



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Education Bill: Transferor Representatives'
Council

5 December 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
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr Chris Hazzard
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Sean Rogers

Witnesses:

Rev Ian Ellis	Transferor Representatives' Council
Rev Trevor Gribben	Transferor Representatives' Council
Miss Rosemary Rainey	Transferor Representatives' Council

The Chairperson: I welcome Reverend Trevor Gribben; Reverend Ian Ellis, secretary to the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC); and Miss Rosemary Rainey, vice-chair of TRC. You are very welcome. Thank you for coming here. I am very tempted to ask for your advice on the moderation of levels of progression, but I will not do so. That subject is the reason for the delay; my apologies for that. The Committee had other business this morning. Thank you for coming and for your submission. We look forward to engaging with you.

Rev Trevor Gribben (Transferor Representatives' Council): My particular Church understands moderators. *[Laughter.]* My Methodist and Church of Ireland colleagues, however, may be a bit confused.

Thank you for your invitation today. There is a bit of déjà vu. When we met Chris Stewart in the entrance hall, I thought that I had gone back two years, like in the 'Back to the Future' films. It is good to be here with a different Education and Skills Authority (ESA) Bill. As transferors, we are delighted to be able to welcome the progress made in bringing the Bill to this stage. This has the same title — it is an ESA Bill — but from our perspective, it is a very different animal.

We greatly welcome the political process that has got us to this point, as well as the engagement and various agreements that have been made. We particularly welcome the proposed sectoral body for controlled schools. Some have said that that is a major gain for the controlled sector. We see it as righting an injustice that has gone on for decades in Northern Ireland. We do, however, recognise it as a gain; it is very positive. Even now, there is a feel-good factor throughout the controlled sector in

all kinds of schools because, for once, they will have a cohesive voice. Even the promise of that has done a lot.

As transferors, we welcome and, indeed, are heartened by the fact that our existing legal rights are acknowledged and protected in the ESA Bill, which was very much not the case in the former draft legislation. That will enable transferors to continue to play a constructive role in partnership with others in education, which has always been the position of the transferring Churches since we transferred our schools to state control.

Transferors acknowledge the work done to get us to this point. We see that as continuing the legal rights and legislative guarantees that were given by the Government of Northern Ireland to Churches that handed over their schools to the state for safekeeping. We also acknowledge the membership proportions on the ESA board: 40% elected; 20% transferors; 20% trustees; and 20% other nominees. We welcome those proportions as they reflect the legal position in the education and library boards and in the old education authorities before that. We are not there simply because we are an interest group, but because it is a continuation of legal guarantees and rights, and we wish to acknowledge that today.

As we state in the introduction of our submission, we recognise that the Bill has to be scrutinised by the Committee. We welcome the fact that that will be more detailed than originally envisaged, with the extended period. Nonetheless, we will welcome the day when the ESA Bill is passed by the House and becomes law as an Act, because we believe that change is necessary. In its day, the current system of education and library boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) served well, but it is now beyond being able to continue to perform its functions through those bodies.

I will now highlight some particular points as I work through our submission. We welcome the holistic approach to education in clause 2. We also welcome the responsibility to contribute to the moral and spiritual development of children. As transferors, some of the legal guarantees we received when we transferred schools were not only about the presence of transferors on certain bodies but about the protection of religious education. We hope that the TRC and, indeed, the controlled sectoral body will have a part to play in ensuring that religious education is protected. It is Christian in ethos, but it has to be open to other faiths and have modules in other faiths. Nonetheless, legislatively, based on the 1986 Order, which is still the law of the land, it is Christian in ethos.

We note the various references to sectoral bodies or those deemed to represent them, which is an interesting phrase, being consulted. We advocate a further strengthening in legislation of the position of sectoral bodies. For instance, the phrase:

"consult with and have due regard to the views of"

is stronger than simply "consult". If we reach the day when everyone is consulted about everything in legislation, and if there is a particular consultation because of existing and future legal rights, perhaps that phrase could be strengthened. We, along with others, suggest that a phrase such as "sectoral body for controlled schools" be inserted, rather than the very euphemistic phrase, "persons or bodies deemed to represent controlled schools". It might mean that Chris and his friends will use less ink when they do the final draft of the Bill. I am sure that he will have a good response to that later.

The TRC welcomes the fact that the teaching appointment committees are going. We played a part in those in the area boards, and they had their place in the day. However, we recognise that that disadvantaged controlled schools, in the sense that they were not able to appoint their own principal or, in some cases, vice-principal. We welcome that, and we are happy to give it up, because we think that that is the right thing to do. However, as stated in our submission, when ESA is appointing assessors to sit alongside schools in filling senior management positions, we think that those should be more than HR specialists and that a panel of assessors should be drawn up, in conjunction with the sectoral body, to help to protect ethos and other such dimensions of the controlled sector when appointments are made.

For us, one of the key things that needs to be changed in the controlled sector is leadership. We need to invest in and develop leadership. Those senior appointments should not be made by a body other than a board of governors. We are fully supportive of that, but assessors should sit alongside the board not only to give it legal advice but to help it — particularly in, say, a small rural primary school — to make judgements between people on the grounds of leadership. We feel that that would be worthwhile.

In our submission, we refer to clause 28 and the fact that we want to see more in the Bill about shared education. I am sure that our colleagues from the integrated sector, who follow us today, will say much about that. We want it said very clearly "shared education". Integrated education, whether we like it or not, has become a sector, and it is a valuable one. We welcome that it has a Christian ethos in Northern Ireland. Many people go to integrated schools, which are still in the minority, and parents have the right to make that choice. However, it is a sector, whereas shared education is a concept that all people can embrace. As suggested in our submission, we want, for instance, a duty on sectoral bodies to work together to maximise co-operation and, where possible, develop shared educational provision. We feel that something needs to be written into the Bill in that regard rather than writing in "integrated education", which refers simply to one sector. It is about maximising the potential of shared education, which is a term that all sectors can embrace.

For the record, we say that we see shared education as having a Christian ethos, because the vast majority of our schools have a Christian ethos, and the vast majority of our pupils are in the controlled or the Catholic sector. If sharing is going to work, young people from those sectors will have to come together around the curriculum in other ways in order to share in education. That is what we would like to see encouraged more in the Bill. I am sure that members will have picked up on a subtle point in our submission. Let me articulate it more fully for your sake, Chairman. It is to do with planning for the controlled estate. After long discussion, we recognised that the point at which we have arrived today is perhaps the best accommodation that could be reached, which is that ESA will continue to own the controlled estate. All the permutations have been considered and discussed, and we have reached what seems to be the best practical solution. However, that potentially still puts the controlled sector at a slight disadvantage. If other sectoral bodies have a direct link to ownership — say in the integrated or Catholic sector — and they are participating in area planning with the weight of ownership behind them, ESA must remain neutral between sectors. ESA must be an honest broker in area planning.

We are suggesting that, if a way can be found legislatively or in ESA's standing orders to enable the controlled sectoral body to participate in estate management discussions and negotiations on behalf of the controlled sector, that allows a body that is an advocate for the controlled sector to have a voice and would parallel that to other sectors in education. If necessary, I am sure that others who understand the issue better than me could further such a pact.

Our submission makes a point about advisory and support services for schools, and we want to put down one cautionary note. Although in principle we would support maximising the autonomy of local schools through boards of governors, we want to note the danger of that in Northern Ireland. If groups of schools choose to come together to buy in support services, and if that is done on a sectoral basis, we could end up in Northern Ireland with a Catholic CASS system and a CASS system for other schools. An advisory and support curriculum should be delivered, ideally through ESA, to every school.

It would be unfortunate if we had a further Balkanisation of advisory and support delivery through legislation that permitted groups of schools to come together to buy in services. We do not feel that that is the intention of that clause, but we want the Committee to explore that with officials and others to ensure that that could not happen because it would not be good for us as we move forward.

Our submission also refers to religious education (RE). That has been a factor in controlled schools up and down Northern Ireland whose boards of governors have wanted RE to be inspected professionally by the inspectorate, as every other subject is. However, because those schools do not technically make the request within the exact 30 seconds that they have to make it when an inspection is notified, it does not happen. A controlled school should be able to say that it wants inspectors to inspect RE. The Department of Education (DE) should have the ability to log that information, and when inspectors arrive two years later, they inspect RE. That is what our little amendment suggests.

My colleague the Rev Ian Ellis will speak to our final point regarding a peculiarity in the controlled sector for transferor appointments to controlled, non-selective secondary schools. Ian has a better mind than I have, so he understands the issue and can articulate it much better than me.

Rev Ian Ellis (Transferor Representatives' Council): That is not the reason. The reason is that, more often than not, I take the phone calls about the issue. Thank you, Chairman, for a chance to articulate this point. It is referred to towards the end of our submission, and it gives us an opportunity to address something that has been an issue in the controlled sector for a long time, particularly affecting transferors.

You may wonder what on earth that has to do with schools, schools improvement or making things better. It is linked very directly, and I will come to that. The nub of the problem is that a controlled secondary school has a board of governors with transferors on it. However, those transferors have to be elected from the contributory primary schools. No one else can be elected. They have to be on the board of a primary school that feeds into that secondary school. No other governor in the secondary school needs that double job — you understand that phrase, I think. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Some of us, yes.

Rev Ian Ellis: Some of you do. You know what I mean.

We have to be on a primary school's board of governors before we can be elected to a secondary school's board of governors. In the old days, 20 or 30 years ago, that was fine because being on a primary school's board of governors was not a great, onerous task. However, as you know, governors' responsibilities have now increased. The frequency of meetings has increased. There are fewer and fewer transferor governors on primary school boards who are willing to take on the extra job of being on a secondary school board. So when they are called together for meetings, they either do not go or only a few turn up and it is muggins's turn. It is not an effective way to put governors on a secondary school board.

You and I all know that there is huge pressure on secondary schools at present. They need strong leadership. They need committed governors who can give time for meetings and the kind of governance leadership that is needed. So we suggest a change to that election process. Instead of someone being drawn from the pool of transferors in the primary schools, the transferring authorities — the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church or the Church of Ireland, at central level — are allowed the right to make those nominations. We would go to the local churches and ask people who have an interest in education but who are not, perhaps, currently involved in schools, have a little bit of time and, above all, have the skills, inspiration and commitment to work on a secondary school board to do that and to take that on. That would free us up to be able to widen the net a little and find more appropriate and better leadership for those schools. That is one way to try to address the issue.

Given those pressures on secondary schools, that fits in with where we are going to improve schools. We need to enhance standards and raise aspirations. Above all, we need people who will keep not only children's aspirations high but staff morale high. Good, supportive governors on school boards will help to do that. We think that we could, perhaps, arrange that better if we were doing it centrally rather than relying on an election system that is not really working. If the Bill could have that attached to it, it would give us a mechanism by which to adjust it. We are also open to speaking to the Department to find the exact way in which we could do that. However, we have been appealing to the Department for years to do that. Perhaps this is an opportunity to do it and, at the same time, enhance what we can bring to the leadership of secondary schools throughout the controlled sector.

Rev Trevor Gribben: Perhaps, Chairman, I could make one concluding remark. We are certainly open to questions. Rosemary will come in to bat on all your difficult questions in a moment.

We see the establishment of an Education and Skills Authority as a way forward to giving equality of treatment for all schools in Northern Ireland. All schools are grant-aided. We would not want anything in legislation that gives any particular sector particular rights. ESA must treat all schools equally. Therefore, hints in other areas of assurances that bodies must discriminate in favour of particular sectors — I will not name two, but you could write that bit in yourselves — seems to jar against every school being treated equally. Someone has to grasp that as the ESA becomes established.

The vested privileges and advantages that certain individual schools have had in the past simply cannot continue — we refer to a different grouping of schools here. If those privileges are so important, they should be available to every school. We would want to resist an argument that because certain schools, which have been independent in some sense, have had certain privileges in the past, they should be continued simply because they have had them in the past. The controlled sector has suffered long enough by being the Cinderella. It has educated the vast majority of children from a Protestant background. Those schools must be treated with equality. If a few people want to argue for vested interests to continue, they have to be available to every school. We want equality of treatment across all sectors. We welcome the fact that ESA is a huge step towards that. Much detailed political discussion and negotiation have got us to this point, and we commend those who have been involved.

The Chairperson: Do you want to comment, Rosemary?

Miss Rosemary Rainey (Transferor Representatives' Council): No, I am fine.

The Chairperson: I will declare an interest at the start, much to Trevor's annoyance, I am sure, as someone who sits on the board of governors of a controlled school and who was educated in a controlled school. I do not want you to hold me up as an example of that system because it might count against it.

Rev Trevor Gribben: I could not possibly comment, Chairman.

The Chairperson: I appreciate what the controlled school system gave to me as a young person, so it is only right and proper that I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Ballymoney High School.

Thank you for your presentation and your submission. I want to tease out a wee bit more the issue that you raised in relation to the inspectorate and of wanting an amendment that uses the wording:

"except with the agreement or at the request of the Board of Governors of the school."

I think that Trevor mentioned that. You are defined by the fact that, unless you do something at a particular moment, there is no inspection.

Rev Trevor Gribben: I will give a very specific example. I have been in my job now in the Assembly Buildings as deputy clerk of the General Assembly for five years. Prior to that I spent 12-plus years as a minister in Whiteabbey Presbyterian Church and was on several boards of governors at the time.

One of those boards of governors passed a resolution, at my and other transferors' urging, that we would request that RE be inspected at the next inspection. That went into our minutes, but an inspection did not come around for about three or four years. When it came, lo and behold, RE was not inspected. When I and others asked why, we were told that it was because we had not asked them, when we got the notice that the inspectors were coming, to inspect RE.

There did not seem to be a mechanism whereby we could simply say as a board of governors that, now and for all time, we want RE to be professionally inspected because we feel that it should be taught as a professional subject. It should not be a sectarian subject; the legislation states that it is "undenominational" — whatever that interesting word means. It is taught with a Christian ethos that is based on the scriptures. We want that to be inspected. We want it resourced and inspected professionally. We want the inspectorate to help to improve it, which, I assume, is what they are about.

There does not seem to be a mechanism in schools whereby it can be registered that, every time inspectors come to a school, RE should be inspected. That board of governors fell foul of that, as have many others. They thought that RE would be inspected in the controlled sector, but it has not been. When we ask, we are told that, unless we ask specifically and at a particular time, it does not happen.

The Chairperson: Would that strengthen the procedure as it is currently constructed in the Bill?

Rev Ian Ellis: We are open to discussing the right mechanisms with the inspectorate. There is obviously a hiccup that is preventing things happening. Our motivation in this is around the esteem of the subject. If someone is teaching a subject that is never inspected, it does not say very much about the subject.

A good many RE teachers out there are doing an excellent job, but their subject is never examined, and their teaching and learning is never properly inspected. They never have a good report, nor have they ever had anything said to them that would help them to teach better. There is a feeling that the subject is not being treated equally with other subjects.

I know that the Department is focusing on literacy and numeracy, child protection and pastoral care. Those are important subjects, but when a general inspection is taking place and the curriculum is

being examined and teaching and learning is taking place, we think that RE ought to be looked at. A mechanism needs to be found to enable that to happen, because it is not happening at present.

The Chairperson: I have seen correspondence making a claim that, somehow, ESA would bring to an end the Christian ethos and identity in schools and that this was the end of the world. In fact, it is ironic that the person who raised it with me was associated with an independent Christian school, for which the Bill makes no provisions because there will still be independent schools. I also declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of an independent Christian school.

I want to put on record our appreciation of the work that transferors have done over the years in the sector, and I concur with Trevor's comments that, in the past, the controlled sector has been treated, in many respects, as a Cinderella in our education system. From the transferors' point of view, as the Bill currently stands, do you see any other threat that would undermine, diminish or weaken the Christian ethos and identity of schools, particularly, for your purposes, in regard to the controlled sector?

Rev Trevor Gribben: Chairman, we do not. That is probably as direct an answer as you will get in a political forum.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Rev Trevor Gribben: The reason for that is that we note in the Bill the rights of boards of governors to set schemes of management, employment, and so on.

I have not highlighted this point, but our submission states that sectoral bodies should have a role with ESA in drafting the typical schemes of management that are set down for schools to adopt. We would strongly advocate that sectoral bodies should have a role in that. If ESA sends down a template for a scheme of management for governors in the controlled sector to consider, the controlled sectoral body should be part of drawing up that template. The reason for that is the Minister's commitment in writing, in the House and in Hansard that sectoral bodies will be allowed — encouraged, in fact — to develop the corporate ethos of sectors. We greatly welcome the Minister's assurances on that and the political negotiations that have gone on around it. We feel that that is a good thing. The controlled sectoral body will have a responsibility to help to develop ethos in the controlled sector.

We recognise that the controlled sector is diverse and that that will have to be reflected in the ethos of the sector. We welcome that. Previously, nobody has developed ethos in the controlled sector, and all credit to the Department of Education and the Minister for coming forward with those positive proposals.

The Chairperson: Perhaps I should have said at the outset that the Committee will consider the controlled schools sectoral support body next week. We do not want to stray into that today, and we want to work on your submission. Members should stay specific to the issue of the Bill.

I want to ask a final question on clause 3. That is causing some concern by *[Inaudible.]* the voluntary grammar schools. Their issue is that, because ESA would become the single employing authority, they would lose their position and place and that the voluntary principle — however that is defined — would be diminished and lost. As representatives of schools that have been under the control of a board, which is similar in kind to what is being proposed in the Bill, do you believe that, other than the removal of the teaching appointments committee, there are other issues that need to be addressed to give schools greater confidence that their boards of governors will, ultimately, still be able to make decisions about who they employ, sack and all the issues that are invested in the Bill and that are currently the responsibility of boards of governors?

Rev Trevor Gribben: Chair, I will begin with that, but Rosemary may also want to come in. She works very much in the education and library boards and currently chairs the Belfast Education and Library Board. As you quite rightly said, controlled schools have always had their staff employed by a body other than their boards of governors — the education and library boards. That has not proved to be a threat to controlled schools. The ESA Bill maximises the local autonomy of boards of governors. My understanding is that, in layman's terms, although ESA will be the employer, control of employment will be with boards of governors, as will the right to take decisions to hire, fire and set the kind of jobs they want, within the schemes and the law, of course. The fact that schools in the controlled sector have the right to appoint their own principals is a gain for the controlled sector, and the fact that ESA will employ that person from the controlled sector's perspective is not a threat at all.

To be honest, we cannot really understand how it is a threat to any school. We are agnostic, Chairman — you can write that down — as Churches —

The Chairperson: I am glad that you have admitted that in a public forum.

Rev Trevor Gribben: — in this war about employment. As people of the Word, we would love the voluntary principle to be written down in words so that we might understand it. It seems to be different things depending on who articulates it. However, that may be a political point, which is unfortunate.

Miss Rainey: Currently, the controlled schools have tremendous support and advice from HR personnel at the boards. Under ESA, it will be essential for all boards of governors to have support from HR. Initially, for those who have not been accustomed to that, it may necessitate an HR person being present for interviews. It is also essential that there is a panel of assessors who would be able to give expert opinion as to procedures and advice at that level. Those two issues will be absolutely essential for schools.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much for your presentation. I welcome a great deal of what you said. You mentioned equality all the way through and a wish to move towards shared education. I know that it is not the subject of today's meeting, but with area planning, we seem to be dividing all our schools into two sectors and rather forgetting the third, which is the integrated sector. I put that down as a marker.

As to the make-up of the ESA board, we are leaving out two or three different areas, and we seem to have a board that is mainly Church or mainly political. We seem to have forgotten principals and teachers, unless you happen to put some on from your sector. How do you think that we could make the ESA board more representative of everybody? If we carry your suggestion through on governors, I appreciate that you have to have the Christian ethic working all the way through. However, we are almost moving to a monopoly. If you were to get your proposal through, will you look at putting people on a board of governors who are not necessarily Church but would certainly look to the ethos of the school so that we get a composition that is more rounded of society?

Rev Trevor Gribben: I will respond initially to those two points and will take the second point first. Our understanding is that the constitution of the boards of governors is not being affected at all by the ESA Bill. I think that that is correct, and the Department certainly told us that it was correct. It is in legislation under the 1986 Order, and that is not changing. That was a battle for another day. However, wisdom prevailed. In a controlled school, legislation gives transferors four seats on a board of governors; in a controlled secondary school, it is six seats. All we are suggesting is that, in secondary schools, a system should be found whereby we can send someone who does not have to be a governor in a primary school. That is the one simple point. We do not think that the Bill is entering into the debate as to how those boards of governors should be constituted. We think that that has been agreed.

Mr Kinahan: That was what I meant.

Rev Trevor Gribben: In appointment to a board of governors at primary school and secondary school level, transferors seek to put on the best people. Very few of them are actually clergy. They seek to put on people with experience in finance and education. Many of those people will be parents of children currently or formerly at the school. When transferors appoint, the primary concern is to put on someone who will do a good job as a school governor and will also come from a Christian background, because that is who we are. They are not there because they got a top mark in some catechism exam. That is not why we put transferors on boards, so I can give you reassurance on that.

With regard to the make-up of the ESA board, let me restate what we tried to say in our submission. Although we welcome that make-up, the legal make-up and proportions should continue, as should the legal rights of those represented at that level of administration in education. That was, as I said: 40% elected; 20% transferors; 20% trustees; and 20% other nominees. If the ESA board has to be enlarged to enable other people to sit on it, we would assume that those proportions would continue. It could be an ESA board of 30 people, which would give more space for that other grouping — whatever it is made up of — if that is required. We would simply assume that those proportions would continue.

There was nothing much on television last night, so I read other written submissions to the Committee. Some greatly inspired me; some helped me to sleep; and some simply made me laugh, saying that

legal rights should be given up here, there and everywhere simply to put someone on somewhere. There are extra seats, and if legislation wishes to increase that number, the board could go to 30. Education and library boards have always had more than 20 members. I am not saying that they should be as big as some once were, but there might be scope to increase the membership. However, the proportions of those legal rights should continue. We want to make that point strongly.

Mrs Hale: Let me declare an interest as a member of the Presbyterian Board of Social Witness. I welcome you here this morning. As I read through your submission, I noticed that, under schedule 1 concerning ESA membership, you are concerned at the possibility that the Department:

"might in future require more than 4 nominations and potentially adversely affect the denominational balance of the final representation"

on ESA. This is my first experience of the balance issue; I was not on the Committee for the previous Education Bill. Could you indulge me by expanding on that? It would be appreciated.

Rev Trevor Gribben: Yes. At present, the Bill mentions four nominees from the transferors. The Transferor Representatives' Council is a very good example of Churches working together. There may not be many good examples, but this is one of them. It would be very rare for any of our individual Churches to put in a submission about education. We tend to speak with one voice, as current transferors of schools. Therefore, three Churches are represented here today: the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church and the Methodist Church. So in a sense, because of our internal need to hold that together, we would not want — even I would not want — four Presbyterians to be the four transferors. Even I would want the Methodist Church and the Church of Ireland in the room. That is a big thing for me to say. *[Laughter.]* So the thought of our sending in 12 names has nothing to do with who the Minister is, or a Minister picking four Church of Ireland members out of those 12 names. We have balances to keep. As transferors, we also want to keep a geographical balance, because a church and transferors in the rural west of the Bann have different issues than those in Ballymena, if I may give that example, which you might understand. In sending those four people, it is important for us to get the balances right. We have been given assurances, and I think that they were given in the House and are in Hansard, that the Minister will request four names from transferors this time around. We are a wee bit concerned about the future.

As transferors, we will send people to ESA who can do the job. We will not send our four most senior Church people — not that they could not do the job, of course. I am on public record, and I need to watch my pay check. *[Laughter.]* We will not observe any sort of hierarchy in the Churches; we will send people who can do the job.

Transferors on education boards — I will say this to Rosemary — have held education and library boards together, particularly during this last traumatic period. The chairs of the Western, Belfast, and North Eastern Boards are transferors, the chair of the Southern Board is a trustee, and there are appointed quangos in the South Eastern Board, much to our annoyance. However, that is another debate.

Mrs Hale: Thank you, Trevor.

The Chairperson: The issue of disparity when it comes to Ballymena is probably the language barrier more than anything else. *[Laughter.]* That is why I live in Ballymoney and not Ballymena.

Rev Trevor Gribben: I was once at a meeting on cross-border sharing in education, and I thought it was between Ballymena and Ballymoney. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Dobson: Thank you, Trevor, for such an enthusiastic presentation. You are very easy to listen to.

Rev Trevor Gribben: You should come to church some Sunday; that would put you to sleep.

Mrs Dobson: I am Church of Ireland, so I will have to be with Ian. *[Laughter.]* I know that we discussed RE in detail, but I want to go back to it. I agree with you that RE should have the appropriate level of support in the curriculum. I know you have covered this. Do you feel that the Bill, specifically with regard to the way that the board of governors is appointed, would affect RE's place in the curriculum? Do you believe that there is enough commitment in the Bill to ensure pupils' continued spiritual development?

Rev Ian Ellis: I will start off on that, and Rosemary can say something because she chairs a little group that meets with the RE advisers and transferors on a regular basis, so she has a bit more insight into that.

What we observed over the past couple of years is that the RE advisory group — there used to be four or five of them across the region — has shrunk as the boards have shrunk. Their positions were not replaced as they retired or moved to other posts. So, we just see an erosion of the support for teachers in RE. I suppose we are asking what will happen to curriculum support for RE in a new regime where CASS is being completely transformed. Could something be done around that to enhance the support that RE could have in schools?

One plank around that is the inspection thought. The other thought — I am straying into sectoral support a wee bit here, Chair — is that maybe a role for the sectoral support body could be around providing RE support, particularly in controlled schools, but also an advice service that could be bought into or used by other schools. There could be a place there to enhance the support that RE could have.

Mrs Dobson: Do you think there is enough commitment in the Bill for spiritual development?

Rev Ian Ellis: I think so. I was really heartened by the strapline across the Bill. Clause 2(2)(b) states that the duty of ESA is:

"to ensure the provision of efficient and effective youth services that contribute towards the spiritual, moral, cultural ..."

"Spiritual" is the first one that is there, and I think that resonates with all the communities that we have in Northern Ireland in that the main social determinant is Christianity and Christian faith. Although everybody is not necessarily at church on Sunday mornings, there is still within most parents a desire to have their children taught within the nurture or in a context of the Christian faith. So, we see spiritual development as a key thing and as having a key role in schools.

People could be looking at the ESA board and are perhaps concerned about a move towards a secular education system, but the board is reflecting, at the minute, the churches, the transferors are there, and I am sure that other people with a Christian background will be there. So, we can say that our education system in the future has got a commitment to the Christian faith right in at its very board. We are heartened by those things.

Rev Trevor Gribben: I have one point that will expand slightly on what Ian said. The theory around the delivery of CASS and support has all moved towards school improvement. As transferors, we are totally in favour of school improvement, but it has moved away from support of particular subject areas. We would argue that religious education is particular and needs particular attention. Because it is particular and exclusive in legislation in the way it is stated, we believe there needs to be support for that subject. Whether that is done through ESA, or, as we suggest at the bottom of page 2, through the sectoral support body, there needs to be support. We also believe that that was one of the guarantees given to the churches when they transferred churches to state control — that there would be support for religious education, which is open, welcoming and non-denominational but nonetheless important. C S Lewis, that great thinker in education, along with many others, said that those cornerstone values that have come from a Christian background and ethos are vital. They include things like integrity, honesty and working with people. We think that the vast majority of parents in Northern Ireland are not only comfortable with them, but want them in education. Therefore, we feel that religious education needs to be protected and enhanced. If a way can be found legislatively for making a statement on that, we would welcome it as the Bill goes through.

Miss Rainey: Ian referred to the group that I chair, which meets the RE advisers — or, more correctly, did meet the RE advisers. Ten years ago, we had five RE advisers, one in each of the respective education and library boards. Over the years, as people have been reassigned to other duties and under voluntary severance arrangements, members have gone. We are now reduced to one adviser, who happens to be in the Belfast Education and Library Board, and one advisory officer, who works part-time on RE in the Western Education and Library Board. Apart from that, there is no recognised support for RE teachers. That is of grave concern to the transferors because even the two we have no longer just deal with RE. They have been sidelined — and I use that word advisedly — into delivering community relations, equality and diversity and other support services, such as citizenship,

and learning for life and work. So, there are no longer RE advisers per se. It is of concern to them and us that that has become the case. Those meetings, which took place every term, have now gone into abeyance because they do not have time to meet us and have discussion with us. I want to say to you, using the words that they would say if there were here, that they found those meetings with us to be completely invaluable because they learned a lot about what was going on at congregational level and school level that they had not heard through their work in the library boards. Each of them paid tribute to those meetings and want them to continue. So, there is a deficit, and we would like to do something about that under the new support structure.

Mrs Dobson: I have one final point, if I may, Chair. Can I briefly take you back to the sectoral bodies? In your submission, you refer to the clarification and strengthening of functions of sectoral bodies, which you say should be underpinned by maximised legislative certainty. I am interested to hear more about your ideas for legislative certainty and what you would like to see in the Bill.

Rev Trevor Gribben: Well, everywhere where it says, "consult with", it could say, "consult with and have due regard for the views of". We are led to believe that that is a legal term which means that the ESA, the Department or whoever is doing the consulting has to have a really good reason for not taking those views into account. The Minister still decides. The Department still sets policy. The ESA will still do what it does. However, "consult with and have due regard for the views of" is stronger. I think that is a Civil Service term, which Chris will be delighted that we are throwing back to him, and no doubt can counter it in some way later today.

Although we are told that the term "persons or bodies deemed to represent" is a good term, maybe it could be strengthened in some way. If there is to be a controlled sectoral body, why can it not state "consult with and have due regard for the views of the controlled sectoral body" or whatever sectoral body? That would strengthen it for us.

Mrs Dobson: You suggest that sectoral bodies could have a role in appointing school principals. How do you see that operating?

Rev Trevor Gribben: Again, the sectoral body should have a role, along with the ESA, in identifying who the assessors should be in the pool of assessors that we feel needs to be set up. So, a group of assessors is set up who will work with controlled schools in making those should be senior-management appointments. I have chaired and vice-chaired, and been in controlled schools and on boards of governors of all kinds over the years. Although controlled schools have wanted the right to pick their own principal rather than send three names up to somebody else to pick, when controlled schools get that right, it will be the first time that they have had that right. There will be a feeling of vulnerability in many small controlled schools. So, assessors and who they are will be really important to ensure that the ethos of the sector is represented.

An outside voice can help a board of governors find the right questions to ask about leadership, and that is very important. For us, leadership is a big thing in the controlled sector. I will give you an example. Under current arrangements, other sectors have been able to use public funds to bid for and buy in leadership development for their sector, but, because the education boards have had to be neutral, they could not buy that in specifically for the controlled sector. We are hoping that, through the controlled sectoral body and other ways, the whole enhancement of leadership in controlled schools will be built up. That panel of assessors will be key in that.

Mr Craig: I had better declare an interest as well. I am on the board of governors of three schools. I have dealt directly with Trevor and you in the past over issues about transferors, and I commend you for your suggestion at the bottom of page 6. This has caused me personal difficulty in a post-primary school where, no matter what you do, you have to remember that governors are volunteers and, ultimately, a lot of them are still in full-time employment. Our system works for those who are retired, because they have more time to give, and that is fair enough, but that pool, unfortunately, gets exhausted. As Trevor knows, because he intervened with me on the issue, it takes a long time to circumnavigate our system. Unfortunately, it led to a situation where we were without transferor representatives in the school for three to six months. I welcome the fact that you are asking for that to be rectified, because it delays the system.

I also commend you, Trevor, because I can attest to the fact that the quality of the transferor representatives that I have seen in the schools where I am on the board of governors is very high indeed. If we had met yesterday, we would have had a doctor, a Church of Ireland minister who is a very great help — I am glad that you did not fall into the trap that he did — a lecturer from the local

tech, and a doctor of engineering, who sits on DETI. I can attest to the high quality of transferor representatives. Trevor, Ian and Rosemary, when you are considering people for boards of governors, I hope that you take that on board and keep up that high quality. That, in itself, attests not only to the fact that the four main churches legally have an influence on the schools and the Christian ethos, but, more importantly, you take very seriously the educational outcome of those in the sector. I am looking for an assurance that that will continue.

Rev Trevor Gribben: I welcome what you said and thank you for it. Yes, that is taken very seriously. Some people, probably through a lack of their own education, want to parody us as wanting to put clergymen on all over the place to have some kind of sinister control over education, but that is far from the reality. Transferor governors, like all governors, are very hard working. They are people who have huge experience. Sometimes on boards of governors, principals say that they are really key to helping the board of governors function. I am sure that exactly the same could be said if the trustees were sitting here, or the Catholic Church, so it is not a sectarian comment. Some who would want to try to remove any Christian ethos from education would want to parody us as clergymen who sit and have nothing to contribute. Some clergymen are very good and those good ones are on, hopefully. Others probably use their time doing other things.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for your time and submission. I have no doubt that the Committee will give serious consideration to your comments, as we do with all submissions. Thank you for your attendance, and I look forward to working with the sectoral support body when it comes next week.