



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

PEDU Stage 2 Reports: Action Plans

14 March 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Education

PEDU Stage 2 Reports: Action Plans

14 March 2012

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Phil Flanagan
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr Conall McDevitt
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Daithí McKay

Witnesses:

Mrs Katrina Godfrey	Department of Education
Mr Alan McMullan	Department of Education
Ms Eve Stewart	Department of Education

The Chairperson: I welcome Katrina Godfrey, who we have not seen for a long time at the Committee. You are very welcome back.

Mrs Katrina Godfrey (Department of Education): Thank you, Chair. It is a pleasure as always.

The Chairperson: You used to be here more often.

Mrs Godfrey: I was a frequent flyer.

The Chairperson: I also welcome Alan McMullan and Eve Stewart; thank you for taking the time to come. Katrina is the director of planning and performance management at the Department of Education. Alan is the deputy head of the schools access team; and Eve is the head of the participation and parenting team. Members should maybe have a conversation with you about that issue, Eve, after we are finished here — we might get some useful tips. It is over to you, Katrina.

Mrs Godfrey: I welcome the opportunity to brief the Committee. In case the titles were not clear, I will let you know the roles of my colleagues. Alan takes the policy lead on school transport, and Eve takes the policy lead on school meals. My role has been to co-ordinate the overall performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) exercise in the context of the wider responsibilities that sit within my directorate. That is why it is the three of us with you this morning, Chair.

The Committee will have received the two stage 2 reports at the start of February and also the paper that we prepared for today's meeting. As you are aware, the reports focus on two major areas of operation: school meals, and school transport. For us, those are significant areas of spend. That is perhaps not the case in the overall education budget context, but, of the proportion of the budget that does not go to schools, they are significant areas of spend with in the region of £75 million spent on transport, and £29 million on school meals. In fact, I suppose that it is £59 million gross on school meals if you count the contributions that parents and pupils make through the amount that they pay for their meals.

The main emphasis in the reviews has been on capturing best practice in the boards and on looking at how that best practice can be applied more consistently across all the boards. The reports, in both cases, find scope for significant potential savings if all education and library boards (ELBs) matched the performance of the most efficient in each aspect. I say "potential" because the PEDU reports recognise that it will not be possible in every case, because of geography or the nature or needs of the children in cohorts, for every board to match exactly the unit costs of the cheapest. However, through the reports, we find that, even in areas where a board is the most efficient, there will be aspects of its performance that could be informed and improved by the practice in the relevant aspect in other education and library boards.

The reports have been signed off by the Minister of Education and by the Minister of Finance and Personnel. That is an important point. The process saw us working very closely with our colleagues in the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), and the reports were signed off at a meeting between the two Ministers. As you will have seen, they contain 53 recommendations, 24 of which are specific to meals, 25 that are specific to transport and four that are common to both. Not surprisingly, many of the areas where scope for savings has been highlighted relate either directly or indirectly to staffing levels or terms and conditions, and, therefore, the Committee will appreciate that the process of consultation and discussion with staff and their representatives will be an important part of how we take forward the reports. In that context, I can tell the Committee that work on action plans that address the recommendations is well advanced. The intention is that there will be two action plans — one for each report — that set out how we will respond to each of the recommendations. Those action plans will be shared with the Committee, but we are also committed to publishing them and the progress reports on them, because the Minister believes that transparency and accountability are very important.

The action plans take a twin-track approach. Where it makes sense to act immediately to make improvements, that will happen. We will expect the boards to take the action that is needed to address recommendations that can be addressed immediately. However, there will also be many areas where the more effective approach will be to incorporate recommendations into the service or staffing models that are being developed and designed for the Education and Skills Authority (ESA). The work of the implementation teams is also crucial, and, in that regard, the reports are incredibly timely in informing that work. As I said at the outset, our trade union colleagues have an interest as well. The Minister has already briefed the education unions, teaching and non-teaching, on the two reports, and they have asked for a further meeting with officials before the action plans are finalised, which, I hope, will take place in the next few days.

In summary, therefore, the experience of undertaking these in-depth reviews has been, from our perspective, extremely positive and productive, in the sense that it allowed a group of people, largely from the DFP, but with some assistance from our staff, to take an objective in-depth look at two areas of service that are important to the education system. The reports, as I said, have been agreed between DE and DFP Ministers. They are very timely, given the challenging financial situation and the work associated with ESA in the context of the Programme for Government commitment that ESA will be operational in just over a year. The action plans are well advanced and will be made available to the Committee at the earliest possible opportunity.

I will do my best to deal with any questions that members may have about the PEDU process. Alan and Eve have more detailed policy knowledge on transport and meals respectively, and I will avail myself of that knowledge as we go through today's session.

The Chairperson: Thank you. I appreciate having the paper that we received and the reports. I have a number of questions on setting some context for where the Department sits in all this. As you are well aware, I am always very cynical that the Department tries to say that, although there is a problem, it is someone else's responsibility. Recommendation 2.3 of the review of home to school transport says:

"The Department of Education should develop and ensure the implementation of clear guidance in respect of the most cost effective form of Home to School Transport provision depending on the extent and nature of the SEN to ensure consistency between ELBs."

Why does the Department not have a proper set of guidance for cost effective home to school transport? It is clear from the figures: look at some boards and the disparity between the Belfast Board and other boards. In some places, I saw figures of something like 60% or 70% of a difference. Why has the Department had to have a PEDU report to identify what has been a glaringly obvious problem for some considerable time? What is the Department's position on recommendation 2.3? I see from your briefing that the Minister has accepted all the recommendations in both reports. The Minister has signed off on those. You confirmed that there is an action plan that will associate with the recommendations.

Mrs Godfrey: That is absolutely right. The Minister has accepted the recommendations and is absolutely committed to looking at the action that can be taken in relation to each one of them. That is what the action plan will do. Before Alan comes in, I would point out that a lot of information in the report begs questions about variations. The questions are the key thing for us, because the answers may be entirely justified. For example, by taking the cohort of children eligible for free school transport in Belfast, you are immediately dealing with a very different cohort than in all other parts of Northern Ireland. That is because schools are much closer, generally fewer children are eligible, and the majority of those who are eligible for home to school transport will have special educational needs (SEN). The arrangement for their transport, particularly in an urban context, immediately becomes much more complex. Therefore, the PEDU report recognises that you cannot equate unit costs without drilling into the reasons behind them, and without satisfying yourself that those are reasonable. That is the process that we are in. However, we know that Belfast is atypical in the extent to which transport is focused on children with special educational needs, which are, in many cases, quite complex.

We also know that there is a balancing act in transporting statemented children. We must ensure that they are supported in getting to school safely, on time and in a condition to learn. There is also a sense of fostering their independence and making sure that their independent living skills are developed, and that has been a critical part of the consideration.

Mr Alan McMullan (Department of Education): I emphasise what Katrina said about looking at like with like. Virtually every child on a board bus in the Belfast Board area has SEN, whereas that is not the case in, for example, the Western Board, where the split would be about 50:50. So there is a significant difference in the unit cost of providing the service. Looking at the extent and nature of the SEN, the process is that welfare and medical people assess a wide range of differing medical conditions that must be met with different responses. Each of the five boards do that in their own way, so, when you drill down, there is the possibility that more uniform processes can be brought into play.

Mrs Godfrey: The key action for us will be that process, which is already under way, of looking, to the extent that you can, in a global way, at the often individual needs of children. We must look at how boards have struck the right balance between the level and nature of transport provision that meets the child's needs. Remember that a lot of this will be defined by medical needs and medical practitioners. However, we need also to make sure that lessons are learned across the boards, which is very much where the guidance will focus — not on coming up with a sixth approach, but on taking the best of the five approaches and saying that something works in one board, so why not in another? What are the reasons that may prevent it from working? Are there things that can be done? That is the multidisciplinary way in which that will be approached by folk who understand clearly the

educational and medical needs of children with SEN and those who understand transport logistics. Between them, they will make sure that the best solution is applied universally.

The Chairperson: Alan referred specifically referred to Belfast in relation to special educational needs. However, the cost of taxis is huge. Would it not be cheaper for that transport provision to be undertaken by the boards as opposed to private operators? For example, supporting data from the Republic shows that non-board, outsourced provision there was 20% cheaper. That is certainly not the case when we look at taxi provision in Belfast, which is astronomically more expensive. Obviously, there are more than market forces at work.

Recommendation 2.1 reads:

"The Department of Education should require NEELB and BELB to examine, in line with their statutory duty of best value, why the unit cost for Taxis is higher than the other ELBs and test the outcome of that exercise to ensure that it is satisfied that value for money has been secured."

Mr A McMullan: All the taxi provision is secured through proper procurement procedures, which all the boards adhere to. The boards will be looking at the various tenders that are put in, and take those that are the best value. It may be that, in certain areas, tender prices are higher for various reasons, which means boards are in a position of having to take what they consider to be the best price in an area. Certainly, the figures suggest that there is a possibility of savings in this area. Again, we will have to look in great detail at why the unit costs are showing a difference. If boards can make savings, they will.

The Chairperson: Does the current contract for securing that provision include cost? We have had a continual issue with the Department, Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) and DFP on procurement and the number of contracts that have gone out, come back, and been changed. CPD was setting value for money in some contract criteria as only 25%, with the rest related to quality. Then, when that was not doing the job, CPD felt that it needed to make a change. It has now said that if you go below 30%, you are not really getting value for money.

Is there not a case for simply stating in the contract how much the successful company will be paid and leaving it to whoever steps up to the mark? I do not want to name any taxi company, but if taxi company A decides to put in its price, which happens to be cheaper than taxi company B but still leads us to a place where we have huge differentials between Belfast and any other part of Northern Ireland, surely we need to draw a line and say, "This is what you will be paid. Do you want the work? If you do not want the work, that is fine and it is your own choice." I am nearly sure that that is what happens in the North Eastern Board, because I have had taxi operators say to me that the North Eastern Board has set a tariff and that if you are happy to supply the work, you bid for it and, if not, you do not get the work.

Mrs Godfrey: One of the challenges in Belfast will be the fact that demand, particularly at peak times at the start and the end of the day will be so much higher. If you look at things like car ownership in the Belfast urban area, there are areas where it is lower, so there are many more people who need to avail themselves of taxi services, which will have an impact on the cost of taxis. However, the procurement should always be driven by value for money. There will be a point at which a taxi operator's costs mean that it is no longer the preferred method for transferring children because it is cheaper to use a minibus, a bus or some other form of transport.

Mr A McMullan: In deciding somebody's transport, the boards will always look at the most cost effective method and will send the vast majority to school on a bus and provide a concessionary bus pass. They will then look at putting people on a board bus as the next best way of doing it by unit cost. It is only in certain circumstances, a lot of which are related to SEN, where the taxi is the only option to get those children to school. After that, your only other option is a parental allowance, with the responsibility falling on the parent.

The Chairperson: Is there an issue with the detail on special educational needs children in the statement? A small number of those children require a very specific type of transport — almost a one-

to-one service. However, we are all aware that there are contracts out there whereby a service drives past other provision. It could be amalgamated and done more efficiently.

It seems as though the board almost has its hands tied, because there is a statement that says, "This is what you have to do." I am not trying to say that parents are being disingenuous but if their needs are being met, surely bringing needs together and doing it more efficiently will not deter or damage the needs of a child, but have an overall benefit for the cost of delivering the service and maybe allow other children to access other elements of the education service.

This may relate to a slightly different element, but I notice that the SEELB reviews its routes every year. I see that that is being recommended. Should there not be a review of the needs? The minute a child gets a statement, they seem to stick with that. I know that there is the annual review, but how much of the transport element comes into that annual review? The annual review is more around the educational needs of the child. The parent will say, "John still has to get to the school." What happens to the child at the school is different because of the statement, but that element of transport is not looked at.

Mrs Godfrey: That is right. Recommendation 1.3 makes the very point that there should be a review of: *"the form of Home to School Transport provided to each SEN pupil on an annual basis"*.

We will be following up on that recommendation more or less immediately, because it makes good sense.

Interestingly, the table at 3.2 on page 34 of the report provides some of the information in your question on who decides on the provision for SEN. You will see immediately a very significant role for the folk on the medical side rather than the educational side. In many cases, that works effectively where there is a challenge function from the education and library board transport operator. They might ask, "Are you sure that that is the best way? Are you sure that that is the only way? What about this way?" Some of the needs in relation to getting to and from school will be clearly determined by the health service whereas, in the school, it is much more the domain of the education service.

Mr A McMullan: Reviewing someone's transport — they may have been given it when they first started school and have then moved on through their career — is beneficial not only on the transport side but to the development of the pupil in that they are supposed to be helped back into society to lead a full life. If we continue to just take them from A to B constantly, that is not developing them. As they move through school, there may be potential to pull away from certain aspects of the transport and help to establish them in society.

Mr McDevitt: I want to take you back to some of the headline figures for the cost and numbers on the transport side. It states on page 4 that, in 2009-2010, £75.1 million was spent on transporting 90,000 pupils, which was a 17.3% increase in spend compared to 2004-05. What numbers were transported in 2004-05?

Mr A McMullan: I do not have that figure in front of me, but I can supply it to you. My gut reaction is that it would not have been that much greater.

Mr McDevitt: So more children were being transported in 2004-05?

Mr A McMullan: I think it was possibly in the low 90,000s.

Mrs Godfrey: That would be very much in line with the demographic decline, but the figures at play there will clearly be inflationary factors relating to fuel and those sorts of costs.

Mr McDevitt: It is a spectacular increase.

Mr A McMullan: The other big factor is the implementation of the recommendations from the Environment Committee, primarily those relating to three children sitting on a seat for two. That put on a considerable number of extra buses, which is reflected in the costs.

Mr McDevitt: There were, therefore, road safety factors, which were, obviously, exceptionally important.

Mr A McMullan: No standing was allowed either.

Mr McDevitt: Yes, that was another road safety issue.

The first thematic group of conclusions and recommendations is around eligibility. It says that the objective is to reduce the number of pupils who can avail themselves of the service by targeting the eligibility of those who need the service most. Have you factored that in against another environmental or governmental policy, such as the regional transportation strategy, which states that we should be promoting a modal shift and that the objective should be to get more children out of private vehicles and into public transport buses or alternative modes of transport? Given that you have accepted all of the recommendations, how are you going to target eligibility, as it states in the report, and not see a significant fall-off in the number of children using public transport and returning to their mum and dad's car?

Mrs Godfrey: The report is also very clear that the biggest impact on eligibility would, potentially, be policy change. On page 8, you will see that the report does not get into the territory of policy change. That is very deliberate, because that is very much the domain of Ministers and the Assembly.

You are absolutely right: one of the critical balancing acts here is about how to make sure you run an efficient, transparent and equitable transport service while still being aware of not only the transportation strategy, but the statutory duty on sustainable development. We must ensure that, in taking actions in budgetary terms, we do not come up with a perverse set of circumstances that impact on other Executive commitments in relation to public transport, environmental issues and, indeed, road safety, because we know that, statistically, bus transport is one of the safest methods of transport. That is an issue for us. We are due to meet shortly with colleagues from the Department for Regional Development (DRD) to talk in more depth about the interface between school transport and the wider objectives of the Executive that relate to sustainable development and promoting public transport.

Mr McDevitt: That is good to hear. Do you not think that this sends out the wrong message? This basically says that we cannot afford to pay for this many kids on the buses, so we need to get fewer paid for.

Mrs Godfrey: I do not think that that is what the report says. The report talks about making sure that we review eligibility for those who are already eligible, and making sure that those who are eligible continue to receive their support. The report stops short of saying anything specific on reducing the number of children who are already eligible and makes it very clear that that is a policy consideration with much wider and much more complex tentacles, if you like, because they go much beyond that.

Mr McDevitt: Page 9 contains conclusions and recommendations. It states:

"Eligibility: reducing the number of pupils who can avail of the service by targeting eligibility".

It does, therefore, say that it wants to reduce the number of children. It does not say that it wants it done cheaper or more efficiently; it says that they are going to pay for fewer kids to get free school transport in the future.

Mrs Godfrey: If you look at the recommendations themselves, you will see that they do not stray into that territory. On paragraph 21 on page 8, the report recognises that that is one way of saving money, but it also recognises that it does not make specific recommendations in those areas because of the complexity of the policy issues and because the report, according to the terms of reference that were set for it, was very firmly focused on looking at opportunities for cost reduction. You are right: it is much more complex when you start to factor cost reduction alongside effectiveness, value for money and the objectives of not only the education service, but other parts of government.

Mr McDevitt: So just so we are absolutely clear, the Minister does not accept paragraph xxiii as currently written?

Mrs Godfrey: The interpretation of paragraph xxiii of the report is that, where pupils are eligible, we should make sure that they are supported in the ways that the transport policy allows. Recommendations such as the one the Chair just mentioned around reviewing the best way of providing home to school transport for a child with special educational needs do not change a child's eligibility. However, they may change the nature and cost of transport provision and the ability of that child to develop life skills, independence and other things. That is very firmly accepted in the approach taken in the recommendations.

Mr McDevitt: May I just ask one question about school meals? The data around schools meals is fascinating, and the disparity is very interesting. Some of the cost lost through administration and back-office functions is worrying. This is a similar wider context question: what consideration did PEDU pay to the Executive's stated commitment to localism, the promotion of sustainable sourcing, and the support and promotion of local food producers?

How does the report, which reads to me like a "cheap food" report, fit in with all the advice internationally about the fact that we need to spend more on food and get away from a cheap-food culture on these islands? How do we reconcile all the recommendations, which are saying that we need even more efficiency and cheaper food on the plates, with the fact that the Executive purport to support the opposite, which is that more of the household budget should be spent on food and that we should be buying more local food?

Mrs Godfrey: I will start off and then hand over to Eve to provide the detail. The critical starting point was the terms of reference for the PEDU review. We spent some time challenging that area very carefully, because we are aware of an awful lot of the evidence on the importance of nutritional standards, of the attractiveness of a meal and encouraging children to take it up and of encouraging them to avail themselves of the social skills and a lot of the wider skills that come from the process of sitting down to a school meal. At annex A, on page 61, you will see the terms of reference that were set at the time. Colleagues in PEDU have very clearly pointed out that the terms of reference required them:

"to undertake work into the scope for, and delivery of, significant cost reductions across the two sectors".

That was the context in which the reports were commissioned. The challenge for us in accepting the recommendations is to make sure that we find ways that improve efficiency, without having any detrimental effect on either the nutritional quality of the meal or on the attractiveness of the meal in encouraging children to avail themselves of it. Eve, I know that you pushed that point with the team.

Ms Eve Stewart (Department of Education): I will give you a bit of information. There are statutory nutritional standards in place for school meals.

Mr McDevitt: Would turkey twizzlers meet them?

Ms Stewart: Turkey twizzlers would not be allowed unless they were made from real turkey. At the minute, the Department provides earmarked funding of almost £3.5 million to the boards to ensure that school meals meet nutritional standards. There are guidelines on what can be produced in a school meal, how many times a week children can eat red meat, portion sizes, and various other issues around healthy eating.

Mr McDevitt: This is my last question, as I am sure other colleagues want to pursue matters. It is strange that Katrina is able to tell us that they accept all the recommendations that are fundamentally based on getting the cost down — in other words, a cheaper food outcome — and that we are going to be able to achieve greater localism through more central kitchens, which is what we are told you should not do if you want to get school cooks to really embrace the idea of local sourcing. I am looking across the table at Mr Flanagan, who is from Fermanagh. If you centralise all production in a county like Fermanagh, you will lose the opportunity to avail yourself of the really interesting stuff that kids will want to eat because they perceive it to be local and that will be sold as local at home.

Mrs Godfrey: In response to that, I want to make the point that the report clearly indicates that the bigger scope for savings is not actually on the cost of food. It is very important to us that the cost and quality of the food is paramount, because there is no point in having a really efficient school meals service if nobody takes up the meal. That is just counterintuitive. The issue for us is whether there are lessons that can be applied that are already operating in individual education and library boards and are not having any detrimental impact on the quality of the food. That is where the recommendations are taking us — not to make changes that are counterintuitive, but to look at what is already happening.

You will see a comment in the report on some of the work that the South Eastern Education and Library Board has done. The report makes it very clear that that was not at the expense of the nutritional quality of meals. The report points up areas that are not based on theoretical models but are actually based on things that are already happening. It is requiring us to ask why, if that happens here, it cannot happen there. That is the key. It is not about trying to impact negatively on quality or the attractiveness of a school meal, because we know so much about the importance of that. What it is trying to say is that, if board A can deliver that quality and attractiveness in that way, are there lessons for other boards? That is the central message of both reports.

Mrs Dobson: Since we are on school meals, and Conall is doing such an excellent job, I will start with school meals. Could the proposal to increase the price of pupil and adult school meals actually lead to fewer people using the service because of the price rises, and therefore increase the average meal cost, rather than reducing it as intended? Following on from that, what practical measures could boards take to achieve economies of scale in school canteens?

Conall mentioned something that is really concerning me. What measures will the boards and the Department be using to make sure that economies of scale do not impact on our local small businesses, many of which rely on their contracts with local schools?

Mrs Godfrey: I will start the other way around. We are working in the context of the procurement rules and, if there is a wider look at greater localism, which the Chair and Conall spoke about, that will presumably be reflected in the procurement guidance. However, our role, and what we expect the boards to do, because it is expected of us, is to make sure that procurement is in line with the CPD guidelines at every level, whether it is a huge infrastructure project, or goods and services. From what we know, boards do that already on a pooled basis, and in many cases are able to demonstrate that they are pulling off both objectives, entirely meeting the procurement requirements and —

Mrs Dobson: But you do realise the importance, Katrina, of that issue for local businesses that rely on those contracts?

Mrs Godfrey: Absolutely. It is a point that others have made around the attractiveness of food and the link to food being produced in local areas. There are also the links that children themselves will make around the benefits of local food, food air miles, and issues like that. That is extremely important. The one thing that we do not want to do is to take the sort of action that might result in something being cheaper but not attractive. That is absolutely critical, because we have a responsibility to make sure that the food that is served in schools, particularly to younger children, is nutritionally sound and is the sort of food that children will naturally want and be encouraged and supported to eat. We cannot do anything — and it is not the intention to do anything — that will change that.

We have to make sure that, in taking actions, we understand their full impact and that we look at it in the longer term and widely, so that we do not fall into the trap of saying that, if we do that, it will be cheaper. We also understand the dynamics at play. That is why the catering staff in the boards will be absolutely crucial to implementation. The report, particularly the school meals report, acknowledges how willing they were to share that expertise, because they have that passion for good food that is seen very clearly at a local level.

Mrs Dobson: The report mentions a common threshold of 150 meals a day and calls on the board to review the economic viability of kitchens that fall below that level. Does that mean that we will get a viability audit in school kitchens and come up with a kitchen hit list? *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Godfrey: There will be no kitchen hit list. It is perfectly reasonable that it requires us to ask the question and to test the thinking. It is not as simple as saying that over 150 meals is good, and fewer than 150 meals is not good. In fact, the report points out that you get to a level where you get economies of scale, and then you get to a level above that where you stop seeing them. The real test is: if it is below 150 meals, is it still the best solution for an area? You will also know there will be rules around how long and how far you can transport food, and you will also instinctively know that if you transport food for too long, you can impact on its attractiveness, quality, variability, etc.

Mrs Dobson: What are the alternatives, Katrina? I presume that we are talking about small and rural schools.

Mrs Godfrey: The report is not saying, "You should not have this". It is quite reasonably asking: if you are not in a situation where you are running a large number of larger central kitchens, how are you satisfying yourself that your model is the best model to deliver the policy objectives in a way that represents value for money? The critical thing in every aspect of the school meals report is how you look at the recommendation and test it in a very mature way that takes you into proper value for money, as the Chair said earlier, and not simply cost, because they are not the same thing.

Mrs Dobson: Do you have ideas yet on how to feed the pupils in the small rural schools?

Ms Stewart: The catering people in the boards are already looking at that, and, when ESA comes into operation from 1 April next year, there will be a regional approach to school catering. It has not been accepted that all kitchens serving fewer than 150 meals will have to close, because the Department's policy is that there will be free school meals, and also school meals for any other children who want to buy them.

Mrs Dobson: Could I ask Alan a question?

The Chairperson: Yes. Did you want to come in on that point, Michelle?

Miss M McIlveen: You are talking about economies of scale, but, in recommendation 2.1, you have given quite a hefty figure of £7.5 million that could be saved. However, you have not explained where you got that figure from and how you will make that saving. It really goes back to the Jo-Anne's point.

Ms Stewart: PEDU came up with those figures through all its field work with the boards. It got a lot of data from the boards and pulled them together to come up with those figures. The Department has accepted that recommendation on the basis that it accepts that there are efficiency savings there. Recommendation 2.1 talks about savings of between £4.7 million and £7.5 million. The Department has not yet come to any view on what the saving should be. We will work through this as part of the follow-up to implementing the PEDU recommendations.

Mrs Godfrey: The critical thing is that the recommendation says that the boards should investigate the reasons for the variations. The recommendation is taken from the graph on page 24, and, very simply, the figure comes from a calculation that, if kitchens with higher than average costs achieve the average and all kitchens have performed in the upper quartile, that would be the saving. However, right through the report, PEDU makes it clear that that is very much based on a statistical and financial analysis and the rider is always "in the event that it was possible". The recommendation is not unreasonable, because the recommendation is that the board should investigate the reasons for the wide variation in spend and identify and disseminate lessons learned from those that are performing in the upper quartile. That seems, instinctively, not unreasonable because it allows you to check that you are doing things the best way possible. It is not a blunt instrument that says, "You must do it cheaper", because cheaper may not be possible in your circumstances.

Miss M McIlveen: I will leave that point because we will come back to this once we see the action plan and progress.

Mrs Dobson: Previously, in an answer to a written question, the Minister said that some actions will be immediate following the publication of the report. Given that the report was published last month, what steps has he already taken, if any?

Mr A McMullan: Although the report was published last month, the action plan and consultation with the unions have not yet been completed. Until those are completed —

Mrs Dobson: He did say that there would be immediate actions.

Mrs Godfrey: Alan is absolutely right. The action plan will make it clear where that action is being taken. You will be aware that, at this time of the year, we set targets for the education and library boards through the resource allocation planning process. Some of the recommendations will be reflected from 1 April in that process. Some of the recommendations will require us to ask the boards to do things; that request will coincide with 1 April and it is in that context that the immediacy was being asked for.

We can ask for some of those actions immediately, but it may not be possible to deliver them until 1 September. If, for example, they involve looking at a route or a mode of transport, it is incredibly difficult to start making changes in the Easter to summer term, and we try not to disrupt patterns of provision for providers and, particularly, for parents and children, in the middle of the year. The Minister's point was that, where it is sensible in the financial year that is about to start, to take action, we will take it. Where it is more sensible to invest the time in this financial year in designing the models for 1 April 2013, we will do that. There will be some areas where it will be a bit of both; there will be things that we can do now and things, particularly those that are related to staffing and other issues, that will be best dealt with in the context of the regional service that will come on 1 April with the establishment of ESA.

Mrs Dobson: I just want to clarify that those were the Minister's words.

Mrs Godfrey: Yes, absolutely.

Mrs Dobson: I have one quick question for Alan. I was very interested to read about the idea that you put forward to make board vehicles eligible for private hire as a means of generating income. I know that Church and community groups are always looking for minibus hire, and that is an excellent idea. How do you envisage that working in practical terms, with insurance and that type of thing to consider? Can you give me a few more details on that?

Mr A McMullan: Clearly, there are a number of issues to be looked at in that regard, insurance being one of the primary ones. It is also about the availability of drivers and their clearance to use those vehicles. We will have to look into all these things before we reach a point where we can agree how and whether the buses can be used for other purposes.

Mrs Dobson: So there has been no in-depth analysis of that?

Mr A McMullan: Not at the moment.

The Chairperson: As long as it does turn out like the community use of schools, Alan. Ten years later, we will still be sitting and there will be a crisis. We will just voice a caveat and a warning that, if the Department is considering that, it does not replicate the same difficulties that surrounded the community use of schools. The community use of schools and the community use of buses could end up being synonymous with bureaucratic difficulties and problems.

Mr A McMullan: There is an issue with the community use of buses. The buses are designed for children, so they may not be available or suitable for adult use. There are a number of issues to be looked at and addressed.

Mrs Dobson: The concept is good, but it needs to be —

Mr A McMullan: The concept is good, but there is the question of downtime. There is a misperception that the buses are used simply for school runs, but they are used by so many other services, such as youth services, summer schemes, swimming trips and meal deliveries. There is not that much downtime.

Mr Flanagan: Thank you for coming to the Committee and making your presentation. I want to pick up on Joanne's point about the community use of buses. Was any analysis done of the potential for working with the likes of Translink and other transport providers or the Health Department, which already runs transport services in rural areas, to see whether the service provided in those areas can be improved, and whether that could provide some level of savings across government?

Mrs Godfrey: The point about health is interesting. We looked at that in conjunction with health colleagues a while ago, and one of the interesting points that came up was that the needs of the health service and the needs of the education service were broadly occurring at the same time, which presented a series of challenges. For example, everybody wanted the bus between 8.00 am and 9.30 am, so the solution was not as simple as saying, "We will use our buses for this bit and then you can use them."

The downtime, as Alan has said, for education and library board buses, is extremely restricted in most board areas. They are well used. For example, there is a requirement in the curriculum on swimming, which requires transport to and from schools. It is an area that it is right to continue to look at so that we do not miss opportunities. However, having looked at that myself, I can say that it sounded like there ought to be more opportunities for sharing than there were when you started to look at the situation, because of the overlap in the times when the buses are needed. With health, we had looked at transporting people to day centres and whether there was scope to do things together. However, as I said, the folk in health quite reasonably wanted the day centre transport at the same time as the folk in education were talking children to school. So it turned out to not be clear cut, but it merits ongoing investigation.

As I mentioned earlier, we are due to sit down with senior officials in DRD in the coming weeks to look again at the opportunities for the interface between school and wider transport and at the concept of a more seamless transport service. In many respects, that already happens with the services run by Translink, which, in many cases, are used by both members of the public and children. In parts of Northern Ireland, the situation is more complex. For example, in Belfast, the education and library board buses are specifically adapted for children, often those with special educational needs or physical disabilities. However, it is has been on our radar, and we continue to take every opportunity to explore it, both in the context of rural transport with Translink and the health service. In terms of the review that was done, Alan, is there anything that you want to add?

Mr A McMullan: It was done in 2006. Again, the potential for additional routes was found to be very low.

Mr Flanagan: Sorry, additional Translink routes?

Mr A McMullan: When I say "additional route", I mean the buses being used for another purpose.

Mr Flanagan: Was that review done at a high level? Did it involve people in the local community at any stage? They are the people who would be able to anticipate demand for transport use. I will give you a very quick example. Senior civil servants in DRD never realised that there was demand for a bus from Enniskillen to Derry. It was put to them locally a number of times, but it never went anywhere until it was raised in the House and the Minister progressed it himself. Unless there is proper consultation with local communities about the needs in transport, we will never go anywhere.

Mr A McMullan: The primary aim of that review was to look at every single board bus that was in the fleet and assess its potential downtime for the drivers that were available. Every single bus was looked at. It was found that, for a bus to be available to do a different route for another organisation, it would tend to have to have between an hour and a quarter and an hour and a half of spare time at least to be able to go from its location to wherever it was going, do its run, and get back to be used for the school work. The review found that there was very little potential for the use of the board buses in that respect. The only real potential for use would have been in the evenings, after school.

Mr Flanagan: What I am suggesting is not so much affected by the downtime of education and library board buses. I will give you an example from the village that I come from. Every morning, three yellow

buses leave to go to Enniskillen, which is 25 miles away. However, if a member of the public wants to go to Enniskillen, he or she has to wait until Thursday for the one bus there is a week. There has to be some sort of arrangement made to enable members of the community to use a public transport facility that is already going in that direction and probably is not full. That would not be that hard to sort out and would provide a better service in the community and possibly save money for both DRD and the Department of Education.

Mr A McMullan: I understand what you are getting at. It may not be as easy as you suggest, in that there are insurance issues, child and adult seating issues, and child-safety issues. Other boards' buses transport SEN children with medical issues. Those are points that would have to be looked at and overcome before we could get to that situation. I am not saying that it could not be done; I am saying that there are issues that must be addressed.

Mr Flanagan: I do not see a will to resolve it, to be honest. It could easily be done if people on the ground in that area were given the opportunity to sort it out. However, if this continues to be the approach at such a high level, it will not be resolved. Are you confident that the delivery of all of your recommendations will generate the predicted savings in the transport system, or will something else need to be done to deliver those savings?

Mrs Godfrey: When it talks about "headline" figures, the report makes clear that these are potential amounts. It also makes clear that it will not be possible in every case for every board to replicate the lowest. For example, when the transport report talks about £10 million, it makes it clear that that is the figure that would be possible in the event that the Belfast Board meets the miles-per-litre rate of the Western Board. We immediately instinctively know that that will not be possible, because the Belfast Board's fleet travels shorter distances in urban traffic. The Western Board fleet uses bigger buses that are more fuel efficient over longer distances, so we immediately know that it will not be possible for small buses driven around Belfast streets to get the same miles per litre as the big buses.

The report points out that there are savings here and this is more complex than it seems at first glance. The key thing that it consistently tells us is that we have to keep asking why the Belfast buses' fuel efficiency is lower. There is a reason for that. Do we understand that reason? Have we tested it? Have we probed it and are we satisfied with it? More importantly, is the accounting officer in that organisation satisfied that that reflects value for money? By going through that process systematically with every area, the report's view is that we will deliver savings. However, because of complexities such as those, the report itself and the review team were not able to identify the level of savings. The headline figure is indicative, but it points to the fact that savings can be delivered if boards learn from good practice in one board and apply that across the piece. It is not the sort of area that lends itself to an easy overview that states that, "If he does it for x, you should be able to do it for x." As we discussed, it is a lot more complicated than that. The test for us is to understand the complexities but not be daunted by them to the extent that we take them for granted and do not ask the questions.

Mr Flanagan: Has the £5 million that was supposed to be saved every year from transport been delivered this year?

Mrs Godfrey: Considerable progress has been made in delivering it this year. We will have the full out-turn updates quite soon. Any progress made will have an impact and contribute to the funding available for anything else. The report provides almost the opportunity for the spotlight to shine a second time on the provision of transport, meals or any other area. Is there scope for more learning from the experience that is already there? That savings requirement is there. The boards will report on its delivery at the end of the year, and the report will give us scope to ask more questions and to look for more savings.

Mr Flanagan: The review of home to school transport was the subject of a motion agreed in the Assembly. Has that started yet and how will it work with these recommendations?

Mrs Godfrey: The recommendations are very much in the context of the existing policy and are aimed at making the present system more efficient and effective. The review that the Minister talked about in the Assembly is more in the territory of looking at the policy itself.

Mr Flanagan: OK.

Mrs Godfrey: I do not doubt that the report will inform the review. However, the review would be designed at looking at something in a rather more strategic context, and, perhaps, at picking up some of the wider points around how school transport interfaces with rural transport, the regional transportation strategy, sustainable development, road safety and other issues. I may be right in saying that that review has not kicked off yet and that the Minister is still considering how he wants to take it forward. As soon as we have more information about that, we will certainly make sure that the Committee is made aware of it.

Mr Flanagan: Finally, moving on to the situation with school meals, and to pick up on what Conall said about localism, is any work being done to enable schools to grow more of their own produce that they can then consume? That would deliver significant savings and would give children and young people more of a desire to consume the food. It would also enable them for sustainable living in later life.

Mrs Godfrey: The honest answer is that I do not know the answer, Phil. I know that a lot of schools do that, but this goes back to the conversation that we had about schools having the facilities to prepare the food that they grow and the extent to which that has an impact on decisions on whether to have central versus local kitchens. There is not much point in having a wonderful potato patch in a school if you have no cooker to do something with the produce. Those are the sorts of issues that start to interface with each other. However, I am not aware that we have any stated position on growing your own produce.

Ms Stewart: I am aware that some schools have their own growing clubs. I do not know how much they produce, and I do not know the position on schools growing food to be cooked in the kitchen for school meals.

Mrs Hale: Recommendation 1.4 and the table on page 6 use the terms "Gate to Gate" and "Door to Door", but I do not know the difference between those. I see that the South Eastern Board operates a gate-to-gate policy and that the other boards operate a door-to-door policy. Recommendation 1.4 states that all boards should move to a gate-to-gate policy. Can you explain that to me?

When deciding the transport provision for pupils with SEN, I see that some boards will take the recommendations of the senior medical officer, but, in the South Eastern Board and the Western Board, the mode is determined by statement or by the ELB. This is a constituency issue, but my concern is that children who are coming through my door in Dromore have a statement that clearly states that one mode of transport is to be provided, but, to meet its performance criteria, the board is ignoring medical advice and going with another form of transport, which is detrimental to the child. Therefore, what is the difference between gate to gate and door to door? Can the senior medical officer overrule at any stage what the board determines to be the correct transport for an SEN pupil?

Mr McMullan: I will take the question of the gate-to-gate and door to door policies first. Door to door means the front door of your house to the front door of the school, and gate to gate means the gate at the end of the driveway of your house to the gate at the school. A number of schools have quite long driveways, so changing from a gate-to-gate to a door-to-door measurement will affect eligibility.

Mrs Hale: Where the statement and the determination of the mode of transport are concerned, and given the situation in the South Eastern Board, does that mean that the board can overrule medical and professional advice?

Mr McMullan: The transport officer will not overrule; based on what was in the statement, they will look at options to get that child to school. If they considered that there was a different, better, safer mode of transport or arrangement, they would talk to the medical side about their thinking on the statement, and they would come to an agreed position on what they would provide. The issue with the medical side is that they simply say that a pupil should receive such and such, but they have no responsibility for the cost. They might say that a pupil should get a taxi, which could cost £1,000, but they do not appreciate that there might be another way of transporting the child at less cost that still meets exactly

the needs of that individual child. Therefore, it would be done in agreement; they would not simply overrule.

Mrs Godfrey: The experience is that, and the PEDU report points this out, this works best in that partnership role, where the child's needs are to the forefront at all times, where the transport people and the board can see solutions that will meet those needs and where they have the debate with whoever they need so that they can make sure that the child's needs are met in the most effective way possible. That is the way that it should work, and, as the report points out, that is where it works most effectively. A partnership approach, with the child's needs at the centre but with the SEN and transport people bringing understanding and knowledge, is the best model for making sure that needs are met in the most cost-effective manner. As public servants, we will all always have a responsibility to make sure that there is value for money.

Mrs Hale: I understand where you are coming from, Katrina. However, from speaking to people in my constituency office, my experience is that that is unfortunately not the case. We are talking about children who get full support in school — 30 hours a week — and who need one form of transport. However, the board is saying, "Tough", because it needs to meet its delivery targets. Such children are then having to find independent ways to school. A few people who have come through my door have told me that that has happened. That is why, when I saw in the report that the Belfast Board and the Southern Board take advice from the clinical medical officer, I wondered why some boards do not.

Mrs Godfrey: Certainly, if there is an individual issue that you want us to look at, Brenda, please let us know, and we will follow that up separately.

Mrs Hale: Thank you.

The Chairperson: Before we go on to Daithí's questions, I just want to clarify something with Alan about the home-to-school transport review. I am worried about the comments on page 8 about some of the things that are likely to be in the review. Those include:

"Requiring parental contributions to the cost of home to school transport, either from all parents or from all except those from low income households".

I always get worried when I see such things repeated in documents. Somehow, those who have the ability to pay will be forced to pay, while some arrangement will be constructed, be it free school meals or whatever, to enable other people to get out of paying. That means that the burden will be transferred from one section of the community to another.

The gate-to-gate policy is only a way for the Department to shorten distance so that children who would have been eligible for door-to-door assistance do not end up getting the service. In simple terms, we are basically passing 48% of the budget from one hand of government to the other or from one room in Stormont to another, because it is going from the Department to Translink — I want to come on to the contract before we finish. Given that, I think that it would be far better to say, "We will give you all free transport". I think that that would provide huge savings, because you would not have to pay taxi operators, private operators and all that. You would be saying, "Unless it is over 2 miles or whatever, pop on that bus". I take Phil's point: if you get on a bus, you will get to your destination. That might be the simplest way.

Mrs Godfrey: Again, the brief for the PEDU people in the DFP terms of reference was to look at cost reduction. In that paragraph, they are simply making an observation that areas where policy change could reduce cost include reducing eligibility. Reducing eligibility will of course reduce costs; there is probably little doubt about that. In the same paragraph, they make it clear that they are not making policy recommendations. They are observing that, if you want to reduce costs, some specific areas could be considered. When the time comes, the key thing for the Minister, in consultation with his Executive colleagues, will be to decide which, if any, of those options are sensible and deliverable in the light not just of education policy but of wider Executive policy. I would not want people to be alarmed by that. That is simply an observation that says, "If you want to do this for less money, these policy changes would deliver that." That is not the same as saying, "This is what we are thinking of doing."

The Chairperson: The result of the same process in the Irish Republic was the imposition of a charge of €50 per pupil for using Bus Éireann. That jurisdiction carried out a review and assessment and decided to change its policy. If we follow that rationale and the policy change introduced in the Republic comes into vogue, as I understand that it will, there will be a £50 charge per primary-school pupil for travelling to school.

Mrs Godfrey: The key thing for us is that any decision on something such as charging would, I suspect, immediately become a cross-cutting decision. The Minister and his Executive colleagues would have to discuss that in the context of the Executive's wider policy on charging and other such aspects.

Mr McKay: Reference is made to potential savings through introducing more energy-efficient equipment to prepare meals. Will you elaborate on where things stand now? How efficient is the equipment in the kitchens? Is there an average grade of energy efficiency? If you decide to go ahead with that proposal, there will be significant upfront capital costs. How long would it take to realise any savings?

The report on transport states that, in 2009-2010, fuel accounted for 14·6% of the total cost of vehicles in the board-owned bus fleet, which was up from 13·6% four years before. Has the Department considered hydroelectric vehicles or other alternative vehicle fleets that would realise long-term savings?

Mrs Godfrey: I suspect that we are all familiar with increases in the cost of fuel from filling up our cars. Alan will talk in more detail about procurement, but the starting point is always what will be the best value-for-money alternative. At this stage, I suspect that the necessary technology for running a 56-seater bus might not be available in all parts of Northern Ireland. Alan, have the boards been looking at that?

Mr A McMullan: I am sorry, but I am not aware of any work that the boards have done on electric vehicles, although that does not mean that they have not done some. The boards are always looking at the quality of the vehicles. All their vehicles are replaced as best they can by their end-of-year life, so there is always an emphasis on having the most economical vehicles possible and making sure that the fleet is up to date.

Mrs Godfrey: It is an interesting area, which is worth pursuing to the extent that that is how we look at things, by keeping up to date with any alternative options.

Mr McKay: It is also a matter of looking at longer-term trends in the price of oil. However, other European countries, Scandinavia specifically, have introduced such vehicles and are realising savings.

Mrs Godfrey: They have tended to introduce them more in their public transport fleet than in their school transport fleet. That is probably because public transport vehicles are operational for a period during which the value-for-money saving is more apparent than would be the case for a school bus, which is designed for a slightly different purpose.

Mr McKay: However, it would be worthwhile for officials to look at that.

Mrs Godfrey: Yes. We will certainly do that.

Mr McKay: Here, there would be greater viability in Fermanagh than here in the city of Belfast. Perhaps you could look at that.

Mrs Godfrey: Absolutely, and also, as you say, there are other alternative fuels: not just electricity but biofuels and other similar options.

The Chairperson: There is a well-known company in a constituency —

Mrs Godfrey: — which may be dear to your heart?

The Chairperson: It is a company in which both Daithí and I have an interest. That company has done very good work in that area and currently supplies Translink. So that would be a useful place to start — not that I would canvass for a particular company or business.

Mrs Godfrey: The other question was on school meals. Now, the procurement process always looks at energy efficiency when replacing equipment for preparing school meals. It is a case of at what point in the cycle does it become value for money to replace equipment rather than keeping on going with an existing asset. When replacing equipment, we must also ensure that environmental considerations, particularly energy efficiency — the double whammy of cost and environmental consideration — are taken into account when deciding what model should replace the existing one. If you do not mind, Chair, we will check that out in a wee bit more detail, because I know that there are now specific energy-efficiency obligations. However, neither Eve nor I have with us today details of the extent to which they immediately apply to kitchens and central kitchens in the same way as they apply to schools.

Mr McKay: My final question relates specifically to the maintenance, as opposed to the use, of board-owned transport. Is there a possibility that, in certain towns, the Health Department, to which Phil referred, and the Department of Education carry out the same sort of maintenance work in different depots? Has the Department explored looking outside the silo and trying to have a single depot for all vehicles?

Mrs Godfrey: That is a point that, if not made explicitly, is certainly implied in a number of the recommendations, including 2.2, for example, which refers to the procurement of goods and of services, which certainly include maintenance. It refers to the need for us to look at whether further savings are possible by working with other parts of the public sector. Maintenance is a really good example of that. If you have a health fleet, a library fleet and an education fleet, is there a model for maintenance that should be looked at, not on an education basis but on a public sector basis? Those are the sorts of things on which the Central Procurement Directorate should be well placed to keep us right.

Mr A McMullan: We are due to meet Translink next month to discuss sharing services, and maintenance is one of the issues within that.

The Chairperson: Just before we go to Jonathan, on that point about the meeting with Translink, just before you came, the Committee discussed an ongoing issue of concern, which is the safety of the transport of our children. Some weeks ago, a presentation to the Committee by the Federation of Passenger Transport raised concerns. We have other information, which we are quite happy to share with you, because we have already agreed to bring it back to the Department. Could that issue be raised when you meet Translink, or is the PEDU report the specific remit of that meeting? Will the contract be discussed?

Mr A McMullan: The meeting is about the sharing of services. It is a meeting between Translink, the Department for Regional Development (DRD) and our Department at deputy secretary level.

Mrs Godfrey: Certainly, if there are any wider safety issues and you are in a position in which you can give them to the Department, Alan and Dorothy will certainly look at them. If they point to issues that we can explore, either with DRD or with the Department of the Environment (DOE) in its licensing role, we will certainly pick those up.

Mr Craig: Thanks for stealing my thunder, Chair.

The Chairperson: Sorry.

Mr Craig: You are fine. Katrina, I think that you have already answered this, but it is something that interests me. The PEDU report looked at the specifics of how to save money and threw out ideas. I take it that when the report was throwing out ideas, it was not looking at other government policies. One idea of how to reduce costs is to cut off free transport at the age of 16. It strikes me that that would go against our policy on how we are trying to educate our children.

Mrs Godfrey: It would also affect NEETs.

Mr Craig: Yes, those in third-level education, NEETs and all of that. The report just throws out ideas.

Mrs Godfrey: As I said, that reflects the terms of reference at the time, which specifically focused on cost reduction. So, quite understandably, the guys in PEDU could see ways that, if you wanted to focus only on cost reduction, would achieve that. However, the key issue is the testing of those within the wider policy context. As you say, something like ending free transport at 16 would immediately impact not just on us but on the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the wider work on increasing accessibility for an age group for which, arguably, you are trying to create more opportunities to make learning, studying and employment or training schemes more, not less, attractive. That is exactly the spirit in which such ideas were suggested. If you do not suggest the unthinkable, you do not get to the points about which you can do something. We should not have a difficulty with that process, provided that the approach that we take to implementation reflects the wider policy context. I know that the Minister is absolutely committed to that.

Mr Craig: You talk about the "unthinkable". I am fascinated by paragraph 3.5 on page 33 of the transport report, which states:

"However, the presence of alternative suitable schools in local areas means that most of the pupils travelling into the large Belfast grammar schools would not be expected to receive free Home to School Transport."

That is a brave suggestion. What is the thinking behind it?

Mrs Godfrey: The point being made there links back to area planning. If we had a planning provision on the placing of schools that reflected where children lived, that might result in less transport across board boundaries. The report uses Belfast as an example. You could point to other parts of Northern Ireland, where more children are bussed from one town to another than would be ideal from a sustainable transport or other perspectives. That reflects the fact that schools have grown up in particular areas and have, perhaps, not moved to reflect the changing demography.

I will use Belfast as an example: if you look at the post-primary schools in Conall's constituency, you will probably find that the number of children from outside the constituency who go to those schools is far greater than the number who live in the constituency. That demonstrates the pattern of a school growing in, and being associated with, a place while the surrounding demography changes. So the statement is a commentary on recognising that, if you had the right schools in the right place — closer to where people live and as reflective of parental preference and everything else as possible — you could immediately, at least in theory, reduce the length of journeys that pupils have to undertake. From a sustainability perspective, it could be argued that that would be good.

Mr Craig: I do not dispute what you say and can see the logic and thinking behind it. My only difficulty is that the capital spend resource implications of what you say are horrendous. I must state the obvious, which is that, frankly, you could probably fit another two grammar schools into my Lagan Valley constituency, because the existing ones are bursting at the seams, unlike those in Belfast. However, as there is no money to do that, realistically, it will not happen.

Mrs Godfrey: If we were starting with a clean sheet of paper, which we never do, whether in education, health or any other area, we would probably put a lot of schools in different places to reflect where people live. The number of children who travel from Banbridge to schools in Newry, for example, suggests that, in an ideal world, you would take one of the Newry schools and put it somewhere else. However, as you said, it is much more complicated than that.

The Chairperson: Without getting into the ideological debate, I must make the point that, for example, 1,000 children leave Antrim town for school elsewhere every day. Only 84 of those children have bus passes. Charges may be introduced in the Republic, and, clearly, parents are still prepared to choose to pay for transport. I found that statistic staggering, and it means that parental choice is also an issue

Mr A McMullan: Also, the numbers moving depend on the number of categories.

The Chairperson: Yes, it does.

Mr A McMullan: If you reduced the categories, far fewer children would move.

The Chairperson: I have one concluding point about the contract.

Mrs Godfrey: The Translink contract?

The Chairperson: Yes. Alan, I am sorry if I missed the point, but is that also on the agenda for the meeting?

Mr A McMullan: No, the meeting is purely about the sharing of services.

Mrs Godfrey: It is a policy-level meeting.

Mr A McMullan: The Southern Board is the lead on the contract. Part of its normal process in dealing with the Translink contract is holding a lot of the meetings. The Department does not have a representative at those.

The Chairperson: Is it possible for the Committee to receive an update on where we are with the contract?

Mrs Godfrey: Certainly. We will get that to the Committee.

The Chairperson: Thank you again for your help Katrina, Eve and Alan. No doubt, we will see you again.