



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Impact of Area-planning Policy on East
Belfast Schools: BELB/SEELB Briefing

25 June 2013

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)
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Trevor Lunn
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Dr Clare Mangan	Belfast Education and Library Board
Mr Gregory Butler	South Eastern Education and Library Board

The Chairperson: I welcome to the Committee this morning Dr Clare Mangan, the chief executive of the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB), and Mr Gregory Butler, the chief executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB).

Members, a considerable number of papers were received late on Friday. To help us understand the timeline, the Committee Clerk has tabled a further short explanatory note. The tabled papers also include the original development proposal from Orangefield High School, a letter from the Department asking for the BELB proposal to be amended, a letter from the head of corporate services at the BELB to the teachers' negotiating and pensions policy team in March, and the Department's correspondence relating to that briefing. I am sure that you have read those documents. You had plenty of time last night between 4.00 pm and 1.50 am. You were bound to get all the papers read then.

I also welcome to the Public Gallery friends and associates of Orangefield, and I thank them for the work and all that they have done on the issue before us today.

You may begin by making some opening comments, and then we will proceed.

Dr Clare Mangan (Belfast Education and Library Board): Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to come here. At the outset, may I say that I took up my position on the Belfast board on 7 February 2013? Therefore, my direct involvement in matters pertaining to Orangefield is from that date onwards. I wanted to specify that at the outset in advance of the discussions that may ensue.

The Chairperson: We appreciate that. The Committee tries as far as it possibly can not to get involved in individual cases, and it is sometimes extremely difficult not to. If we were to get involved in individual cases, the Committee would be snowed under with work, because there is such a raft of cases. However, there is a policy issue that we believe is central to what I will describe as the shameful way in which Orangefield has been treated. The papers have confirmed my worst fears and

suspicious around the way in which a controlled school has been treated. If the area-planning process is to have any validity or credibility, we need to make sure that we do not replicate those mistakes and faults in other areas. I think that the whole process has some credibility issues. That is the reason that I was keen for the Committee to have a serious look at this.

Gregory, do you have any opening comments to make?

Mr Gregory Butler (South Eastern Education and Library Board): Not at this stage, Mervyn.

The Chairperson: The minutes from Orangefield, which have been signed by BELB officials, appear to show that the board promised Orangefield High School that it was to be amalgamated with Ashfield Boys' High School and Ashfield Girls' High School. The Department intervened on 11 January 2013, highlighting the ambiguity of the original development proposal. Then, some time in February, everything seemed to change. Clare met the chair of the board of governors, and then the BELB wrote to the teachers' negotiating and pensions policy team. Suddenly, it was all very clear that this was a closure and not an amalgamation. What happened? Why did the Belfast Board originally present the closure to Orangefield as being an amalgamation? Did the Belfast Board change its mind? Did it follow departmental intervention? I ask that, given that fact that I am beaten up, repeatedly, by the Department and the Minister with the line, "It has nothing to do with us. That is the decision of the board."

We are told that we have a line of demarcation between the Department on one side and the managing authorities on the other. Clare, I appreciate, and I want to place on record, that the actions of others are not where you would like to be in respect of what happened in the past. However, we have to ask you questions, which, unfortunately, relate to the actions of others who were in your position or were on the board.

Dr Mangan: As I said, I took up position on 7 February. In the bundle of papers that you have received, there is reference to development proposal 215, which relates to Orangefield. There does appear to be some ambiguity in how the closure of Orangefield was initially described. There are two separate processes. If it were an amalgamation between Orangefield and the Ashfield schools, a totally different process would apply, with the establishment of an interim board of governors, and so forth, as part of that process. That was not outlined in any of the preparatory engagement with Orangefield or, indeed, Ashfield Boys' High School and Ashfield Girls' High School. Therefore, the way in which the consultation had been conducted for Orangefield, and the process that was invariably decided on as being the appropriate process, was a de facto closure, not an amalgamation with two other schools. That is why the imperative was to ensure that the wording in the development proposal as published needed to be revised to reflect the fact that we were talking about the cessation of education at Orangefield, and that is why an amended proposal was brought to the Belfast Board on 7 February and subsequently published in the local press.

The Chairperson: Let us step back, Clare, and look at the process that brought us to the letter that was sent to your predecessor, Gavin Boyd, on 11 January, which is the key letter in all of this. Why was the Department interfering in what was being proposed by the Belfast Board? It is very clear that the Department writes to highlight its concerns about the wording and implications of the recently published development proposal. It was clear that there had been a knowledge, an understanding, Chinese whispers, e-mails or whatever it was that the board had communicated to the Department, and the Department was not happy. As a result, we have the letter of 11 January. I want to concentrate on that for a moment, because there is a fundamental issue here that we have to get to the bottom of, and I will come to that in a moment or two.

Why had there been ambiguity, and who created it? Clearly, promises were made to staff and to parents. It would seem that Ashfield did not even know that some of those things were being discussed. There is the whole issue of the relocation of Classroom 2000 (C2k): Ashfield was almost oblivious to the fact that that had to be done. If you do the figures — I have to put my hands up and say that I was never very good at numeracy at school — around 100 pupils were never going to have a place. They were not going to have a place even if you did what was being proposed. Where were those children going to go? We now have the scandalous situation of staff not knowing what is happening. They were promised one thing, but now something else is taking place. The parents are very concerned about getting their children into the school that they were promised. We do not know what the future holds.

Dr Mangan: I cannot speak on behalf of the Department; I can speak only on behalf of the Belfast Board. However, the first paragraph of the letter of 11 January states:

"I am writing to you to highlight the Department's concerns about the wording and implications of the recently published Development Proposal".

Therefore, that development proposal would have been published in the local press. I deduce from that that it was on the basis of the publication, although that would obviously require clarification from elsewhere. It was on the basis that it was published in the press and that there were concerns about the ambiguity of the wording. The third paragraph of the letter states that you need to be clear as to the intent, because a development proposal should be clear as to its intent, so that it can fulfil its correct purpose of advising the public and enabling them to avail themselves of any consultation opportunities that arise as a consequence.

The Chairperson: I want to go to an issue that I think is at the heart of this. Well, it is one of the issues at the heart of this. I want clarity, because I am not exactly sure. Forgive me if I say anything that is inaccurate, and do correct me. To your knowledge, were the contents of the initial development proposal discussed with the Department prior to its publication?

Dr Mangan: Chair, as I have said, to my knowledge they were not, but I can say that only from the point of view of having come into the board —

The Chairperson: Yes, and I accept that, Dr Mangan.

I understand that the previous chief executive of the Belfast Board was also an accounting officer in the Department. Therefore, here we have Mr Gavin Boyd, accounting officer of the Department of Education, who was on secondment as interim chief executive of the Belfast Education and Library Board. He has had more titles than I have had socks in the past two or three years. On behalf of the board, he published a development proposal to the organisation that has to make the decision and that he is employed by. Is there not a serious conflict of interest in that process?

Dr Mangan: The Belfast Education and Library Board would approve the development proposal. It is brought to the board for approval and, subsequent to that, goes through the usual publication process. I think that it important to differentiate between an officer and the board, which de facto approves the proposal.

The Chairperson: OK. Have we any documentation? We will have to find out about the legal aspects of the issue and get more information from the Department. When this was discussed by the management board of the Department of Education, did the then chief executive of the Belfast Board absent himself from any decision? Was he asked about it in any way? Were there any discussions? Clearly, there was a conflict of interest. His board made the decision to publish. I accept the point that you make about the role, Clare, but the Belfast Board, of which he was interim chief executive, albeit that he was an accounting officer of the Department, made a decision, and he was then party to it, but he was also party to the organisation that would ultimately make the decision on the proposal. In your professional judgement, if you were in that position, do you believe that the right thing to do would be to absent yourself from any discussion or decision-making process?

Dr Mangan: In my professional opinion, I think that it is important to be clear about what your professional responsibilities are in roles that you fulfil. In that regard, each individual has to make his or her own professional judgement pertaining to whether there is a conflict of interest. In this case, it is a matter for someone else to make that particular assessment.

The Chairperson: A quick calculation shows that the closure of Orangefield and Dundonald high schools and the amalgamation of Knockbreda and Newtownbreda high schools, coupled with the expansions of the two Ashfield high schools and Priory Integrated College, will leave over 100 pupils with no school to go to. You may, of course, argue that falling rolls in the area will mean that no pupils will be left without a place. However, would the Belfast Board and the South Eastern Board not accept that their plans for this area are risky and that they leave the controlled sector with only just enough places? Do both boards not accept that the plans are rendered even more risky by the well-known poor state of the accommodation at Ashfield Boys' High School, never mind the likely delays in the relocation of C2K and the very probable need for more special educational needs (SEN) support for the expanding schools in the area?

Dr Mangan: There are four separate points there, as I understand it. The first relates to the numbers, from the point of view of both the Belfast Board and the South Eastern Board. It is important to emphasise that there has been regular engagement between the two boards in recent months on the figures relating to the east Belfast schools. We want to be clear that, for the development proposals, the submissions made, and their consideration in a wider area-planning context, we had sufficient places to ensure that there was capacity in the future, and our continued review of those figures indicates that, at this stage, those figures are still accurate. I am not sure whether Gregory has a different view.

Mr Butler: We looked at and kept working on the total numbers, and we keep them under review all the time. We are confident that the numbers provided in the stage part of the Ashfield proposal facilitate the complete make-up.

Dr Mangan: The second issue relates to C2K. We have had many meetings with the principal of Ashfield Boys' in recent months, and what is clear is that, irrespective of any agreed closure of Orangefield or any permutations that take place in east Belfast, Ashfield Boys' required additional accommodation on that site. Therefore, the imperative to move C2K to another location was energised by the development proposal, but the reality is that the school needed additional accommodation anyway. In that regard, Ashfield Boys' will be accessing additional classrooms that are part of the C2K allocation of space, with effect from September 2013, to meet the curriculum needs as the school currently requests them.

The third issue that you raised relates to special educational needs provision. In recent months, both boards have met to consider the special needs requirements of the east Belfast schools, because there is a recognition that a high percentage of the pupils at Orangefield have statements of special educational need. I know that some of those pupils will not have reached the end of their compulsory school career, but, nevertheless, there is still a need to ensure that we have appropriate SEN provision.

There is also a recognition that Dundonald High School has a learning support provision, but, in the totality of need in the east Belfast schools, we need to ensure that special educational centres are part of any considered development of post-primary sites so that the diverse needs of children on those locations can be met. It is our intention in the autumn term to progress with more specific development proposals for the Ashfield schools on special educational needs. That has been discussed informally with the principals of both of those schools.

The fourth issue that you raised relates to the wider issue of area planning and the strategic overview of it. All that I can say is that, in recent months, any revisions or reviews of any proposal or arrangement have been made with continued reference to an area-planning framework. I do not want to speak on behalf of Gregory, but I feel that, based on the regular meetings that we have had, that is an accurate reflection of the situation.

The Chairperson: There is so much that we have had try to get our heads around in a short time, but when you read the minutes of the board, it appears that Orangefield pupils and staff are the losers here. Promises were made that could never be fulfilled. This comment was made in the Orangefield board minutes of 14 March 2013:

"There was the flexibility for the Board of Governors to allow the school to stay open another year. The Board would help to deal with the emotional stress put upon the staff, pupils and parents. The Board had let the pupils/parents down, not the school."

With all that as background to the issue, where are we at at this moment in time? What confidence can we have as a Committee? I am someone who has an interest in the controlled sector, despite what the Minister or others might say in papers. I come from the controlled sector, and I am very proud of the controlled sector. I have not come to the issue as someone who has begun defending it only recently. I am someone who came out of the controlled sector. It is absolutely shameful that there are parents in the community who were promised things by the previous chief executive and a board that now cannot be delivered. I want to know now what steps have been taken to deal with the emotional stress and the staff, pupils and parents, who are particularly affected by the Orangefield situation.

There is a wider issue around the area plan for south and east Belfast. With my party hat on, I have attended meetings to discuss that, and I have provided you with a paper. However, what is the position at this minute in time? If I speak to members of the board of governors — some of whom are present today — can I have confidence that they will not turn around and tell me a raft of other stories that knock down anything that we are hearing? When I use the word "stories", I mean an accurate reflection of where they currently are, and that the situation has not got any better.

Dr Mangan: I refer to the third page of the document that I prepared. Paragraph 4 refers to meetings with schools regarding revised arrangements. I apologise for the mistake in the heading, which should read "Revised Arrangements" as opposed to "Advised Arrangements".

From the beginning of March, it became clear to me, as chief executive of the Belfast Board, that the proposed closure of Orangefield by 31 August was an ambitious date that had delivery difficulties for the school, the pupils, the staff and the wider arrangements that needed to be put in place. Meetings took place that I personally attended from 5 March onwards, and they are summarised on that page. The purpose of doing that was to assist the board of governors of Orangefield, as well as the parents and the teaching and non-teaching staff, with the status of the situation as it was then and the situation that they were moving to. I felt that the imperative was to do that as early as possible so that people were clear about the revised position. That is a position that I have continued to reinforce in any contact that I have had with the principal or with the other two schools that are affected as a consequence. The priority was to ensure that, before the end of the second term, the schools knew what the revised position was so that when they returned after the Easter holidays they would be clear that they would not be closing at the end of June 2013. I felt that that would have been very difficult for the parents, pupils and staff to deal with.

Since then, board officers have worked directly with the school to ensure that any particular arrangements that needed to be made for particular pupils to facilitate school placements for September 2013 could be facilitated. That work has been ongoing so that pupils who are transferring have placements for September 2013. The context that we are in is that the communications that were made from March onwards remain as is. We have continued to reinforce that message, and the view is that Orangefield High School will continue to exist from September 2013, with any proposed revisions to the development proposal coming into effect, subject to ministerial approval, in August 2014.

The Chairperson: What about the relocation of the year 10 pupils?

Dr Mangan: The relocation of the year 10 pupils has progressed. I will give you the summary of that. If I get into very small numbers, I will be wary of data protection. I will take the situation that was confirmed a few days ago. For Orangefield High School, we will separate out the boys and the girls for the purposes of where they elected to go. We have nine boys in total, and they all have placements for September. Five are going to Ashfield Boys' High School and four pupils are going to other schools.

The information that I have is that 16 girls will transfer. At this point, 13 of those will go to Newtownbreda High School, and other schools have been identified for the three others. At this time, the information that I have is that pupils have places for September 2013.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that you are sitting facing me, but the difficulty is that I am getting indications that the numbers that you gave for the boys are not the case.

Dr Mangan: The board officers obtained that information from the school.

The Chairperson: If we can, we need to facilitate some discussion after this meeting around what the situation is. There is clearly a difference of opinion and view on the figures that you have given us.

Mr Kinahan: May I just come in on that point?

The Chairperson: Go ahead.

Mr Kinahan: Clare, how much of that was in line with parents' choice, or were those the only places that the pupils could get?

Dr Mangan: Some of it was in line with parental choice and some was in line with the availability of places. Even within that, a small number of pupils elected to go to schools that, again, reflect parental choice. Therefore, it is a mixture.

The Chairperson: Gregory, before we move on to other questions, one of the issues that I have been concerned about in the whole process for some time, and I raised this with you recently, is the fact that two different boards might have two different approaches and absolutely no political accountability, which you could argue is the case on the Belfast Board, given its membership deficit. We have had absolutely no political representation on the South Eastern Board since 2006 or 2007, when commissioners started running it. Had the commissioners held any discussions with the Belfast Board on decisions that impacted clearly on, for example, Priory Integrated College? What discussions were commissioners privy to and involved in during the process that led to the first development proposal?

Mr Butler: Commissioners and board officers have two separate roles. Belfast Board officers and South Eastern Board officers met to discuss the proposals. The commissioners were made aware of that contact and what was being discussed. It is not usual for board-level meetings to be held to discuss proposals. The commissioners were aware of it. The two chairs would have had discussions about the joint working between the two boards. Therefore, the discussions about proposals would have been held at chairperson level, and the chief executives would have brought the proposals to each board.

The Chairperson: OK. The overall numbers in the area have not changed, and they will not change much by 2025. Therefore, why was there what seemed to be a great rush by the two boards to take out of the system three controlled schools?

Mr Butler: I can speak only for the South Eastern Board. The rationale for that is well documented in the three development proposals that we provided to you. Dundonald High School was identified in 2007 as needing improvement and leadership. A follow-up inspection in 2009 found a continued need for improvement, and the school went into formal intervention in December 2009. Following an inspection in June 2010, it remained in formal intervention. It exited that in September 2010 but went back into formal intervention in 2012. Therefore, there was an educational performance situation with Dundonald.

Knockbreda High School's situation is not dissimilar. In October 2009, it was identified as inadequate. In October 2011, after a follow-up inspection, it remained in formal intervention. In 2012, it improved but remained in formal intervention. Again, there were educational performance issues.

In November 2006, a number of areas of improvement were identified at Newtownbreda High School. From then until 2012, four follow-up inspections found that it remained at satisfactory, which is not as good as we had hoped for. From our perspective, pure and simple, we had three schools with issues. There was also an issue with the make-up of the enrolment at Knockbreda. There were 135 year-12 pupils at the school this year, who are, therefore, leaving. There were approximately 100 year-12 pupils the previous year, and multiplying 235 by the budget figure gives you something in the region of just over £500,000. From the SEELB's point of view, the 2014 date gave us time to manage a situation in which we had two schools in formal intervention and one classed as satisfactory. Educational performance was the main driver.

The Chairperson: I do not accept that you solve the problem by closing a school and scattering the children like confetti. I do not accept the rationale that the board used. Even if we accept your rationale, why would you put the children into Priory Integrated College, which has as many difficulties as any of the schools that you are proposing to close? How come Priory was the one that ended up benefiting as a result of this? Basically, you are shifting the problem down the carriageway into Hollywood.

Mr Butler: One of the interesting aspects of area planning is parental choice and parental preference, which you have talked about. We identified very clearly in our proposal a strategic way forward about where we were looking at, and we highlighted the parental choice that that provided. It gave parents three options. Of the options in the controlled sector, one was co-educational and one was a single-sex school. The third option was an integrated school. The design was to provide those three options.

I do not accept that Priory Integrated College is in exactly the same position because, if you look at its performance, you see that there is one dip in a particular year. There was no difficulty with its

previous performance. There was one year when the performance was specific to certain problems, and I expect that that will change when we see the results this year. There is not a similar comparison to be made. Priory was not in formal intervention and was not judged unsatisfactory by the Department, so I do not accept that.

On your point about shifting the problem to a different area, when you look at the distribution of pupils, you find that it was not the case that people were going from Dundonald to that particular area. It was a case of using area planning to look at the total number of places in the geographical area. It is, to a certain extent, going with the shared future concept, of which the integrated option is a central part. So, from day one, when the development proposals were written, we have been clear on why those three options were chosen.

The Chairperson: If you accept the premise that you judge a school solely on the basis of how many pupils achieve five GCSEs at A* to C, we are in for a lot more school closures. It is hypocritical for the Department and, I have to say, for a board to buy into the idea that the sole measure of attainment should be five GCSEs at A* to C. The Department's policy is that it is immoral to have a test at 11. That is wrong, it says, but you can test them until they are blue in the face when they are 16. If the pupils do not get the five GCSEs at A* to C, the Department will close the school. The whole system has got out of control on the issue of not being able to provide for young people in the controlled sector. If you carry this through, the figures might be able to show that, overall, we are doing well on paper. However, this is not a paper exercise; this is about pupils, and that is what really concerns me.

Mr Butler: Can I draw you back to the 2007 report? In the development proposals, unusually, we included the complete inspection report. It was not just the educational performance that was identified as failing — it was leadership, management and school development planning. Educational performance was not considered in isolation. Formal intervention is not a one-horse race. The inspectorate looks at a number of things. Just in case it is seen as a conflict of interest, my wife is a retired primary school inspector, so I do not now have a conflict of interest to declare to the Committee. That particular inspection identified not just one area but four. We clearly stated in our report exactly what the situation was and we included the inspection report so that we could not be accused of hiding that information. All the inspection reports and follow-up reports are in the development proposals. We have been clear about our rationale. It is not about a single issue. A number of issues were identified at Knockbreda, and we have set out the numbers and the financial issues. The decision was not based on a single issue.

Mr Kinahan: It was not so much in your patch, but I have had two or three calls from parents in south Antrim. I go back to my military days long ago when we knew how every single soldier was progressing in their training and where they were going. Is there a system in place so that every pupil, parent, teacher, governor and the non-teaching staff all know where they are today, what will happen in the future and what the options are? Is there a management plan for you to communicate with the schools so that everyone knows where they are going and can enquire and keep in touch with it?

Dr Mangan: As I said earlier, I met the teaching and non-teaching staff in March. Obviously, the outworkings of this will have differential consequences for teachers and non-teaching staff, and it is important to recognise that. At this point, the non-teaching staff wanted assurances that their job is secure for now, and they were advised that the school will still be open in the next academic year. Obviously, the Minister will ultimately make the decision on closure, but they were advised that, when we are clear, if the proposal is approved and the school is closed, we will then re-engage with the teaching and non-teaching staff about the way forward. At this point, the message that I have been giving consistently is that the school is still open, children require to be taught, and the work continues. When I am aware that the development proposal has been approved, subject to that being the outcome, I have, in conversations with the school principal, indicated that I will let her know as soon as possible so that the next step in the operation can commence.

Mr Kinahan: Whether it is C2k or the new building, are there any major pitfalls or questions, such as planning issues, that we do not know about yet with the plans?

Dr Mangan: With C2k, there are two steps to the work in Ashfield Boys' School. That school requires work for its pupils now, irrespective of anything else that is happening. Therefore, the board has had points of direct engagement — I have been party to that — with the principal and senior members of staff about their immediate needs. A £500,000 minor works programme will commence at Ashfield Boys' School at the end of June to make amendments and upgrades to the existing classrooms, or at least a subset of the classrooms, for September. The intention is that the next phase of that work will

take place in the next year. In other words, at this stage, we are clear about how we will deal with the minor works and when they are likely to take place. At the end of the day, that depends on continued engagement with the schools. We do not anticipate any difficulty with the minor works at Ashfield Boys' School.

The issue at Ashfield Girls' School is more complex because it is a public-private partnership (PPP) school. We had hoped to do some work there, in the first instance, under the minor works programme. Because it is a PPP school, there are high administrative costs associated with any amendments that need to be made, and our view, as a public body that must have regard to value for money, was that the administrative costs were disproportionate to the minor works costs. Knowing that the work at Ashfield Girls' School was part of a two-phased piece of work, I believe that it is more sensible at this stage to progress the work in one bundle, with one overall admin cost, rather than doing it in two phases. I met the principal of the school and one of her vice-principals again recently to reinforce the revised arrangements pertaining to those works.

Mr Kinahan: I have one more follow-up question. Are you are getting the resources or the funding you need? You mentioned £500,000.

Dr Mangan: We have the minor works moneys and, on the work that we believe needs to be done on Ashfield Girls' School, we have submitted a bid to the Department through the school enhancement programme because the work is substantial. On a separate issue, in relation to Ashfield Boys' School, our fundamental belief is that, to enhance the quality of the educational experience of boys in the east Belfast area, Ashfield Boys' School ultimately needs a newbuild. We are trying to sow the seed in relation to that.

The Chairperson: I have a difficulty with that, Clare. Did the former chief executive and the board officers not know that that was the amount of work that needed to be done before they progressed to a decision on the closure of Orangefield High School? You are talking about a business case, which is not the speediest thing in the world when you see the progress that they make. Did the board not discuss the issues of C2k and the risks? I cannot get my head around that. You refer to us in your paper, and I appreciate that this is your paper, you are accountable for this paper and not the actions of others, but the risk and management of that risk was agreed with C2k and the Western Education and Library Board, which is the managing board, on 9 May 2013. Have we any previous correspondence from the previous chief executive that tells us that the same process approach was being taken? This is all part of the transition — this is all part of what would happen if you were to go down this road; these are all the component parts. It is quite clear that these are the spokes that were put into this wheel when the previous board — the board under the previous chief executive — did not even know that that wheel existed. Why are we doing all of this now, when it should have been preparatory work prior to the development proposal that was first published?

Dr Mangan: I cannot answer that because I was not there. All that I can say is that, once I took up post and became aware of the different strands of this, it became clear that C2k's relocation was, in itself, complex. The school system relies on an effective ICT network and we wanted to ensure that any amendments that needed to be made to the relocated site were appropriate and fit for purpose in relation to the operation of C2k. As we have progressed since February, we have had informal points of contact with the Western Board. That was formalised in a meeting in May because we wanted to be absolutely clear about their business need, and we took the point of view of engaging in this work at a time that minimised any risk, not just to C2k, but ultimately to schools that are C2k users.

Mr Lunn: I cannot help thinking, as you have observed, Chair, that we have the wrong people before us today. I do not like to personalise these things because we are dealing with boards rather than individuals, but what we really needed here today was somebody who would not continually say, with all due respect, Clare, that they were not there. The minutes and the papers are there, but it would have been helpful if we had had, preferably, the previous chief executive, but somebody senior from the board to tell us what actually happened between October and February.

What is the difference between a closure and an amalgamation from the pupils' point of view? The pupils are at the heart of this.

Dr Mangan: An amalgamation is where two schools, effectively, come together.

Mr Lunn: I know that. What is the difference from the pupils' point of view?

Dr Mangan: The difference really is that, in an amalgamation, there is an assumption that the pupils from those two schools will become part of the new school. In a closure, the difference is that parents will exercise their parental right to avail themselves of a wider range of school options; in other words, some parents will elect to avail themselves of one school, and others another. In a closure situation, although it depends on geography, etc, there tend to be more options.

Mr Lunn: Parents would have the same options in an amalgamation. They could take their children somewhere else if they did not like the school that it was being amalgamated with. What I cannot understand about this situation — it fills me with dread about what will happen when we start to action the area plans — is the fact that the school was advised that it was to amalgamate, which now turns out to be incorrect, and that the board of governors, unusually, appears to have agreed with that decision the following day. Most boards and parents will fight to the death for their school. However, in this case, they accepted the decision, and all that they wanted was an orderly transfer of their pupils into a new situation, particularly those in year 10 and year 11, which are difficult years. It seems to have come apart. When the various boards come to action the area plans, and they are dealing with a number of these situations, what will happen? Frankly, this is appalling. Mervyn has asked most of the questions, so I am just speaking my mind. What can you tell me about this?

Dr Mangan: All I can say is that, in order for the pupils to have transferred from Orangefield to Ashfield Boys' School and Ashfield Girls' School, work would have had to be done to those schools to deal with enhanced capacity. In other words, Ashfield Girls' School, as it currently stands, would not have been able to meet the curriculum needs, nor would it have been able to deal with an increased enrolment effectively unless adjustments were made to its building. That is the reality of the situation. At the end of the day, my concern was that, if Orangefield closed and the expectation had been created that the pupils would move to Ashfield Girls' School, we would not actually have the capacity at that moment to facilitate them.

Mr Lunn: Yes, but you can see that: that is obvious. Why was it not obvious last October? I do not get this at all. There is no joined-up thinking here. You have a situation where pupils have to transfer; there is not enough accommodation; it depends on money being spent, which might not be there; it depends on C2k moving out; and maybe they have nowhere to go. I really do not know. However, I do not see any linkage between these various decisions.

Dr Mangan: The linkages are important, because it demonstrates that it is not just about a closure and pupils moving; other elements are involved. At the end of the day, the children have to move to a school that has accommodation to meet their needs. All I am saying is that, with an extension of the planning period, we have identified the constituent components that have to be put in place to effect progression to the new arrangement, which is likely to be less fractious or less difficult for the pupils or the staff.

Mr Lunn: You certainly need to come up with something that is less fractious for the pupils. Would it be normal in these situations to try to do this inside a year and to announce in October that the school will not reopen the following September, or would you normally look at a two-year period?

Dr Mangan: Ordinarily, you would look at a two-year period. Given that the revised development proposal was not published until February 2013, the time frame was very tight. Normally, if you were working towards the closure, it would usually be planned over a two-year period.

Mr Lunn: If Gavin Boyd or a representative of the board at that time were here, what rationale would he give us for the haste in this case, given all the other factors? Please do not tell me that you were not there.

Dr Mangan: I cannot answer that.

The Chairperson: It is distressing, when you read the minutes on Orangefield High School, that you see that senior officials in the Belfast Board were doing what they were told. Another member of the Belfast Board described the shutting of Orangefield as an absorption and not a closure or an amalgamation, as it would have repercussions on jobs. The individual knew that this had never been done before, but it had the backing of the chief, who I assume was Mr Boyd. The response — Clare, this was a comment that you made in relation to that board official — was that he was only doing what he was told. Serious allegations are then made about lies being told and people being deceived

throughout this whole process. I am worried. Boards of governors take a pasting for many things related to schools. One of the comments made by a member of the board of governors was that they were going to be left in their own community with egg on their face. Remember, these are people from the community; they are not bussed, shipped or placed in that community; they are part of it. How do we retrieve that situation?

Dr Mangan: When I met the board of governors on 14 March, I gave them every reassurance that I could that every action that they had taken as a board of governors had been carried out in good faith. They had endeavoured to progress the matter in accordance with the input and advice that they had received from the Belfast Board. Therefore, I have endeavoured to assure the board of governors that any course of action that they pursued had been in good faith. I tried to give them the assurances that I felt they needed.

Mrs Dobson: I notice the members of the board of governors shaking their heads vigorously with sheer frustration. That is evident. That frustration is also evident among the Committee members, as we listen to how the Orangefield situation was handled. It is clear to me that, in taking decisions on the future of Orangefield High School, you gave no consideration to the impact on the community, the children and — the Chair touched on this earlier — the emotional stress that it would bring. It jars with me a bit that the Minister says that he always puts pupils first. Obviously, he did not do that in this situation.

The Minister turns down applications for expansions, and I have seen that quite a lot in my own area, because of what he calls the adverse impact on displacement that it would have on other schools in the area. Is the same not true when it comes to closing down schools?

Dr Mangan: It depends on the school and on the situation. Also, in this particular instance, the intention really is to progress in a way that provides for continued engagement with parents when we get into the next academic year.

Mrs Dobson: There does not seem to have been a lot of engagement with the board of governors, to judge by the faces behind you.

Dr Mangan: I could engage with the board of governors only when there was a need to divert the path in respect of what was being proposed. I engaged directly with the board of governors on 14 March. The board of governors was present at the meetings at which I spoke with the teaching and non-teaching staff. I also had points of contact around that time with the chair of the board of governors. The point that I have continued to make, and the points of engagement that I had with the school principal, is that there is no point in going back to the board of governors every week to say that there has been no change in the situation. When we know of any adjustment to the situation with the development proposal, there will be further engagement with the board of governors. I am not sure what further engagement the board thinks it should have at this stage. Obviously, I can clarify that at a later stage.

Mrs Dobson: Trevor Lunn has left the meeting, but he described the handling of this as "appalling", and it evidently is. It is very concerning, given the impact of area planning on other schools. Gregory, you are well aware in the Southern Education and Library Board area of the impact on the Dickson plan as well. Do you think that it is right that area-planning solutions aimed at resolving issues at one school have a negative impact on the whole system and on other schools? Will you elaborate on that?

Mr Butler: I am not going to get drawn into the Southern Board situation since I am no longer an employee of that body. I do not want to comment on that particular area. In relation to development proposals in general, I think that we have to look at the impact on every school, and that is what the process does. The Department's policy, which I think is probably pretty well named, is Every School a Good School. If that is what the target is, that must be the first priority in decision-making. I think that the Minister, even when he has turned down proposals, has looked at that. It is not about sustaining unsustainable schools. That is the starting point: you look at the totality. That is why, when we were considering our proposals, we looked at and described the total picture to see how we interact with each other. It is not just a question of looking at some of the proposals that have been turned down. It is for the Minister to defend that. In our proposals we have clearly stated what the impact on other schools will be and how we have looked at the situation in its totality. That is what area planning is about.

Mrs Dobson: I would have thought that putting pupils first was the starting point.

Mr Butler: Yes. Putting pupils first is at the centre of Every School a Good School. We clearly stated in the development proposal that that is what it is about. We started off with a definition that made that clear. We need good practice, focusing not on institutions but on meeting the needs of all pupils through high quality learning, recognising the centrality of teachers. That is the starting point of Every School a Good school, and that was our starting point, which we stated as early as possible in the development proposals. That is the driving factor; not institutions. It is about considering what is the best provision.

Mrs Dobson: Obviously, that has not been carried out in practice, because the needs of the pupils are not being put first in this situation.

Mr Butler: All that I can say is that, as far as the South Eastern Board is concerned, our focus is on the needs of pupils.

Dr Mangan: I can confirm that, in relation to this particular issue, we have been working with the South Eastern Board on the progression of this matter from an area planning perspective.

The Chairperson: It is clear that there is still a vast chasm between Committee members' views and what we have heard about the process that was used. I find it somewhat alarming that the controlled sector is being given a short period of time to cope with decisions made in relation to it, and we have another school in another jurisdiction and another city — you will be aware of it, but I will not name the school, because I think that would be unfair — where it took years, and millions of pounds were poured into it, and only now do we have a development proposal to close the school. I am making it publicly clear today that I am not buying into any more desolation of the controlled sector. I have a letter from the former chief executive — I think that we will summon him to this Committee — in which he states:

"The BELB has given careful consideration to the Department's concerns and, whilst we are confident that all the staff of Orangefield High School fully understand the implications of this proposal, we have decided to publish an amended version".

It is quite clear that the staff did not understand those implications. That is a letter dated 17 January; we are not talking about years ago. It is not acceptable, and I think we have to draw this to a conclusion. It is not satisfactory that the Committee has not been able to get answers because it was a decision of others, albeit that other board officers were involved. We are at the beginning of a process, and we will see where it takes us.

In the meantime, I urge both chief executives to publicly demonstrate that they do collaborate, because the public perception is that you both live in silos, and never the twain shall meet, which is to the detriment of public confidence. If area planning is to mean anything, it should not just be done on the basis of one defined geographical area. What happens in the east, south, and — some would argue — the west, has implications for how we plan the educational estate.

In the meantime, Gregory and Clare, thank you very much for your attendance.