will tell you that, if you want to improve educational outcomes, you should focus on the quality of teaching and the quality of leadership in schools. That is what you have to do.

I also have to tell you that, in the short term, a young person who goes into any school that you know is an unsuccessful or failing institution is likely to be better off somewhere else. There are times when hard decisions have to be taken for the benefit of the children who are involved and for their life chances. However, you are quite right that a structural building-type approach to education will not of itself improve educational outcomes. That is down to the quality of the leadership in the schools and the quality of teaching in the classroom.

Mrs Dobson: I thank you all for coming here today. Gavin, it is particularly good to see you again after your inspiring speech at my old school, Banbridge Academy, a couple of weeks ago. It was very good. My question is about area planning. I have met many principals in recent weeks, as I am sure has everyone else around the table, and they have raised the serious concerns that exist about the timescale. Gregory will probably be disappointed if I did not refer to the Dickson-plan schools in my constituency in particular. Are you aware that the area planning consultation could have far-reaching consequences for the system? Trevor stole a line that I was going to say, which was that you referred to area planning as a journey, not a destination.

Mr Butler: That is on my tombstone.

Mrs Dobson: That is very good. Will the Dickson plan be at the end of this destination? I would like to know what message I should take back to the hundreds of parents and grandparents who have contacted me through my constituency office.

Mr Butler: Given that I no longer have responsibility for the Dickson plan and the two-tier system, I can for once pass a comment from me to somebody else. So, I will pass the question over to Mike.

Mr Donaghy: Thanks very much, Gregory. *[Laughter.]* Joanne, I have met with principals and boards of governors in the Craigavon, Lurgan and Portadown areas over the past few months. I am aware of the concerns that they and local representatives have expressed about the future of the Dickson plan. I assure the Committee that the board wishes to defend the Dickson plan and that its proposals are intended to safeguard the two-tier system.

The financial and viability of provision of certain schools in the Dickson plan means that, as it stands, the two-tier system could be said to be at risk if the board does nothing. That is what we are trying to address. We are trying, through the proposals, to address management and administration of schools in the Dickson plan that will allow those schools and the Dickson plan to be sustainable in the long term.

There is no threat to the Dickson plan in the board's proposals. This is reflected in your comments, but we have had very strong representation from schools, local representatives, parents and communities saying how much they value the Dickson plan. That is something that the board also values.

Mrs Dobson: So, are you saying that there is no threat to the Dickson plan?

Mr Donaghy: There is no threat.

Mrs Dobson: That will be good news for many of the parents.

Where the viability audit is concerned, the Minister made a call for "realistic, innovative and creative solutions". Many feel that the viability audit is none of those. Do you honestly feel that it the most effective vehicle for dealing with school closures and mergers? How would you do it if managing the process were left to the boards?

Mr Butler: The viability audit was not to do with amalgamation; it was purely about providing information on the state of play and the stress factors at that time. The area plan is a different issue that we are looking at as a way forward. The viability audit is very clear: it was purely about providing hard information from across the schools sector and identifying areas of stress at that point. That

information would then be updated on an ongoing basis. The viability audit was never designed to be an apparatus. It was purely about providing information and raising awareness.

I have been involved in area planning for 14 years. I had black hair when I started, and now it has gone grey. As I said, it is a process. I said "journey", because we were on a journey. In certain areas, that meant the formation of new schools and approaches. One of the good points that I have seen coming out of this is that people are discussing options that they would not have considered 10 years ago.

My previous and present board have experience of schools that made choices that, for them, were about their remaining by forming partnerships with schools whose pupils they would not even have thought would come in their door a number of years ago. So, I think that we have to be careful that we are not saying that things have not been happening. The early learning communities have created an environment where pupils have been going across schools into other schools where 10 years before, for example, their uniform would not have been welcomed. They are very much agreed on that.

So, a development is ongoing, and this whole process is iterative and progressing. Different communities are at different stages, and, to a certain extent, the schools reflect where the community is at. Some areas are now talking about a shared future, which would have been a non-entity. To retain a school for a particular community in that area, schools have made choices about having partnership with other schools to progress matters. There is a series of examples of that.

So, the process is maybe more about stepping up the speed of what we were doing. I think that we were doing that very much in isolation. Although it may not look as though we have worked a lot together, the viability audit was one of the first areas where the five boards and CCMS worked in a very determined way to produce information in a similar format, with the result that 97% of the viability audit is similar across all the boards. That is a major success, and we are building on that so that we can try to progress things. If I can go back to the comment that I made about our being on a journey, I will say that we are on a journey that started at different times but that we have different paces and we have moved forward. A lot of successes along the road have moved people from where they are towards working together. The local management of schools (LMS) initially had schools competing, because bums on seats mean money. However, in a number of areas, the area learning communities have actually been very successful, to a greater or lesser extent, at getting young people moving and working together across schools to provide progression routes. That is what it is about. What system actually provides progression routes? Whether a young person is in school A or school B, is there a route for them to get from their primary school the whole way through to whatever they choose as the best route for them? That is what I think area planning has done. So, that work has not been done in isolation. It builds on what we have done in early learning communities, on the entitlement framework and on a shared future. However, the shared future part also has to be where Northern Ireland is at.

Mrs Dobson: Do you realise that every time you come before the Committee we are going to quote that back to you?

The Chairperson: Mike, can you clarify something about the comments on the Dickson plan? Is there a threat from the Dickson plan schools that are in it?

Mr Donaghy: Sorry, is there a threat?

The Chairperson: Is there a threat to the Dickson plan from schools that are in it? If you read certain comments in the local papers in that area, you will see that the threat is not coming from the board, the Department or anywhere else but from certain schools. Is that a concern?

Mr Donaghy: I think that it would be fair and accurate to say that there is a difference of opinion in the community. We have had discussions with schools' boards of governors and principals, and we know that there is a division in the community. I know from Gregory's work over a number of years with schools in the Craigavon and Portadown area that an attempt is being made to reach a consensus on the way forward. It has been difficult to actually achieve that. The board's proposal is intended to provide a platform or to unlock a door that will allow the community to take a decision on its way forward. The board recognises the strength of feeling in support of the Dickson plan. There has also been strong representation on the sustainability of grammar education in the Dickson plan, but representations about equality of opportunity have also been made very strongly. So, it is about trying to strike a balance across those areas.

As I said, the board's proposals provide a platform for the community to take ownership of the way forward. As I said in response to Jo-Anne's question, the board is not posing any threat to the Dickson plan with its proposals. What the community does and decides to do further down the road is a different matter, but, at this time, we are trying to sustain the Dickson plan, recognising the strength of feeling that exists in the community.

The Chairperson: Gavin, if your speech at Banbridge Academy was inspiring, I take it that you did not mention ESA. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Dobson: It was quite short.

The Chairperson: Especially when you were in Banbridge Academy. I must check that to see exactly what you said.

Mr Rogers: You are all very welcome. Can I go back to Gregory's journey again? Rather than looking at all of Northern Ireland, I will take a snapshot of, say, Fermanagh. I realise, Jim, that CCMS had its proposals on viability and so on out long before, but when did CCMS and the Western Education and Library Board sit down together to agree a way forward for stage 2 of the viability audit?

Mr J Clarke: Quite early on in the process, actually. Gerry Lundy, who led the post-primary review, also worked on the operational group, which was very active in the Western Board. So, many of the possible options that existed in the post-primary review were reviewed again with the board during that period. I would say that there has been a fair degree of collaboration and co-operation in the Western Board area about that.

Mr Rogers: I acknowledge that, and I acknowledge that you listened, but my information is that quite a bit of the impetus came from some of the schools themselves.

Mr J Clarke: As it should. That is the purpose of the consultation. If we bring solutions to the table, we do not engage people. We are encouraging people to bring forward solutions by giving them the data that we have. As I said, the solutions are very obvious at times but not at others. We are not gifted with wisdom in all these matters. Local solutions can emerge, and I hope that, when looked at, these consultation documents will propose solutions that not just we and the Western Board but those across the piece have not considered.

Mr Rogers: I just used the Western Board as an example. I know that we now have a cross-border survey, but when did that perspective come on to your agenda?

Mr J Clarke: We have been looking at it for quite a while. There were practical issues that we had to look at. I welcome the survey that the Minister has commissioned, because I think that it is better to have information on which to base perceptions rather than to simply have perceptions. I also think that it is a logical way to respond to local needs. We know that there is cross-border movement. Some of it is official, but a lot of it is not. We are rationalising reality here.

Mr Rogers: In a more Northern Ireland context, how do you ensure equality of treatment for all the various sectors — voluntary grammar, Irish medium, integrated or whatever — particularly when current trends in some, such as the Irish-medium sector, are different to those in other sectors?

Mr J Clarke: I repeat that our starting point has to be the provision of education, including the option of a Catholic education, to children. So, in the first instance, we are not in any sector. We obviously have to put the sectoral perspective on to the table, particularly in a forum such as this. However, our objective is to ask how we can make the best provision for every child in this area, regardless of their background. If the option of a Catholic school is viable, it should be on the table. If it is not, we will look for alternatives and advise parents on that basis. We are not here to defend sectors, and I do not think that any of us would say that we are here to do that. We recognise that they exist and that the option to have various perspectives in education available to parents will continue. Before Mervyn asks the question again, at this moment, that includes the voluntary grammar option. However, as I said, the voluntary grammar option is a means to an education, and we continue to want to provide whatever that perception of high-quality education is while making sure that everyone's education is deemed high quality.

Mr Rogers: May I have the boards' perspective?

Mr Butler: We engage with all the sectors on where they are at in a particular time. For example, the South Eastern Board does not have any post-primary Irish-medium education at the minute. However, we have a number of Irish-medium primary schools. As part of that, we are discussing the most appropriate progression routes with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG). Similarly, we are looking at whether there are solutions to facilitating cross-sectoral working with the integrated sector. So, we are identifying what the issues are in each sector and how we can put them into our plans. Our ongoing engagements with sectors involve looking at where they are at. At present, it would be wrong for me to propose making provision for the Irish medium at post-primary level in that area, because there is no demand for it. We will work with CnaG to see how those progressions will come through, as we will with other sectors, to establish where there are options in other towns or locations for looking at cross-sector solutions. We already do that in the in the Ards peninsula, simply because we have the right mix of schools there to facilitate certain things. So, it is about creating an environment where the discussions can take place and in which people are prepared to consider options that may be different from what they have done in the past.

Mr Rogers: Shane talked about his accountancy background and the fact that we sometimes think of the financial costs and so forth. When it comes to equality of opportunity, are the social and community costs considered, particularly where our rural schools and communities are concerned? If we think of a rural primary school in, for example, Fermanagh or south Down, where small rural schools are quite a distance apart, we will find that that is totally different scenario to that in the city, where small schools may be half a mile or a mile apart. So, have the social costs to the rural community been considered?

Mr McCurdy: I would say that costs of the development of area planning at this point have not been a factor per se. Clearly, in arriving at any consideration in an area, you have to look beyond just the cost factors. Area planning is about facilitating and understanding where there is a need for an educational facility and then making sure that it is resourced appropriately. That falls back into Sir Bob Salisbury's work on the review of the common funding formula. I am quite sure that, through the area planning process, there will be instances of schools in areas that, in another context, would not be deemed viable or sustainable but that may be required to ensure that they are maintained and kept viable for the provision of education to the community that they serve.

Mr Butler: What often happens when you are closing a small school is that the parents are very much up and fighting the closure. I might meet those parents two years later, and they may say to me, "Gregory, why did we fight? We have a much better experience now for young people, because they can do A, B, C and D." So, there is a certain amount of looking at creating viable units that give the best education and social experience for young people. Once they get through that trauma, parents will quite often come back in two years' time and say that the children have a much better experience and that they did not need to fight.

Sometimes, we have to move people in rural areas beyond thinking that they have to retain a school in every location. We need a network of strong rural schools. In the past, we looked at where we could create opportunities by maybe amalgamating or bringing a number of schools together so that a good-quality education in the town and rural area was developed. It was not about retaining a school in every hole in the hedge, because that was detrimental to young people, and we are about avoiding such a detriment.

Mr Rogers: Yes, I understand that, but I think that you would agree that the trauma that is associated with moving a P1 child half a mile to another school as opposed to 10 miles would be a different level of trauma.

Mr Butler: I think that we take that into account.

Mr Rogers: My last point is for you, Clare. Is the Woodlands speech and language unit in Derry part of the area planning, or is that ahead of it?

Dr Mangan: The Woodlands provision in Derry is about trying to regularise something that is outside the existing legislative arrangements. It is about putting in place an expansion of speech and language provisions in the Derry City Council area so that we can expand the number of places for children who have speech and language needs while ensuring that their needs are met closer to

home. That is because 50% of the children who avail themselves of that provision do not live in Derry city; they live in Limavady, Eglinton, Magheramason and other places. The work we are doing on that is about expanding specialist speech and language provision within a framework that is more closely aligned with the special educational needs (SEN) framework than the area planning process.

Mr Hazzard: Mike, you said that the various voices here will be meeting to work together in going forward with the review. To what extent did that happen at the outset of the process? We heard from Tony Gallagher's report that the boards adopted various approaches in engaging with sectoral interests. It highlighted that the North Eastern and Western Boards were, perhaps, more successful in that. I just wanted your appraisal of that. Does that show that there could have been better provision of equality if there had been engagement with stakeholders right across the board?

Dr Mangan: Our experience with that sectoral engagement was that it enabled us to have a much more detailed focus on what the other sectors considered to be the priorities in the area. So, our experience is that it is positive and that it is a process and mechanism that we would endeavour to utilise in other aspects of school planning development.

Mr Donaghy: From the Southern Board point of view, the model is different. The engagement with other sectors happened on an individual basis. We found that a useful model. We took on board submissions and recommendations from the other sectors. You will find those in the area plan.

Where the uniformity of approach is concerned, although individual area plans may show differences, in the process of agreeing the area plans and the need for more data to put in to them, the questionnaires were uniform. The questions were agreed on a common basis, and the format and means of consultation were identical. Although there are differences, which are inevitable when you are dealing with five or six organisations that are putting together the plan, the process of engagement with other sectors was followed.

Mr Lunn: A few minutes ago, Jim said that you are not here to defend sectors. Forgive me, but the impression that I have had of CCMS down the years is that that is exactly what it has done. I am encouraged to think that you are moving away from that position. I want to ask any of you about a statistic that is often quoted. It has probably been blurred a bit by area learning communities, shared facilities and so on, but it is still a fact that 90% of our schoolchildren are educated purely with their co-religionists. Do you think that, as a result of your deliberations and the outcome, that will change?

Mr J Clarke: I have two points. CCMS — indeed, any sector — has a responsibility to advocate and promote its sector, but defending is different. We have to see that the child, from whatever background, is the priority. If our involvement in education requires us to co-operate, that is the objective, if it affects the education of the child.

On the second part of the question, as we move forward, there are practical issues that have been brought to everyone's attention through the viability audits that are telling us that certain schools are not viable in their current situation. There are options that have to be looked at, and the demographics, if nothing else, will throw up the possibility of different ways of providing that education. Therefore, I do think that sharing will become more apparent. We should also look at sharing as a spectrum. Several of my colleagues have made the point today that an awful lot more sharing is going on than the system might recognise. People do not have to be wearing the same uniform to be in the sharing situation, and the concept of communities and areas working together is becoming more and more apparent in schools. Things such as the shared education project, which Tony Gallagher was strongly involved with, have helped to break down some of those barriers. There are governance issues at the very top of this spectrum, but there are also collaborative issues to deliver access to the curriculum and, of course, the community relations, equality and diversity (CRED) aspects.

Mr Lunn: That is fine. I am not talking about the various shared options; I am talking about where the child goes to school. I am asking any of you — I do not want to pick on you, Jim, all the time; or maybe I do.

Mr J Clarke: Of course you would not.

Mr Lunn: Is that figure of 90% liable to change as a result of what is going on here?

Mr Butler: You have to look at it within the Northern Ireland context. If you look at the Northern Ireland society that I was involved with 25 years ago through youth work and compare it with Northern Ireland society now, you can see that its make-up and relationships have changed. As a society, we have moved on. Particularly in certain areas in Northern Ireland, there are a very large number of newcomers, who, to a certain extent, have nearly been the equalling factor that enables change to happen. If you look at the trend over the past 25 years and at where we were then compared with where we are now, you can see that, as a society, we have moved on a long way. Certain things are institutional in towns, such as housing and a range of other things, and they dictate certain patterns, but, as a society that has moved on from where we were 25 years ago to where we are now, we have a lot more unique cross-community sharing, socially, culturally and educationally. This process will help to move that on further.

Mr Lunn: I accept the societal change, but I do not see that that figure has changed. It has been that way for years.

Mr Boyd: I will make a comment from the perspective of the Belfast Board. One of the exercises that we have been carrying out is to identify any unmet demand. All of the sectors are represented in the city. Is there any evidence that parents' wishes to have their child educated in a particular setting are not being met? In one or two instances, we have identified that, and that clearly is a consideration for area planning given the contexts that we are operating within. If, politically, we were directed that we will not recognise the current sectors and that any new offering will be based on an entirely new framework, as administrators, we will carry out the area planning process on that basis. However, from a Belfast perspective, we have been focused on identifying if there is any unmet demand in, for example, Irish-medium primary education or integrated education, and if we identify unmet demand, ie instances when parents cannot get their child placed in their preferred setting, we will seek to deal with that in the context of the area planning process.

Mr McCurdy: I am not sure that I necessarily share the same degree of optimism about the change that might result. There is certainly the potential and capacity for change, but I am not sure that the reality on the ground will result in that change in respect of parental preference, which Gavin referred to, and, indeed, the ability of the area planning process to accommodate parents who specifically want provision of a certain character or type. Gavin said that statistics suggest that, at the moment, there is maybe some evidence, but very much at the periphery, to suggest that that is not being facilitated. I am not as optimistic that there will be a fundamental change from the percentages that you have suggested.

Mr Lunn: I really believe that society is probably way ahead of you and us in a lot of this and in a lot of aspects of life, and I think that, if you provide the right template and right encouragements as a result of all this, you can do society a favour. You might find that it is not quite as hard to move hearts and minds as you might think.

Mr Kinahan: Do you not think that we should put more options out there? Gavin, you suggested that you are only dealing with those who come to you, but you could put out all the options for different schooling to the parents. We know that CCMS does a mass of sharing but a lot of people do not know that that is an option. There is a way of turning it all on its head, and we might get further if we show that the options are more available rather than everyone just thinking that they have to go to a certain school because it is the one near them or it is a school for their religion.

Mr Boyd: I am sorely tempted to go back to the bit about journey and destination, but, from a Belfast Board perspective, we have started on a process and are learning quite a lot as we engage with school leaders, boards of governors and political representatives. To be perfectly honest, there will be a destination, but it will be quite a way down the road and populations will move, society will change and parental preferences will change over time as well. That is why I tend to agree with my colleagues and see this very much as an iterative process. Over time, the options that are made available to parents in communities will change. There is no doubt about that.

Miss M McIlveen: I apologise for nipping in and out; I have had a constituency issue to deal with. I found this very interesting, and I will follow on from Trevor's theme. I will not quote Gregory, as others have; rather I will quote the Minister, who has talked about thinking outside the box. We may find ourselves in a position where, say, there are three schools in a locality — a CCMS school, a controlled school and an integrated school — and at least two of those schools require a newbuild and, perhaps, the third school is perceived to be unviable. If other solutions within the sectors are not possible and

the community was to come up with the solution of a community college that could possibly be a non-faith school, would there be an objection from CCMS or the boards?

Mr J Clarke: CCMS would prefer a faith-based option in the school and a faith-based dimension. In fact, I rather suspect that that would be the view of the general population in Northern Ireland. Certainly, the option of shared campuses and shared facilities is very real in the case of the Lisanelly proposal, for instance. One of the key points underpinning your question is this: what is a viable school? You have addressed that to a degree, and some of my colleagues made the point that the concept of viability will be influenced by the recommendations from the Salisbury report on funding. There is a correlation between the amount of money going into a school and the service that it can provide in relation to the entitlement framework. The numbers that make a school viable need to be looked at again when the Salisbury review has reported. The concept that I keep coming back to is that, by whatever means we achieve it, the objective of all of us should be to provide every child with a quality education as close to the area in which they live as possible.

Mr McCurdy: I will come back on that, because it is pertinent to a lot of what I have been thinking and trying to advocate. You have talked about a community college. Presently, if it were at one school, it would have to be a controlled, maintained or integrated school, because there is no fourth option at the moment. It has to be one of the three.

Miss M McIlveen: But, if there were a legislative change, there would be a possibility of that happening.

Mr Butler: One idea that has been built into the plans for both the Southern Board and the South Eastern Board is the continuum of provision, ranging from collaboration through strategic lines to collegiates. As we sit, collegiates have not actually been delivered because of some of the problems with staff, etc. We were saying that, if you want to move to that sort of concept, there may be steps along the road to that. One of the areas that we and CCMS discussed around primary schools in the Southern Board was co-locating the two and having a much larger school and a smaller school to retain the Protestant community school in that area. People need to be confident in their own area before they can progress on. That was seen as another step in the journey. You are creating a model that is somewhere between where you want to get to and where you were by having co-location or having a collegiate with shared governance. However, there are certain things that we can do under current legislation and certain things that we cannot do. That is why we included some of those models to provide a framework of possibilities, some of which are not currently within the legislative framework. It was to get people to think that there are ideas outside the box.

Miss M McIlveen: I understand that you have received thousands of responses, but, from a cursory view of those responses, have you seen anything from the sectors and communities themselves that is innovative and different and that shows that there has been thinking outside the box?

Mr Donaghy: I think it is too early to have an informed opinion of the responses that have come through. We, as a group, are still trying to get the agreed template for providing the report. We have not really, as of yesterday, taken a view of what has come through or analysed it.

Miss M McIlveen: Finally, where are we with the primary school area plan?

Mr Donaghy: The area planning working group, which includes the five boards, CCMS and the Department of Education, has been working on the template and the drafts of the area plans for the primary sector. The first drafts of those are with the Department, and it really is up to the Minister and the Department to agree the timetable for that.

The Chairperson: Finally, the million-dollar question for you all is a starter for 10, and whoever answers first will probably get the prize. Do we have 85,000 spare places or 62,000?

Mr Boyd: I do not know if it is helpful, but I can give you the Belfast perspective from going around a number of schools. If you visit a number of schools — as I do, and I know that you do, too — you are unlikely to find 85,000 empty desks. What you will find is a number of rooms in schools that were previously used as classrooms and that are now being used for all sorts of other activities, which may well be very useful. You will also find parts of schools that are boarded up and no longer in use, so there is significant underutilisation of accommodation. Schools in Belfast have certainly been very innovative about how an amount of that accommodation can be used.

The Chairperson: Are there no other takers?

Dr Mangan: I am not going to comment on the number, but schools are using their accommodation for things like the extended schools programme and other programmes that have developed. In a sense, the number of spare places is actually perhaps less significant than how schools utilise the space.

Mr J Clarke: The other point is that, regardless of the number, it is evident that there are significant numbers of surplus places, at a cost to the education budget. The question we all have to ask is this: what is the best way that we can use the limited resource available to us?

The Chairperson: Do you ask for the numbers when the individual plans come from schools? Does the board get back from individual schools the surplus number?

Mr J Clarke: It is not difficult to work that out on the basis of the enrolment number the school has and the enrolment that is actually in the school. It is quite a simple exercise. The point being made is that accommodation is used in a number of different ways.

From a different perspective altogether, it seems to me that, even under the current budget arrangements, we are putting in additional resources to address social deprivation. We should not be measuring the schedule of accommodation in schools that are serving areas with high levels of social deprivation in the same way as we measure it in schools that are not. Clearly, schools in areas with a high level of social deprivation are going to need more resources because, in many cases, they have the staff resource for smaller class units. There are issues there that may impact on that number.

I heard part of the discussion about the Manhattan system, and my board colleagues might wish to comment on that. The key point, which I do not think is disputed, is that, in certain areas, we have significant numbers of surplus places. It is a requirement for all of us to address that matter.

Mr Boyd: It is not just a question of excess accommodation. Last week, I was at a primary school in Belfast where the upper floor of the building is not in use at all. The building is a 1960s construction of very poor quality. Despite the best efforts of the staff and parents, it is a fairly depressing situation. That school is in an area with very high levels of deprivation. If we were providing that school today, it would be built to provide all the facilities necessary to integrate with the community and all the additional support for single mothers and various other groups in the community. The building would look completely different and be designed to integrate with the community and provide all the other support activities that you referred to earlier and that we need to support children in those circumstances. It would be a completely different deal.

The Chairperson: I thank you all for coming. We could take this a long, long way, but we have started the journey. Whether we have a map, wheels on the car or a steering wheel, we do not know. However, we have started some sort of a journey. Thank you all for the time you have given today. I have no doubt that, when we start to look at primary schools, you will be back. As I have said before, we have not seen anything yet when it comes to the discussion around the future of primary schools. I wish you well and thank you for taking part.