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Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Community Use of Schools

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Premises Bill should not proceed, and, in consequence, the Bill was voted down at its Second Stage. However, timing is all important in such matters, and perhaps it took the past four years to allow a wider realisation to develop of the proposals in my Bill and conclude, after all, that they were both practical and sensible. I therefore suggest to the Committee that it should push forward with the issues proposed in my Bill, set them alongside the work initiated since by the Department and take ownership of the overall delivery of the issue. Even if it does not proceed as a Committee Bill, a package of measures could be produced to maximise community use of publicly owned school premises.

As you know, certain changes have taken place since 2008, not least the diminishing size of the schools estate. A number of schools capable of offering community usage now face closure. However, new opportunities arise out of those circumstances that it would be foolish for the Committee or anyone else to ignore. I submit that school closures should not result in empty buildings being left to decay but in realisable community assets, and they should be used for that purpose.

Back in 2003, the PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) review for the Department identified six categories of activity that would fall within the definition of "community use". Those were adult learning; youth activities; leisure and recreation; resource use and information dissemination; social services and healthcare provision; and cultural and social activities. The PwC study found that the opening of school buildings to local groups engendered a sense of community ownership of the facilities. The review team explained:

"Local school facilities can provide a more informal, familiar and friendly place to learn, offering in many cases the first step to improving human capital".

In my opinion, the proposed school closures since then provide even greater opportunities for school and community use.

You may be interested to know that, last October and November, with the help of Land and Property Services (LPS), I obtained property valuations. Those valuations indicated that, in the controlled sector, the value of school buildings in use was £1.668 billion and the value of school buildings not in use was £28.76 million. I have been unable to obtain current valuations for the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) estate, but, in 2003, the CCMS operational value was £851 million. It is fair to assume that its value will have increased substantially since then.

All those substantial public assets, if put to proper local community use in a variety of ways, could transform community development and play a major role in community regeneration. We need to bring our communities into the loop as more schools face closure. I suggest that the Committee actively engage with local communities through a local audit of used and unused school buildings and their assets. Surely local communities have the right to be included in formulating the Department's intentions in their area. I see it as our duty as legislators to harness all public resources for the community. To me, even the hard figure of £28 million worth of non-used school assets across the five education boards suggests a need for urgent intervention. Empty schools sitting idle are a waste. They should be seen not as a problem but as an opportunity. Sitting on realisable assets in an era of mounting budgetary pressures is hard to defend. They should be reused to develop community potential.

My proposal has an income-generating potential and would allow constructive use of those buildings, rather than letting them simply fall off the Committee's radar and disappear into some dark corner in the Department. At the very time that we need to build and empower local communities and realise the Executive's overriding commitment to community development, this idea ticks many of the boxes required. It is a liberating and imaginative proposal that represents the kind of broad thinking that the public expects from its legislators and that will deliver for our currently divided communities and create new, neutral shared spaces at the heart of forming united communities.

In summary, I recommend that the Committee seek to promote legislative effect to the measures designed to introduce wider community usage of the schools estate; to ensure that good buildings no longer in use are made available for use by local communities; to look to commercial sponsorship to contribute to funding community activity in schools; to be proactive and resolute in scrutinising the realisable assets of all school buildings and connected land, because those are, after all, our assets and the public's assets; and to be exacting in its exploration of cross-departmental usage for schools to secure maximum benefits for our public in the end. Thank you, Chairman.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for that overview, David. You should have most of the correspondence, but whatever has not been made available to you we will certainly make available after today's meeting. That correspondence includes a letter dated 31 January 2012 that we received from the Minister. In the final paragraph, he stated:

"I now strongly encourage school leaders and Boards of Governors to consider opening the doors of their school for use by the community".

That is clearly the crux of the matter. We have all the recommendations from the working group. The Department's well-crafted and well-constructed response contains caveats such as, "The Department should continue" and "The Department currently supports". Local schools have written to us saying that they would love to have the school opened up more, but — you always get to the proverbial "but" — the nub of the issue is insurance, liability, cost and so on. Members can keep me right, but none of the working group's recommendations addresses that fundamental issue. If that was addressed, I do not see any school's board of governors having a difficulty with concurring with all the other recommendations. The core issue of how they will be able safely, legally and financially to open the doors to the community has been sidelined.

It is useful to put on record our appreciation of the many schools that open their doors. There is a tendency for us to think that all our school doors are closed. That is not the case: we have some papers that set out that it happens in various places, and we all have examples of schools in our constituencies that are open to the community in a variety of ways and at different times. It encourages more of a community concept of how that can be implemented more regularly. Have you, David, picked up any more practical examples of how schools, especially boards of governors, have addressed the legal and financial issues of opening their doors?

Mr McNarry: Like you, Chairman, and, I am sure, like all the Committee members, the contact that you have with schools, boards of governors, and so on, is quite repetitive and exacting. It seems to me that the message needs to go out loud and clear that we can do it, rather than that it can be done but there are problems. People say that they cannot do anything without funding. I note from the information that you have gleaned so far from two boards that there is a struggle, even though they are trying manfully to get on with things. It all seems to be identified with what funding is available. How the schools address the issue needs to be rejigged. They need to see it almost selectively as how the schools are used and that they belong to and become part of the community 24/7.

No one is suggesting that there will be many activities taking place during school hours. What we do know, however, and what put all this into our head, is that, once the school is closed for a break, the gates close and access for the community is denied. I am not always keen on the one-size-fits-all idea. It certainly does not apply to the diversification that we have in our communities. However, there are at least a number of issues, such as those that PricewaterhouseCoopers identified away back, that could determine that schools should be used for this, that and the other. Those could then be fitted to the community to see whether there would be that usage, and then hear from communities in the various constituencies — that is why I suggest an audit — to find out what they are looking for.

The changes that are happening in education bring forth a situation in which there is great danger of dying schools. From the start, what I have been trying to emphasise with the Bill has been to involve the communities at all stages. Where there are dying schools, the obvious result is dying communities. That is particularly the case with primary schools, and the Committee has discussed where school closures are happening. Families want to stay where there are schools, and families will move to where there are schools and move away from where there is not school provision. It is important to protect the link between schools and communities in every way. With schools closing, we can lose local communities.

I do not dispute the reasons for closures; I understand and accept them. However, where two, three or four schools in close proximity are to close because of numbers, it will be decided that one — the worst of the best, in my opinion — will be kept open. However, the worst of the best is all that it will be. I have had instances of that in my constituency, and I am sure that members will have had instances of it in their constituency or will see it happening. At that stage, linked to the community use of schools, there should be some imaginative thinking to say that the school that will be kept open will be the best, because it will be a state-of-the-art school that will be developed, built and retained not only for educational needs but to fit in with the community.

Chairman, to come back to where we began, it is up to a Committee such as this to be forceful. I see a danger coming in your direction that came in my direction at the time of my Bill. The idea then was

that there were some good ideas in the Bill that the Department could undertake. It has not done so. It is up to the Committee to push for its ideas to be incorporated. I have suggested that you take ownership of this, not only because I think that it is popular but because a scrutiny Committee in a legislative Assembly can be seen to be doing something and to be thinking about the communities throughout Northern Ireland. They are the most important consideration.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much, David. As you know, I was not on the Committee before this. I am intrigued because, with the policy on viability of area planning coming through, we seem to have an opportunity. All the way through, you talked of "community", yet two things go through my mind. One is the matter of where the councils exist in the community, because they are one driving force. The other point, linked to that, is that the council that I was on struggled to be able to afford to run our community buildings. The Bill is an extremely good idea, but if we push it through, we are adding a whole mass of facilities, which will put the strain on funding for council buildings that were already struggling.

We have not done an audit. Going back to the beginning, we should add into the audit that we are looking at all the council buildings as well. It is about getting the balance right for the community of all facilities, not just school facilities. Has an audit of any such link been done?

Mr McNarry: It has not. That is why I am suggesting that the Committee might undertake that. Danny, you are on the button with what you said about the demands that communities, which we are all in touch with, put on us. The first thing that happens is that people say that they want to have a community group. They then want a building, and that has to be found. I am not sure whether the amount of money that has been spent on community buildings has provided good value. I have always thought that there are buildings on our doorstep that communities can make use of.

I have listened intently to the argument on autism. I spoke to the people who came up here to give a presentation before the Easter recess. There is no doubt that an added community facility that could be given to children or people in that sector would be most valued by them. That is another add-on to what a community need is.

We could save money through an audit or review of current use of what we call community buildings. I am not suggesting that we take them away, but a lot of them are saying that they are over-extended and cannot do this or that, and the ratepayers are paying for those. I believe that this could be revenue-earning because a number of organisations that need premises, or better premises, are quite willing to pay for them and explore sponsorship. It is hard to get sponsorship for anything at the moment but if you had a good cause, many commercial organisations would seriously consider sponsoring a Northern Ireland-wide group and, therefore, the tributaries they would have in many constituencies. So, Danny, that idea of looking at council sponsorship is key to how you take this issue forward. That would be part of the audit that I suggested.

The Chairperson: Following on from that, this is maybe why we did not pursue this element earlier. Take the line that Danny referred to; the Department of the Environment (DOE) was looking at the whole issue of the review of public administration (RPA). A key element of RPA was community planning. We should write to the Environment Committee to ask it to ask the Minister what consideration was given during the construction of the community planning process to marrying that and having it as part of area-based planning in terms of education, and the reverse: ask the Department of Education how it saw that issue when it was looking at area-based planning, which has become the big buzzword.

Area-based planning, if you listened to the permanent secretary at a recent function, is only about rationalisation. It is only about the number of schools, not the functions of those schools, unfortunately. That is what we will do as a Committee with those two elements. One, we will ask the DOE how it considered area planning in relation to its community planning, and the reverse to the Department of Education about whether it considered community planning when it was looking at area-based planning. I have a sneaking suspicion as to what the answer will be, but we will not pre-judge anything.

Mr McNarry: I think you are right, and I am glad that you have developed that. There is always a trick in this type of thing and sometimes it is to try to get those that you want onside to believe that it is their idea and not really your idea, or to steal it from you. That is where you can drive it on this issue, but get them to realise one day that this is actually good stuff that we should be doing.

I had a meeting with the Minister on that basic issue with Jo-Anne Dobson when I was your deputy. I found him welcoming and understanding of it. My concern is that he does not get nobbled by his officials, and that is why I ask the strength of the Committee to row in behind its idea and take ownership of this. There is plenty of mileage. It is not just everything that I say; there is more that you are already adding to it. I recommend that you take ownership of the issue.

Mrs Dobson: First, David, I welcome you back to the Committee. I am sure we are all in agreement that you made a valuable contribution to this Committee and I thoroughly enjoyed my time working with you.

Some of the things you said in your presentation, which was excellent, I found to be powerful, particularly your comments about dying schools and dying communities. You know that I am always on about agricultural issues, being a member of a farming community and the Agriculture Committee. The Ulster Farmers' Union is keen to meet the Committee to discuss a number of recommendations that it has put forward on rural schools. We have spoken in the House many times about the potential for our rural communities across Northern Ireland — it is enormous — and about the impact of losing some of those rural schools. As you said in your presentation — I would like to you expand on it a little bit — we need Departments working effectively together. We know the benefits for people who live and work in rural communities, but the proximity of services is also important.

Do you agree that the Department of Education should make better use of school buses by making them available for community use? How should all that tie in together?

Mr McNarry: I am now on the Committee for Regional Development, so the buses are a big interest. You are right to point that out. The whole issue of community transport — not just school buses — and how it affects rural areas is under intense scrutiny. We have all agreed a Budget, but it is sometimes the management of that Budget that worries me. Each Department has been told, "That is the amount of money you have, now go away and do not bother us." All they need to do is do as they have been asked until the next time.

This all hinges on communities. I was born and bred in east Belfast, so I know the city. When I go back to my old haunts, I see all the little primary schools closed, and they are no different to those I see in my Strangford constituency out in the country, as I would tell it. As I said earlier, the whole idea is that families will stay where there are schools and will move to where schools are. Indeed, we have seen that in the debate about grammar schools, where we actually had people going to buy postcodes to ensure the future education of their children as they moved on that level. You are right; it is a way of life and it needs to be connected. I believe that it can and should be connected. All those threads need to be woven together.

Mrs Dobson: What would you like to see happen? Should the Minister have discussions with the Health Department to make this happen? How can we make it a reality?

Mr McNarry: The way I see it is that you have an idea, which is based on protecting community usage of schools, and then you weave into that every other aspect. I do not think that you can divorce education and health in many areas. You need to have that input, particularly when we are dealing with children.

The community use is almost after-school use. I know that some schools are doing well with breakfast clubs and after-school clubs etc, but they are related to children as well. I would like to see that extend into all that can be done in a community for the community itself, of all ages. It is amazing how much voluntary activity goes on, and it could be greatly improved if they had the facilities to be able to activate and to use those. I would like to see all that happen.

Mrs Dobson: We all have examples, as the Chair said. Richmount Primary School in my constituency is an excellent example, but it just needs funding to support it.

Finally, David, do you get a sense that the Department of Education is stringing the issue along and that simply lip service is being paid to the idea? Is there any real intention to follow through with it?

Mr McNarry: I will be cautious in what I say. In the meetings that I had with the Minister when I was a member of this Committee and in the one or two meetings that I had with him on the side, he struck me as if he was going to do something, and I still believe that he, personally, will do something. The track record of his Department is that the departmental officials seem to get their way, and that is why

there needs to be a robust approach from this Committee, not to keep the Minister honest, but maybe just to keep on prodding him in the right direction. I do not want to be too hard on the officials, but there is work involved in what we are talking about, and they do not like doing too much hard work. They certainly do not like going out of their own comfort zone. The idea of an audit is a good one for finding out what the communities really want. The last thing that I want to do is to knock the people that we need to help us. However, I suggest that the Committee needs to keep at them all the time. I do not know where the Minister's report will go or what he will do with it but, as the Chairman has already pointed out, the key issues are not in the report.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you, David, and welcome back.

Mr Lunn: I was on the last Committee, as you will remember, David, and when you say "keep the Minister honest", I think it a pity that we did not try to keep the previous Minister honest in this respect. The depressing note in your synopsis is that that Minister said that she would establish a working group in June 2009, and we do not know whether anything happened from it or whether it was ever established. Perhaps we fell down a bit there. There is a depressing inevitability about this. A Member brings forward a good private Bill which should be adopted by the Department, amended or brought forward in a different form and brought back to us through the normal procedure, but that never happens. What they do is, not particularly talking about education, they take ownership. In this case, they voted it down but with a promise that it would be prioritised — and then nothing happened. Here we are now, with only three years of this Assembly to go. I am not hopeful. The previous Committee supported your Bill; certainly, I did.

I take your points in no particular order. The Chairman referred to the question of insurance. That is a complete red herring. I will not start on my usual spiel about insurance, but if a school wants to lease its premises to an outside body, all it has to do is ask that outside body to provide evidence of public liability insurance. End of story.

As I understood it, your Bill was more to do with community use of schools that were still operating, rather than communities taking over empty schools. I think that there is a problem with empty schools. If the board decides to lease them, let us say, to a community group in simple terms, it is still responsible for the maintenance and for some aspects of the insurance. The better deal for the board would be to sell those empty schools. It is to be taken case-by-case, really.

I am involved in a buildings preservation trust in Lisburn, at the moment, which has taken over the old Hilden Controlled Integrated Primary School, which is a listed building. We are trying to raise the money to renovate it, bring it back into proper use and offer it for community use. In your terms that would be an ideal solution.

I am not really asking you a question, as usual, but that is my comment. I believe that the Committee has a role to try to force the pace, which is why you are here, and I totally agree with you. I think it a total shame that three years have been wasted on what is a very good initiative.

Mr McNarry: I thank you, Trevor, for your support. I acknowledge and recognise that, at the time when my Bill was going through the Assembly, this Committee — of which I was not a member — was very supportive.

You are right about the insurance, and I do not need to add to that. As to empty schools, that is a new issue. It was not as relevant when my Bill was going through. Just to clarify: we now have empty schools that are realisable assets. I think that we need to be imaginative in order to realise those assets. I gave the example of four or five schools. Michelle and I have had that close to the Ballygowan and Comber area. The schools there will be picked off until we have only one or two. We know that, and the parents seem to know it. To me, that is the danger of a community being lost.

Perhaps we could take a minute on the issue of empty schools. There has to be a business approach to this as well. I think that the Department lacks any commercial thinking. I went to speak to two fairly large developers to see if they had any ideas different from mine. I asked them what they would do if they had those empty buildings and how the Department and the Executive could realise the assets. They both dealt with it in the current situation, and they both said the same thing: you cannot allow communities to die, which is what I have been saying. Where there is the possibility of that happening, you need to build new houses. If you build new houses, you will rejuvenate the community and young families will want to go there. So, you have to build a certain type of house. We all know that there is a housing shortage, no matter where we are. I could see that the developers were

thinking as businessmen. What they were saying was that they would certainly consider taking on such a space and either building a state-of-the-art school or developing it, and, as they sold, the Department would get. That would be quite a novel thing for them to do in today's situation, but it is a reality. Five years ago, developers were saying, "We will build it all, and we will give you so much for it". There is probably more value and a better opportunity for planning in those situations. So, outside, there is a commercial willingness to look at the assets we have in schools and how best to turn those around. Again, that type of thing put into the pot goes back to the community and the schools to see if it is how they would like it. I believe that if we build houses, we can maintain local communities and add to them.

Ms Boyle: You are very welcome back, David. Nice to have you here. Thanks for the presentation. I support your initiative to set up a scrutiny committee to do an audit. I just want to make a comment about the amount of preschool provision that we have in terms of fit-for-purpose Portakabins that are being used. I know that there is the possibility of a school closure in my constituency next year. The area is coping with much-needed resources and buildings for preschool provision and provision for elderly people. I know that in my area there is a shortage of places for meals on wheels, in terms of bringing the older people into the community for daycare provision and stuff like that, because they have no building. It is a resource that should be used more widely, but there is no provision for it. There is no building in sight for that. I believe that it is in the public's best interest for empty schools to be in use. Again, going back to the example of Plumbridge in my area, we had difficulties when St Peter's School closed, because it lay for a long time. Plumbridge is a relatively quiet area, and there was a fear among the community that the school would end up being vandalised, targeted and burned. There are all those associated fears in a community when a building is lying vacant. It is in the public's best interest. Recommendation 11 from the working group states that other Departments should be involved in terms of a commitment to providing for communities as well, so I share and support the initiative that you are bringing forward. Thank you, David.

Mr McNarry: Thank you, Michaela. Chairman, I did not want to come here to give a presentation of a whole load of things that you probably knew or thought yourselves, so I am personally delighted to hear what you have said and what other members have said, because you are identifying with what you know. I think that is very important. It is so similar in every case.

Preschool provision is a nightmare; we all know that. I am now a grandfather, and I can tell those of you who are heading that way that it is difficult enough bringing up two daughters, but when they present you with a whole lot of children and you thought your job was over after the two daughters, it blooming well begins all over again, and it is new. It is new to me, this whole preschool situation. People have told me that they are paying out as much on their mortgage as they are for preschool; I am saying, "hang on, here is something". If we have the specialists, if we can put teachers to use, if we can put to use all sorts of people who are struggling to find a job, then here are opportunities. That is what I see through this; opportunities to reinvest in the community, to listen to the community, to find out what their needs are.

To go from that extreme, as you have addressed, to the elderly; we do not really look after them enough. We need to do more, and there are things within reasonably short access. I am going back to the buses: they can get free buses to go to these things now or to get to an area within distance. We need to take all that into account. That is why, again, I urge you to take ownership of what this is. The Minister will do so much, but keep him right, and then push it. Discuss it so that the other Departments can be involved. I think it covers nearly every other Department that I know, particularly the planning aspect of it, not just community planning or education planning, but the actual planning for what we can do here.

Mr Craig: David, it is good to see you back here. I missed my old sparring partner.

Mr McNarry: I can tell you it is different on this side.

Mr Craig: Yes, I have thought about that. I would not fancy being there.

I declare an interest, both as chair of Laurelhill Community College and as chair of the management committee that looks after the Sports Zone up there. We in Lisburn have been fortunate. I can quote three prime examples where we share the facilities with the local communities: Laurelhill Sports Zone, Hillsborough Community Centre and Dromara Community Centre. We have worked with other schools as well; we are due to open up yet another scheme with Ballymacash Primary School. I have to be honest with you, David: that came from the community up. Quite frankly, the community forced

the issue with regard to both the board and the Department. We have been fortunate that, as elected representatives, we have done most of this work through our local council.

Do you not agree that, although it is good that a local community has forced the issues of turning them into community schools, it would have been better if both the boards and the Department had had a policy whereby, when they look at their local schools and communities where there is a lack of facilities, they should have approached the local councils and other bodies to turn those schools into community schools, which we have now done in Lisburn by default?

Mr McNarry: I know about the work that has been done in the Lisburn area: congratulations. What has been achieved goes back some time, and it has certainly set benchmarks for others. However, I also know, Jonathan, that not many others have followed. My idea is to engender the communities — not to build their expectations up to any great height but to say that this is what they can do provided that we know what they want, so that we can go with them and identify with them.

I totally agree with what you said. I lose patience with boards and Departments when I come across this sort of thing as to why nothing has been done. However, I then put it back to us and say that this is a job that we could do; this is how we could push the issue and force it through onto the boards. From what you have supplied as a Committee, I have seen what the boards have been doing. Although I appreciate and commend it — I have not seen it all, I have only got from two boards — it is not great and it is focused in areas where you might expect it, certainly in Belfast. However, it is not great in other areas. It is not a great achievement; you could not sit back and say that it was brilliant.

I suppose the reason why I am here, and I detect the interest that you have, is that we all agree that it is not good enough. I do not want to be accused of saying that it is lousy and not good enough, and having someone ask me what I am going to do about it. You are right; there is a good role model in Lisburn. However, you also have to be able to ask the communities what activities they would like. You have just got to start. You started with sport, and that was good. It could be sport somewhere, and different things could happen.

I will end on Jonathan's point by saying this: we all remember — I remember it as a businessman because I made a lot of money out of it, so it will always be with me — that, during the Troubles, we had to have swimming pools everywhere and they had to be the best that you could get anywhere. When we brought people over from Europe and England, they said "Why have you got all these?" What are they doing now? Communities move on. We do not look after them, and then we find that we cannot afford them. The big tick box is whether it is affordable. I will not mention north Down's Olympic-sized swimming pool and the money that has been spent on it.

There is just as much fun in being able to say to a bunch of young children, "There's a bit of grass, go out and play on it and we will look after you" as in telling them that we are going to build them a big swimming pool, but we will decide who can use it, and half the community will not be allowed into it at all unless they are attached to something. I do not want to knock that too much, but it is another white elephant as far as I am concerned.

Mr McKay: Thank you for your presentation, David. I agree with a lot of what you said. We need to be much more imaginative with the schools estate. I was thinking of a role reversal where you have local community centres. In my constituency, schools that are coming through at grassroots level, the likes of Irish-medium and integrated schools, start off in rooms in community centres. Of course, they share that with preschool, different services and businesses. Is there any reason why that could not be the other way round? For example, if there were a school with a certain number of children and a large part of it were not being used, why could it not be opened up more to the community? That is worth exploring.

You cannot continue to have a situation in some villages and towns where people know that the school is going to close and, one or two years later, the school closes and it just sits there. There has been no discussion and no community planning about what it could be used for in the meantime. If you can plan ahead and use the building it will not fall into disrepair or be vandalised and, therefore, it could save ratepayers money because they would not have to bring it up to speed in another couple of years. That is just a comment.

You have had discussion with grass roots, schools and communities on the issue, and the focus has mainly been on use after school hours. However, how much of those discussions has been on what we might do with buildings and how they could be opened more to the community during school hours?

Mr McNarry: There is an obvious protection of a school during school hours. I am still not sure what the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) will be, but this is about tying together, perhaps in ESA, a lot of visions as to what we might have. Schools are now finding their own level of size, and so on, and I am very keen to see a school collective that involves preschool children. I am keen to see commercialism be accommodated at that level, and I am keen for it to be piloted in a couple of places to see whether it works.

One key element that I took from the communities that I talked to was the level of responsibility that you will put on school governors, and so on, and whether they want to assume such a role. In the main, I found that most of them would accept that level of responsibility, providing that they knew their exact role in it and maintained ownership on behalf of the school so that somebody from an outside body could not come in and try to kick the school outside and take over. We need to deal with that human nature issue.

You are absolutely right about respecting the buildings, and community influence will bring that. The PricewaterhouseCoopers report also identified that, where there was joint ownership in communities, vandalism dropped to almost zero. People respected the building.

I am convinced that the provision that one would make for the usage of schools can be paid for. It may involve jockeying for different funding and different sponsorship, but it can be paid for and can be more cost-effective. However, it can also introduce a great variety of usages into schools. Jonathan talked about sport, but the facilities in schools are so suitable for music and dance of all kinds. Why do we not use it? We have some great assembly halls in schools that are hardly used. The variety of stuff, Daithí, is tremendous.

In many cases, the grass roots needs to get a bit of confidence back, but without raising its expectations. It comes back to the audit idea. There is diversification in constituencies and even within the same constituency, and you will get different ideas in different places. However, that is where the local identity is established, and that is what you want to address. To me, all things are possible with this. I do not see why it cannot be done.

The Chairperson: We have two more questioners. I will try to bring the session to a conclusion quickly, because we have run over time. However, the discussion and dialogue is useful.

Miss M McIlveen: Thank you, David. I apologise for being late, but I had a meeting with preschool providers in Newtownards before I came here.

The questions have been covered and the areas well discussed, and we have chatted about the good examples that there are around Belfast and Lisburn. In Ards, there is collaboration between the council and St Columba's College in Portaferry to meet a local need for leisure provision. We are all mindful that we meet a number of principals in our constituencies who are willing to get involved in such projects, but they encounter difficulties and obstacles, be they from departmental officials or because of insurance issues.

In my experience, councils can be a driver in all of this. Jonathan talked about the requests coming from the community, and often a council's reaction is to build a community centre or go out to consultation on the need for a community centre, rather than looking at what is in its particular area. With RPA coming down the road again, particularly to do with community planning, perhaps councils can look at what is there, as opposed to duplicating, with the consequence of reduced resources. In your early consultation for your Bill, what response did you receive from local authorities?

Mr McNarry: I had a poor response from local authorities. To be fair to them, it was something that they did not think was their responsibility. They saw it as a departmental issue. Therefore, the response was poor. That is not to say that, four years on, they should not be approached again.

Your point about RPA is well made. The Chairman mentioned it earlier, and that is a direction that could be incorporated into extra research. Again, taking a step back and see what councils can do is all part of joined-up government. Part of the audit idea that I suggested could incorporate finding out all that councils do. Having recently been a councillor, you may know more about it than I do, but many people do not know exactly what facilities their councils provide and what is open to them. We are trying to close gaps. That is what I want to do, so it would be a good idea to go back to the councils.

Miss M McIlveen: Local authorities would be my priority. There are a number of schools in our constituency, David, with empty classrooms. Principals desperately want their buildings to be used and to encourage footfall in their school, but that has to be achieved in partnership and cannot be left to the Department.

Mr McNarry: You are right. It seems ideal to have preschool children make use of empty classrooms. However, you have to make sure that parents do not think that, because they are there for preschool, their children will naturally move into a place at the school later. Those things have to be established, and, with usage, they can be. Parents are crying out for it.

Mr Rogers: Thanks for your enlightening presentation, David. Almost all my questions have been answered. However, the key thing here is that families will stay where there are good schools or move to where there are. Your comment that this is not about protecting just schools but our communities is important. We need to adopt a proactive and imaginative approach to this and really think about what type of community we want to have here in 10 or 20 years' time. Michaela mentioned the idea of using a school site for supported living. Last year, we had a debate about the closure of our rural libraries and using schools for such facilities.

You used the phrase "joined-up government", and we need that. We see examples of it, such as Laurelhill Community College, where groups work together. We recently had a case in Newry of the council, working with the Department for Social Development, Sport NI, and so on, getting a cocktail of funding for that type of thing. We think of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the rural White Paper and access to services. When we are at the Committee for Education, we have to drive this, but we need to get those other people on board, because you certainly can get value for money out of all of this.

Mr McNarry: My sense is that Sean is right in what he said about the other Departments. Our colleagues on other Committees are no different from you sitting here. I am asking this Committee to drive community use of schools but also to go to your colleagues. I have spoken to colleagues, and they are very much on board with this. They know their constituency, share the realities and understand the needs. I would progress it in that way.

All I can do is thank you again and to ask you to take it on. I can think of no better people to do that job.

The Chairperson: David, thank you very much. There is a variety of things coming out of this that we need to be doing. We need to ensure that we construct this in such a way that we get an outcome, as opposed to going around in circles, as we can do with a number of these things. Thank you very much for your time and for your presentation. We look forward to working with you in the future.

Mr McNarry: Thank you very much.