



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Viability Audit: Departmental Briefing

2 May 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Mrs Lorraine Finlay	Department of Education
Mr John McGrath	Department of Education
Mr Diarmuid McLean	Department of Education

The Deputy Chairperson: Good morning. John, thank you very much for coming. Would you like to introduce your colleagues?

Mr John McGrath (Department of Education): On my left is Diarmuid McLean, who is in charge of investment infrastructure in the Department, and on my right is Lorraine Finlay, who leads up the area planning team.

The Deputy Chairperson: You are very welcome, and we look forward to hearing from you on the viability audit. It is probably the more important of the two matters that we will be dealing with this year. Will you lead off, please?

Mr McGrath: We welcome the opportunity to come back to talk about the viability audits, which, as you know, were carried out by the education and library boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) working with the other sectors. Flowing from the Minister's statement of 26 September last year, the viability audit's main focus was on enrolment levels, delivery of quality education and financial viability. The terms of reference are included in the briefing paper forwarded to Committee members.

The viability audit was a precursor to the work now going ahead on area planning, which is being taken forward by the Department, the education and library boards and CCMS. The purpose of the viability audit, as set out by the Minister at the time, was to identify schools facing stress in terms of enrolment levels, the quality of education that they were able to deliver and financial viability. Its purpose was also to ensure that action that should be taken in the short term to protect the education of pupils in any school would be taken where the educational well-being of the pupils was a concern. The information from the audits will also support the development of a detailed area profile based on current and relevant educational information, which will be an essential part of the area planning exercise.

As the Minister has made clear consistently, his main focus is on pupils and their educational well-being and the quality of education that schools provide. In moving forward into area planning, a very clear and unambiguous statement was needed of the educational and financial challenges facing many of our schools. The audits were submitted to the Department on 15 February and published on Tuesday 6 March by each of the education and library boards on their websites.

Overall, the audit highlighted that, while there are schools that are performing well — many of them — there are also many that are evidencing stress at this time and that could and should be improving the outcomes of their pupils. I will not go into much detail, as a more detailed analysis of the audits was provided as part of the briefing paper forwarded to members. I am sure that members will have many questions in regard to that.

To summarise the main findings of the audit: over 46% of primary schools are facing stress in one or more categories; 124 out of 148 secondary schools are evidencing stress in at least one category; 66 primary schools are failing to meet the quality education criterion, which involves 7.6% of the total primary school population; 32 secondary schools have less than 25% of their pupils obtaining the target of five GCSEs, including English and maths, at grade A* to C; 321 out of 839 primary schools are beneath the enrolment thresholds for urban and rural schools; nine secondary schools are in formal intervention, and seven of them have enrolment levels beneath the threshold of 500; and 24 out of 68 grammar schools are evidencing stress in at least one category. Therefore, there is strong evidence from the audits that significant stress is being experienced across the system, and there is a high potential that this could damage the educational experience that many children are receiving at the minute.

As I said earlier, the viability audits are the first step towards area planning. It has proved to be a very good platform on which to build, and the lessons learned will inform the approach to area planning. That said, while we want to determine the future pattern of provision through area planning, we have to be mindful of the welfare of children who are in the system now. As the Minister indicated when he made a statement about the viability audits, we will shortly be writing to a range of schools that have given us concern about the evidence produced in the audit to ask that appropriate action be taken to safeguard the educational interest of the children attending those schools now. However, it is important to note that schools can be properly considered only in a wider area context. Therefore, it is important that we do not underestimate the complexity of the task facing the entire education system and the delivery of area planning.

On area planning, you raised some issues with us about certain schools. I will not mention them by name. You asked about schools that are achieving academically but which do not fit within the criteria set out in the viability audit. Specifically, you cited St Aidan's in Derrylin, and perhaps we will come back to that if you wish. The CCEA has produced a post-primary review, which contains a number of recommendations, including one for the amalgamation of St Aidan's and two other post-primary schools in that area. Again, we can talk about that if you wish. Obviously, any decision to close a school will require the publication of a statutory development proposal. That must be preceded by consultation with those directly affected by the proposal, and the two-month statutory consultation period provides a further opportunity for interested parties to make their views known.

You also asked us about advice to school governors and how to communicate with parents on matters relating to area plans. In due course, all of the area plans received will be subject to full and formal consultation. That is not just consultation with the education system but with the wider community, whose interests this is about primarily. The final shape of this consultation has not yet been agreed,

but, as I said, the Minister has indicated that it will be a full, open and transparent process in which all views are considered.

The Deputy Chairperson: Phil, you are in a hurry to get away to something, so I will let you go first.

Mr Flanagan: John, it is good to see you again, and thank you for the presentation. I have a number of questions, and I have some concerns about how the viability audit is being carried out. Boards were charged with exploring opportunities for cross-border planning. Is there any evidence that that actually took place?

Mr McGrath: Are you talking about the area planning process?

Mr Flanagan: Yes.

Mr McGrath: The plans are not long with us, and we are still analysing them. When you say cross-border, do you mean cross-border with the Republic?

Mr Flanagan: Yes, not cross-sector; cross-border.

Mr McGrath: I will ask one of my colleagues to comment on our analysis to date.

Mrs Lorraine Finlay (Department of Education): We have been looking at cross-border and cross-boundary in all of the reports. However, a separate parallel programme is running, on which more work is being done, and the Department is working with colleagues from the South. A community audit will be done, which will ask parents the type of school they would like their children to go to should it be available on a cross-border basis. That is being done on both sides of the border, along the whole border corridor.

Mr Flanagan: The survey announced by both Education Ministers is completely separate to the ongoing area planning process. One of the terms of reference of the process was that boards would assess opportunities for cross-border planning. That has not taken place.

(The Chairperson [Mr Storey] in the Chair)

In Brollagh in Fermanagh, where a school has been earmarked for closure, it was up to the local community to become active, mobilise, and explore the potential for a cross-border solution. It is not the only community to have gotten together a small group and worked up an alternative solution to the one that either a library board or the CCMS put forward. What is the Department doing to ensure that proposals put into the process by someone other than a statutory agency will receive full and fair hearing as part of this process and that any appraisals carried out on proposals will be fair?

Mr McGrath: If proposals emerge from local communities, those will be considered. The Minister has set out his policy criteria for area planning, particularly in the sustainable schools policy, at the core of which are standards issues. Therefore, proposals to obviate those already put forward by a board or by the Catholic Commission in the first instance would have to address the sustainability and quality issues. There is a particular challenge in these areas. Any linkages, whether they are within the local area or cross-border, would have to address the challenges from the quality criteria set by both jurisdictions. The bar would be particularly high for anyone trying to work up something.

Mr Flanagan: That is fine. We will go back to the Derrylin solution. I do not want to speak about that individually, I am just using it to give you a practical example. The CCMS solution is to merge three schools on one site. The proposal put forward by the community in Derrylin is slightly different, but is not a million miles away from it. How can we be sure that the community's proposal will not just be dismissed by people in the education and library board and by the CCMS and that the proposal put to the Department will take an impartial and objective view of both proposals?

Mr McGrath: There is some way to go. We are at the start of the area planning process. Proposals received in the area plans will go out for full consultation. In due course, there will have to be proper development proposals, which will involve consultation with all the local interests. So, there will be a fairly detailed proposition there. Within that, the merits of an alternative proposal can be fed in and tested.

Mrs Finlay: We are also aware of ongoing discussions between the Western Education and Library Board, the trustees, the CCMS and the schools in relation to the proposal put forward by St Aidan's.

Mr Flanagan: Existing deficits in schools are another concern. When a proposal is put forward for a federated, multi-campus, model as opposed to a straight amalgamation, what happens to an existing deficit? Is it just written off? What do you anticipate might happen?

Mr McGrath: You would need to say more about the nature of the federated, multi-campus, model. Essentially, if it is something short of amalgamation, the schools remain the same entities and their deficits remain. There is a lot of language being used about federations and different forms of linkages short of amalgamation or closures, and many of them do not have any legal form and simply consist of the same schools working closely together. People are using words, but they do not actually have a legal underpinning in many cases.

Mr Flanagan: Finally, are you satisfied that managing authorities have been given clear guidance and support to explore shared options across sectors?

Mr McGrath: They have certainly been given sufficient guidance that they should be exploring issues across sectors, particularly when there is an educational issue that could be solved or bettered by cross-sectoral co-operation. One of the issues that we are looking at in the analysis of the area plans is the extent to which the relevant authorities have addressed that.

Mr Flanagan: I will leave it there.

The Chairperson: My apologies, John, Diarmuid and Lorraine, for not being here for your presentation at the start of the session. I just stepped out to do something else with the PTAs upstairs.

John, this process has undoubtedly created a raft of concerns. I will quote another Department document to you. If you were listening outside, you would have heard me giving you a warning that I was going to use this quote. With regard to what we discussed with Adrian and his colleagues in a previous session about consultation on the regulations, school performance and the information that goes to parents and so on, the briefing paper states that, in his statement on 26 September, the Minister's goal was:

"to promote a wider debate on the importance of education and for every community to have an interest in how well every part of our education system is performing."

That is valid and commendable. The paper goes on to state:

"Achieving this goal will in part depend on schools providing information to parents, and the wider public, that is accurate, reliable, relevant, timely and easy to understand."

I doubt whether any of those were achieved in the viability audit, because they were not accurate. Numbers of schools wrote to us saying that the context in which the information was being interpreted was not there. It was not reliable, because the Department had to go back and ask for more information. It was not relevant in some cases and it certainly was not timely, because some of the information on finance or educational outcomes was based on figures from 2008-09 and 2009-2010.

We saw all the stuff that was done in the public realm, and we warned that that was what would eventually happen. I hope you will be able to give me a definite answer as to why you set two separate standards. I can understand why there are two separate standards, because people have to accept

that there are post-primary non-selectives and grammar schools. So, you have a standard for one that was seven GCSEs A* to C for grammar schools but five GCSEs A* to C for non-selectives.

However, you changed the benchmark. In the non-selectives, you set the benchmark at 25%, whereas the Northern Ireland average is 31% or 32%, so you pulled them down. You set the grammars a benchmark of 85%, whereas the Northern Ireland average is 71%, so you put them up. The impact of that was that you ended up with an audit that basically said that all our schools are in the situation in which they have financial problems. You were trying to create, in the eyes of the world, that there are problems across all our schools and that everybody is in this mess together, so everybody has to find a solution. The reality is that there are some very poorly performing schools; a range of schools at different levels, and then, at the other end, some very well-performing schools.

However, as far as the public is now concerned, there are problems in the grammars and secondaries, and dear only knows what we will get when we see the audits for the primary schools. Be assured that it will be the same thing and there will be problems in them all. Was that the Department's real intent?

Mr McGrath: I take issue with the view that that was the intent of the Department. The objective was to do a stress test to see to what extent schools were comfortable with enrolments, their achievements and financial position. I do not accept your description of the data. There will always be a time-lag between exam results and being able to use them for these sorts of exercises.

My colleagues will talk more about the precise targets set. However, this is public information. We did not invent any of this information. We did it over trends. When the data are updated, therefore, I doubt whether in many cases they will significantly change the position that a school may have represented in the first audit.

I also stress that no one has taken any shotgun decisions based on the audit. Obviously, there are concerns, but I do not accept that some harm will be done to some institution because some information could, perhaps, be updated. The audit has given us a sense of the stress across the system. In some cases the bar was set low, and many people still fell beneath it.

When you look at the information in detail; although a lot of schools were still above the thresholds that we set for educational experience, in a number of them the trajectory is going in the wrong direction. A number of schools are also bubbling along just above the threshold, and that does not augur well for the children in their care. The information that we published is factual. What it presents may cause difficulties in many cases, but, as I said earlier, parents and communities have a right to understand schools' educational performance. We think that the exercise has been salutary. It is very much consistent with the evidence from the inspection reports, which suggest that there are significant issues, particularly with quality, across our system. They are of a significant scale, cannot be underestimated and need to be addressed. Therefore, what we have seen from the audit, particularly about the educational experience, is consistent with the findings from the Education and Training Inspectorate's (ETI) programme of inspections. I will ask Lorraine to say something about the thresholds we set for secondary and grammar schools.

Mrs Finlay: These targets were agreed across the five boards and with the CCMS. They were used previously in the boards to look at the gap between what was acceptable and what needed to be improved. The reason for the time lag is that the Minister asked us to have verifiable information, and, at the time, this was the verifiable information that was available. I know that there were more recent examination results, but those had not been verified, so it was felt that it would not be wise to use them.

The Chairperson: We had a presentation on the regulations from your colleague, Adrian. The representatives informed us that the indicator that they deleted is: "seven or more GCSEs at grades A*-C or equivalent". That is clear. In case members think that I am giving them misleading information, they should look at the paper marked "F" in the folder and turn to page 15. This is obviously the answer to the question that Jo-Anne asked in relation to what was deleted:

"Indicators Deleted...

The percentage of Year 12 pupils achieving: ...

5 or more GCSEs at grades A-G or equivalent;
7 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C or equivalent."*

How many times do we, as we would say in Ballymoney, "chap an change" these things? We never seem to get a process in place that is sufficiently open and transparent and that does not lead to all sorts of misinterpretation. On the one hand, you are saying that you are now going to delete as an indicator seven GCSEs at grades A* to C. Yet, you do a viability audit that causes all sorts of concerns out there for parents and everybody, and this is the indicator that you use. Who is right, and who is wrong? It just proves the point: are you are measuring what is available rather than what is important?

Mr McGrath: I think that what we are measuring is important. I am not sure that a debate about the nuancing of certain thresholds is a real issue. The information is the information.

The Chairperson: In fairness, John, it is an issue. If your school is being judged on the threshold and on the level as to whether it is under stress or not, it is a big issue. I have correspondence from schools about the context and the difference between a pupil who has certain grades and others. In the public's mind, it only takes one statistic to be over the threshold and the school — as was the case with this school — was deemed to be a failing school. That was not the case. It was all on the measures that were used and set by the viability audits. The Department cannot have it both ways. It cannot say that it will delete an indicator and then use it as a stress mechanism — and that is the Department's own terminology — to identify schools that are under stress. This is a serious issue for the school.

Mr McGrath: I stress that the indicators used were worked up closely with all the boards concerned, and they agreed that these were the best set of indicators to give us a sense of where the system is.

No one is taking immediate decisions on any of the data. A lot of it is trend data and shows the direction of travel of some schools. It is important that we look at it in the strategic sense, as there will always be the odd glitch in data. As Lorraine said, the Minister wanted us to use verifiable data. We could have used one-year-on data that had not been fully proofed by the statisticians. It would have been more up to date, and it would have been 95% or 96% accurate, but would have been open to the accusation that it was not 100% verifiable. Therefore, we erred on the side of caution on that.

There is serious information coming out in the audit, which, in many cases, should not be a surprise to people. It will be evident to the system in general that a number of schools are not going in the right direction. As I said, some schools will not feature as being under stress, but if you look at the data that has come out of the audits, you will say that they will soon be. There are schools whose trajectory is going the wrong way and going fast. There are patterns out there that are quite worrying.

Certain schools have probably been discussed individually around this table, and there are major issues. I was personally concerned with a lot of the data that came up, particularly in a range of controlled schools, starting with Jonathan's, and some of the ones that we talked about, and originally what we would have called problems along the dual carriageway. There is a pattern of significant underachievement running from Lisburn to Bangor in controlled post-primary schools. They are not little glitches or one-offs; they are serious underperformances. In some schools where enrolment is not the issue, there are serious worrying issues that need to be addressed both in respect of the children who are there now and the future pattern that we want to deal with.

The Minister recently made the decision about Dunmurry High School. One of the issues was where those kids were going to go so that they did not have the same inadequate educational experience repeated. It is not as simple as closing school A. It is about where the kids are going to go to get a better experience. There are serious issues coming out of this matter. The data fit the messages that have come from the inspectorate reports and the aggregation of those, which have serious messages. People do not seem to register what we are actually saying. There are a significant number of schools with issues about teaching and leadership. That is the ETI's evidence. It is not something that we have come up with.

The Chairperson: I do not wish to get sidetracked into individual schools, but the reality is that what is happening in some of the schools that you mentioned did not happen just as a result of the viability audit.

Mr McGrath: The viability audit is simply evidence of what has been happening. That is my point exactly. It has not made these things happen.

The Chairperson: I accept that.

Mr McGrath: It has shown that these things happen. In some cases, it may be more stark, and I was certainly alarmed when I looked at the trend data for certain schools. You can see that some of it is not going in the right direction, and it may well be in free fall. We could end up with situations such as that which was exemplified by Dunmurry High School, and that is not where we want to be.

The Chairperson: In the light of that, is the Department happy that there was a sectoral-based approach to the viability audit? Clearly, there are a number of organisations involved, including NICIE, the Irish-medium sector and the voluntary grammar sector. Is the Department absolutely clear that it has all the relevant information? In the briefing paper that you sent to us, you said that the viability audits provide a firm foundation on which to develop area planning. All the data will be combined with a wide range of other educational demographic and economic data to provide detailed area profiles. We are now going to have area profiles along with area plans. What is the difference between an area profile and an area plan, which will provide the information base for the area planning process? If we have not had buy-in from everybody, you could go back to the boards and say that you need relevant information on x, y and z, as the Minister did — I think, "more relevant information", was the phrase used. You could not do that with NICIE. Was it done with the Irish-medium sector, and was it done with the voluntary grammar sector?

Mr McGrath: The exercise was comprehensive. The boards are the lead authority, and —

The Chairperson: Is it complete?

Mr McGrath: Yes.

The Chairperson: And comprehensive?

Mr McGrath: Yes, it is. It is a snapshot of where we are now. In order to work towards where we want to go, we need that broader base of information about the demographics in certain areas, population trends, the performance of schools and what the solution might be. There is a bit of: this is where we are today, and what do we need to do urgently just to look after the children who are in school now; and the pattern we need to move to, which involves a more strategic exercise through area planning and for which we need to take a broader range of issues into account.

The Chairperson: I will open the meeting up a bit more and move to members, but there are a number of things that we will come back to.

Mr Kinahan: I share the Chair's concerns. We all know that changes are needed and that what is being done needs to be done. However, it was done in a way that seemed to show that the Department almost did not care. I was not a member of the Committee on the day that the audit came out, but, before the end of that day, schools were ringing me because they were frightened that the reaction of parents would force their schools to close. They were not talking about the audit itself but the fact that no one was packaging the thing properly and holding all of the schools and all of the parents together. Even the use of the word "stress" put stress on it. There was a better way of doing it all, and I hope that the Department will put something in place to better communicate and better hold parents together as you go through the difficult times ahead. What you are doing is very important, and I take it on board, but the whole thing was handled appallingly badly. Will a better communication system be put in place, because, when I asked the board and parents, no one really saw it as their duty. It has to be the Department's duty to get the communication better.

My second point, on the groupings around the countryside, touches on the correspondence from the Ulster Farmers' Union and an issue that I met in my work in DRD. To take my patch as an example, if a school on the edge of Antrim starts to look towards moving to an area-planning grouping in Ballymena, that affects all of the other schools in Antrim. Who will ensure that we hold together not only the rural communities of a town but the larger areas that go with them? There is a whole mass of things coming in with that, which takes me back to the question of whether we will communicate properly with the parents and the schools. We need to have a really slick system in which they are part of the decision process and have their say, yet we need this all to happen very quickly.

Those are my two greatest concerns. The third thing that came through from a few people that I talked to was that they felt that the Department was not using all of the expertise and information of some of the boards. The impression that I was getting was that it was coming from the Department and ignoring some of the boards.

Mr McGrath: There is quite a lot in that. First, on your point about caring; the Minister and the Department care about the educational well-being of the children in their charge, and that is the absolute top focus. Schools are there to deliver first-class education. The interests of the children come first, and the interests of the schools come second. This exercise has not been done before, so I agree entirely that there will always be learning. Equally, before you joined the Committee, we discussed whether this exercise would cause a run on certain schools. In our view, how a school performs and how it compares with others is information that any parent or child is entitled to have. If it shows up that a school is not doing as well as it should be, that is an issue for the school to deal with, but not making the information available is being less than honest and does not serve the interests of the community that we are here to serve. As I said, no instant decisions have been taken on the viability audit. It has probably shown up that there are major issues to be dealt with across the whole patch, and we will work very closely with the managing authorities. The information that we got back was the information that those authorities gave us. We contributed some of the information around the finances of voluntary grammars because we hold it as the funding authority. We did not make this information up. A lot of it should have been known to all the managing authorities anyway — its presentation was maybe an issue — and to the schools themselves. The first people who know about schools should be the schools themselves.

We recently did a series of seminars for governors and stressed to them that it is the duty and responsibility of any board of governors to know how their school is performing and how it is performing against its peers and against the standards that are expected. If, in certain cases, it came as a bit of a shock, there are issues there about how boards of governors are discharging their responsibilities.

Mr Kinahan: It is the total picture that you are putting out all at the same time. That is what really hit everyone. Each one knows individually. It was just, in my view, badly —

Mr McGrath: I know. I can understand that, but I have sat at this Committee, as have others, and summarised the findings from the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) inspections, which are quite shocking when you aggregate it up. At times, however, it does not appear to register. We have given out, a number of times, the proportion of schools whose standards are low and the proportion of schools, from the inspectorate's findings, where standards of leadership are inadequate. In many cases, the seriousness of that does not seem to register.

The Chair said earlier, and he is absolutely right, that a lot of schools perform very well. I said that in my opening remarks. Some schools at the other end — it is a normal distribution — are not doing very badly, and then there are those in the middle. However, we are not doing as well as lots of people still seem to think about the education system here. The aggregation of those data may have been shocking, but it is very much accurate and consistent with the findings of inspection reports. I know that the Minister will be keen on this point: it shows that there are issues to be addressed rather than ignored or put in a corner and complacency allowed to return.

Mrs Finlay: It definitely supports the case that we need to move to a much more strategic approach to planning and that we cannot look at schools on an individual basis. We need to look at them as a collective and as a group of schools supporting the whole community and at how they can work

together to ensure that every child has access to high-quality education, regardless of whether they are in the town, on the outskirts of the town or right outside in a rural area. It really does support the case that we need to move, and move now, to an area-based approach to planning and to look at everything across the piece rather than —

Mr Kinahan: You have to communicate better.

Mrs Finlay: Yes, and to do it much better than we have been up to now.

The Chairperson: I want to clarify something in relation to accuracy. Page 6 of the briefing paper gives information, in a table, on the total number of primary schools and pupils and on the list of stress categories. In the section below that entitled "Facts", it is stated:

"66 Primary Schools catering for 8904 pupils (8% of the total number of primary pupils) are not reaching an acceptable level of attainment".

The 66 refers to schools where deficit exceeds the local management of schools (LMS) limits. Is there a typo? I was not able to link the 66 primary schools in relation to the levels of attainment with the 66 in the table at the top of the page, which is under the heading "Projected Deficit Exceeds LMS Limits". That is to do with budget. The 66 under "Facts" is to do with attainment.

Mrs Finlay: It is actually a coincidence that, when they added and subtracted to put the figures together, they arrived at the same figure for the two. I do not have the exact figures with me now, but that question was asked of us before, and we checked it out and found that it was to do with the fact that, when you add some and take some out, it just coincidentally comes to the same figure. I can let you have the full explanation.

The Chairperson: I want to clarify something else. Are we now saying that the total deficit is £4.5 million for primary schools and £25.55 million for post-primary schools? The paper states:

"Projected deficit for the 66 secondary schools in evidencing financial stress is — £25.55m".

Is the total financial stress in our schools, based on that being greater than the 5% LMS target, those two figures put together?

Mr McGrath: No, Chair. In stating the projected deficit for the 66 schools, the paper is saying that, if nothing changes, those schools will run up an aggregate deficit of £25 million. That is not acceptable, so there will have to be measures to deal with it. The figures in the viability audit will not be entirely up to date. They will not be up to the end of the financial year just ended, so the up-to-date position will be further on than those figures.

The Chairperson: If you include the grammars, that is another £2.7 million. Therefore, the projected deficit is roughly £33 million. However, what you are saying is that it is worse than that because the figures are not up to date.

Mr McGrath: It is a mix. The projected deficits project forward in the viability audit. In many cases, that cannot be allowed to happen. On the other hand, another financial year has passed, and, in general, some schools' deficits will have grown. We are trying to put the last financial year to bed and to work out exactly where we are on that. We will be happy to come back and talk about the overall surplus/deficit position.

The Chairperson: That ties in with what we had earlier, and we just made reference to it. The Finance Minister sent a letter to the Committee for Finance and Personnel on 30 March on the review of budget allocations, in which he said:

"As I have stated previously, it is not proposed that the planned review of Budget allocations for 2013-14 and 2014-15 will represent a re-opening of Budget 2011-15. Rather, it will be a reassessment of

the original allocations based on subsequent departmental spending performance in the first year of the Budget."

I assume that that process is under way.

Mr McGrath: The process that the Finance Minister referred to has not started yet in terms of engagement with us, but we know that it is imminent.

Mr Lunn: I must say that I was not critical of this exercise from the start. I thought that it was a worthwhile process, but, inevitably, it has caused quite a bit of concern around schools, and we have all been approached by parents and schools that are concerned about the future. However, there were no great surprises in the information. I have looked only at the South Eastern Education and Library Board's results, but there was not much there that was not already available to the parents and schools anyway. If a school has only 25 pupils, it is pretty obvious. There is nothing new, but it has caused concern.

The original instruction was that the boards and CCMS would work in close conjunction. What did that actually mean? Did that mean that they had to observe the same terms of reference? As far as I can see, it did not mean that they co-operated. The CCMS assessed its schools, and the boards assessed their schools — to the same criteria presumably — but what does close conjunction actually mean?

Mr McGrath: As was said previously, there was a lot of joint working between the five boards, the CCMS and the Department sitting in on that. Lorraine can say a bit more about that.

Mrs Finlay: A viability audit working group was set up. The five boards, CCMS and I went through the terms of reference, agreed common sets of data that would be used, a common approach and a common template. You have to remember that the boards, CCMS and the Department are the holders of the information, so the best way to bring it together is to get those three groups of people together to bring the information together in one place. As you rightly say, it is not new information. It was all readily available.

Mr Lunn: CCMS did not monitor the results done by the other bodies, or vice versa. All they did was agree criteria.

Mrs Finlay: It was all shared information.

Mr Lunn: Did CCMS have any input into the results that were eventually published for non-maintained schools?

Mrs Finlay: Yes. The whole process was agreed with CCMS.

Mr Lunn: That leads me on to what I really want to ask. It will hardly be a surprise. Presumably, when the dust settles, this will be fed into the area-planning process. Is there any likelihood that there could be a level of co-operation between the various bodies on the area-planning process? In other words, is there the slightest chance that the whole process may result in the amalgamation of a maintained school and a controlled school anywhere in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Finlay: It is certainly a possibility.

Mr Lunn: It has been a possibility for 150 years. Will there be an onus on these bodies to co-operate in a meaningful way on this? Is the Minister going to give a direction to them that they must co-operate? If the best solution for a particular town, village, city or hamlet is the amalgamation of two schools and that is what is recommended, CCMS in particular, let us be frank, might not actually agree to it.

Mrs Finlay: You would like to think that, in taking forward this process, the interests of the children will be put to the fore. Therefore, if we adopt that principle, whatever solution achieves the best

educational outcomes for the young people in the area should be the one that is put forward and adopted.

Mr Lunn: That would be lovely, would it not? I am thinking about the post-primary review that is already taking place, which is entirely a maintained sector operation. It has not taken into account any aspect of the needs or the problems of the controlled sector. That is your starting point.

Mr McGrath: We are looking at the area plans now. Different approaches have been adopted by different boards, but I think that it is fair to say that, in some cases, there were high levels of engagement between the relevant board and CCMS, and perhaps, in some other areas, there was a lesser amount. That is one of the issues that we are looking at in the initial assessment of the plans and the judgement that the Minister will make about consultation. Co-operation and cross-sector work should be about improving the educational outcomes. It should not just be something to do for the sake of doing it. Where there are problems — Phil cited one earlier — there need to be incentives for sectors, in the sense that they have a problem that can only be sorted. A lot of that will probably be either at the margins of delivering the entitlement framework in some areas or, frankly, on the rural problems that are there. It could well be that, for the vast bulk, there are no issues that arise for which there is a cross-sectoral dimension to solving them.

Mr Lunn: I do not say that cross-sectoral working is the be-all and end-all of the solution. Of course it is not, but common sense dictates that it has to be part of the solution. As you said, you can work at the margins, work with area learning communities or with the entitlement framework at a higher level and achieve sharing and co-operation, but, ultimately, that does not hit the big problem of the hundreds of millions of pounds that are wasted every year. Does anybody here seriously think that we do not have too many schools? It shouts at you. There are maintained schools in the South Eastern Board now with 25 pupils or fewer. I wonder what is going to happen to them, because the obvious solution is probably not what will be achieved. Eventually, we are going to have to get real about this, and it is up to the Department and the Minister to make people get real about it. You did not get a question there; that was a rant.

The Chairperson: As regards the challenge that that creates, Trevor, we have article 142 of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, which places a duty on CCMS to promote and co-ordinate the planning of effective provision for Catholic maintained schools. I am only picking out CCMS because that is the one regulation in front of me; it is the same for NICIE. If the process of the audits was all about working together and getting the information, and everybody was happy to provide the information, including the grammar schools which are different again and are sitting in a different position, the Minister cannot consult on an area plan on the basis of the audits if he has not got the agreement under article 142 of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, because CCMS has to approve that area plan. If CCMS or a voluntary grammar school does not buy into the area plan, he will be consulting on something that cannot be achieved legally.

Mr Lunn: I could not have quoted you that regulation, but we come up against this frequently when we are trying to achieve any kind of change in the system. We have come up against it in the area of substitute teachers and many others, where there is some regulation that was set back in the 70s, the 80s or the 90s that is preventing change. Regulations and legislation can surely be changed, but it seems that some of these things are set in stone and cannot be changed. The regulation you quoted is one that is crying out for attention. If you do not get co-operation here, you are not going to achieve an efficient system.

The Chairperson: I can anticipate John's answer, and I will respond to that. The Education and Skills Authority (ESA) would not have been the answer.

Mr Lunn: I did not mention ESA.

The Chairperson: I know rightly that John is going to say that ESA would have resolved the problem. However, that is the difficulty and the challenge.

Mr McGrath: That reflects why the Minister's approach was to have the five education boards as the education authorities and CCMS, which is the only other statutory organisation that has duties to plan for the maintained sector. That is why the work on area planning is for the boards and CCMS to do jointly. CCMS has a role in the Catholic maintained sector and, you are quite right, will have to be signing off on or going along with any proposals that affect that sector. That is why we shaped the exercise like that and why they are the statutory organisations that have statutory responsibilities that are distinct from other sectoral bodies such as NICIE, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta or the Governing Bodies Association (GBA), which do not have any statutory responsibility to plan the education system. That is why the mechanisms around area planning reflect the statutory roles set out in legislation. Trevor is, of course, right: legislation can always be changed. However, at the minute, the five boards and CCMS are the planning authorities in the education system, unless or until ESA comes along.

The Chairperson: Will you clarify one point for me? A letter was sent out by the permanent secretary to the boards after there was a conflict around the information that had not been forwarded to the Department. In the final paragraph of that correspondence, the permanent secretary said that, in addition to the amendments outlined, which was the information that was required:

"the revised viability audit should have a preamble setting out the rationale behind the exercise" —

I thought that that was what the Department had provided, but anyway. He continued:

— "and an explanation of the categories used so that schools, the Assembly and the wider community can understand the process that was adopted."

We have not seen the preambles. Did we get preambles? The permanent secretary's intent was for the Assembly, which this Committee is part of, and the wider community to understand. That deals with the issue of context that schools have written to us about, saying that people are misinterpreting or not getting the whole picture about where they sit as schools for a variety of reasons. Do we have those preambles?

Mr McGrath: People will find some material relevant to that if they visit the boards' websites. The difficulty is, and I am not being critical, that, frankly, people are just going to the data rather than reading the context set for the exercise or even the original terms of reference. This was never an exercise that was going to identify a hit list of schools, yet that is what it was presented as in some cases.

The Chairperson: That is why we were concerned about the publishing of the viability audits.

Mr McGrath: A lot of schools are evidencing difficulties but will clearly need to be there for the future. It is a different issue about —

The Chairperson: Yes, but, if I go into the website, am I able to find a preamble for each of the boards that sets out an explanation or a rationale behind the exercise, so that the Assembly and the wider community can understand the process that was adopted?

Mr McGrath: Yes.

The Chairperson: Thank you. I will have a wee read sometime.

Mr Craig: John, I remember asking myself what the point in doing this exercise was. Like the Chair, I think that we all said that there would be issues around what people would take out of it. One of the things I find interesting — I was just flicking through some of the information — is that we have 46.5% of primary schools in stress and 321 out of 839 with under-enrolment. Of secondary schools, 83.4% are in stress and 84 out of 148 with under-enrolment, and 35.3% of grammar schools are allegedly in stress with 9 out of 68 having under-enrolment problems. The cynic in me says that the Department has failed. I would not like to be walking into any other Department and handing out such a report.

You have highlighted some of the issues that have been uncovered by the exercise. I think that we have a major problem in all sectors of education in the greater Belfast area. I use the phrase "greater Belfast area" advisedly. There seems to be a major difficulty there. Unbelievably, the closure of one secondary school in my sector highlighted a major difficulty in the greater Belfast area. Yes, you closed the school for obvious reasons — enrolments were dropping, there were financial reasons etc — but, when you considered where to place those pupils and analysed the situation, despite the fact that we were told that there were 1,400 spare capacity spaces in the immediate greater Belfast area, you came to the firm conclusion that, no matter where those children went, they could end up in the same scenario very quickly over the next few years. That is very damning of our education system.

Trevor touched on the reality of what we are facing. We have far too many sectors; we have far too many empty spaces; and we have a system that we literally cannot afford any more. Now, the cynic in me asks what the Department has been doing for the past decades to allow this to happen, but I am not going to be the cynic. John, what are we going to do to get out of this mess?

Mr McGrath: I agree with a lot of what you said. Certainly, this Minister and, indeed, the previous Minister have consistently made the point that the system we have is not as good as some people think it is. There are huge amounts of high performance and large numbers of dedicated staff, but the outcomes in performance leave a lot to be desired. There has been a complacency about underachievement, particularly in some deprived communities, and a willingness to accept that. There has been difficulty in getting communities to accept the need for change at times. There has been a tendency to hang on to the local school even if it is performing poorly because that is seen as being somehow better than dealing with change. It has been a hard slog for us in the Department to try to get the messages over. That is why we started the information in the viability audit. Although it did not uncover any information that was not there, in aggregate it brings out some major problems. It demonstrates that, yes, we are not doing as well as we should. All the information we have suggests, in many cases, that we can improve performance if we begin to ensure that, in certain areas, all schools perform to the best level. There is evidence for that in any socio-economic group. We need to drive change, and we need an understanding — your comments are very welcome — from the wider community that there needs to be change and that, at the minute, we are not serving a lot of our children as well as they deserve to be served.

The education system is there to add value to children's lives so that they can be employable and find a life and a career. If children go through 12 years and come out without the basis for that, we are not delivering value for those children, and we are not delivering value for the local community or the taxpayer. There is an issue there, and you have flagged it up. An acceptance in the wider community that there is a big problem to be tackled would help, but, in some cases, we are still having a debate about whether we have a problem. I take the point that some people may find that the information might have been a year further on. However, in our view, that is trying to duck the issue. There is a serious issue here, and it needs to be tackled. Problems have been around for a number of years, whether they are in greater Belfast or elsewhere, and action is long, long overdue. We would welcome the Committee's support — I know that the Minister would, along with wider stakeholders, trade unions etc — on the fact that we need change.

Mr Craig: You have identified the issues through the viability audit. That is OK. I have been very critical of boards for not having area plans in place, and I am consistent on that. Will there be a serious attempt from the Department and the boards to put a serious area plan in place for all areas across Northern Ireland? I agree with my colleague Trevor on this: it cannot just be from one sector; it has to go right across the board. That may mean that others have to take a lot of pain out of this, but all sectors are going to have to take pain, and they need to realise that. We need those plans in place. Whether we can get to them under the present legal system is something that the Department, the Minister and the Committee need to look at. There may be things that we will all have to swallow in the future, but, John, it has to happen. Is the Department determined to get to that position? I am a realist in all of this. I have had to swallow an awful lot of pain over the past year locally, and a lot of politicians are going to end up having to swallow a lot of pain on a lot of issues — the Minister included. He is not exempt from it.

Mr McGrath: The Minister can speak for himself on that issue. The Department works under the direction and control of the Minister, and he is determined to tackle these issues — very much so. He

is seeking the engagement of all the statutory bodies on that, but he would welcome wider support on the need for change in the first place. If you get various interests who do not accept that there needs to be change, it is difficult. He is determined to affect change and to drive the area-planning process forward to tackle the issues of underachievement and lack of sustainability, and he has given us a mandate to put every effort into that.

Mr Lunn: I want to acknowledge what Jonathan said. He has said, and John has agreed, that on the back of these figures, if we did not know it already, we know that there is a serious problem right through the education system. I am not making any party or political point here, but it is a fact that, since I arrived in this place, people have been trumpeting that our education system is the best in the UK and that the only problem we ever have is underachievement by a few percentage points of working-class or Protestant boys. This is a reality check. I am glad to hear Jonathan touching on it. Even our grammar schools are stressed in at least one category: the 35% is a surprise to me. I am sorry that there is no question. Jonathan said the right thing, and I just wanted to say so.

The Chairperson: Yes, but I think that you will still accept the point that I made earlier. Part of the rationale, I believe, for carrying out this audit was to create that very environment: that there is a problem in every school. If you look at these hard, cold statistics, you still want your child to go to a grammar school. That is the reality. Only one grammar school is in formal intervention and only nine are not achieving the educational criteria, which is 13%. Go to the other page. Among the non-selective schools, that figure is 23%. Now, I do not want to go down that road, but that —

Mr Lunn: I was not saying that grammar schools [*Inaudible.*]

The Chairperson: No, I know that you were not. However, what I am saying is that we have now set everybody against everybody else in this process. These are the figures that we have, but what worries me is that you get a situation whereby the figures are interpreted for different reasons by different people to defend different positions. I do not think that we will ever resolve that one. That is where we are at on the page with most of these things.

Mrs Dobson: John, you mentioned briefly rural problems. Rural schools is a particular beef of mine. Can you tell me whether you have explored alternatives to closing rural schools, as suggested by the Ulster Farmers' Union last October? Perhaps they could be used as facilities for local communities, health centres, centres for business incubation or outreach centres for further education colleges? There are so many possibilities. What has the Department done to explore that?

Mr McGrath: Our primary job is education. If schools are not viable, we must find a way either to make them viable or —

Mrs Dobson: I am talking about the education of children in rural communities.

Mr McGrath: That is what I am saying. The wider use of school premises is valuable if you have a core school that is viable. If a school is not viable and cannot be made viable through some linkage, it is not delivering its core purpose as far as we are concerned. I know the arguments and recognise the merits of rural schools that are, in many cases, the core of local communities, which coalesce around them. However, we need to make sure that we are providing quality education in the first place.

Mrs Dobson: We hear constantly from the Department about collaboration between schools. What about collaboration between Departments to make sure that rural schools are viable?

Mr McGrath: Schools are viable on educational criteria. Making it a hub for wider community activity does not, necessarily, make a school any more viable. It is getting added value from a school, but it does not necessarily address the issue of too small an enrolment, which is the issue that we face. Those are worthy aims, but I am not sure that they are the answer to educational problems in many cases.

Mrs Dobson: If other possibilities for rural schools were explored, it would protect the rural schools.

Mr McGrath: How would it help with educational viability?

Mrs Dobson: It would help with the budgets of rural schools as well. I continually read that the Minister is focusing on pupils, rather than schools. However, I do not think that the Department fully appreciates the benefit of rural schools to the community — or maybe it is just not interested?

Mr McGrath: We do appreciate that. We are working with colleagues in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) on the draft rural White Paper action plan. That will recognise those issues. However, we start from the premise that children in rural schools should get a quality of education that is no less than that of those in urban schools.

Mrs Dobson: Have you assessed the impact of closing rural schools on their communities?

Mr McGrath: No, we have not, because, at the minute, we are not favouring proposals to do that. The boards will have to deal with that, and, clearly, there will be issues as to the Executive's wider approach and the rural White Paper. However, I put the question back to you. If a school is not educationally viable and cannot be made so, we have a duty to the children whom we are supposed to educate.

Mrs Dobson: And a lot of them are in rural schools as well.

I hear from principals of rural schools that the longer the viability audit goes on, the more uncertainty exists around schools and that puts them in greater danger. That is the point as well.

Mr McGrath: There will be schools in certain areas that face a challenge in the process that we will go through and which are facing a challenge now.

Mrs Dobson: I am not hearing any more details from you on what you are doing with other Departments to meet and address that challenge.

Mr McGrath: Jo-Anne, we are waiting for boards and the CCMS to come along with proposals in these areas. Some will be advanced. In some cases, for geographical reasons, schools will have to be maintained even if they are beneath the threshold because the travel distances would be too far. In other cases, solutions could come up. You cannot have a situation where rural schools are offered complete protection, while, in urban areas, there are difficulties. A difficult balance has to be struck. Jonathan is right to say that we have issues with standards that we have to deal with, and that is no less the case in rural areas. Therefore, if we were to maintain schools that were substandard, we would not be serving those children well.

Mrs Dobson: Do you think that your plans could discourage people from remaining in rural communities because of the lack of educational facilities?

Mr McGrath: I hope not. Some boards have been tackling issues to do with rural schools over the years, so it is not the case that it is now being dealt with all of a sudden. The Southern Board, in particular, has been doing that. There will be issues in certain communities, and, if we cannot find cross-sectoral solutions in some areas, it may well be that there needs to be some change. I am only making the point that the primary criterion, as far as the Minister is concerned, is the quality of education.

Mrs Dobson: There should be better collaboration between Departments to make schools viable. Not enough emphasis is placed on rural communities, but we maybe beg to differ on that.

Mr McGrath: We have worked with DARD, and Lorraine gave an input on that. We will be talking to colleagues there shortly about what is going into the forthcoming rural White Paper action plan. It will touch on the issues of rural schools, but it will make the point that the primary issue is to ensure that children in rural areas get the same high quality of education as children elsewhere.

The Chairperson: On that point, I am a bit confused. I quoted the figures on the benchmark that was used for post-primary. On the benchmark that was used to judge the educational criterion for primary schools, the paper says that for 60 schools:

"their results in both English and Maths are in the bottom quarter of their Free School Meals Band for 3 of the past 4 Years".

Was only the free-school-meals band used in the educational judgement? What did we use? In post-primary, it is reasonably straightforward. You base the academic criteria on GCSEs, despite what we said earlier about that. However, it is an objective process. What did we use for primary schools? Was it competency levels of four and five?

Mrs Finlay: We used Key Stage 2 results.

The Chairperson: Right; so that is what was used.

My next question relates to what Jo-Anne asked. Schools are deemed to be below enrolment thresholds, which are Bain's thresholds. Bain's threshold for rural schools was 105 pupils. For post-primary schools, Bain's threshold was 500 pupils. It seems that, on that issue concerning post-primary schools, dear Mr Bain's document has been put through the shredder, because some of the area plans in my area talk not about schools of 500 pupils but of super-schools of 2,000-plus pupils. It is going that way with post-primary schools, but, although I am not a prophet or the son of a prophet, I would not be surprised if a lobby were currently making a huge impression on the Minister to reduce the threshold for primary schools so that the optimum number for primary schools, taking a guess, should be 84. How did any group of schools or people responsible for schools come up with the figure of 84? They have done the calculations of the number of schools that they have to close, and they know that they would have to close fewer schools if they based it on 84 than if they based it on 105. Are we going to stay with Bain in relation to the primary sector or are we going to throw him out in relation to the post-primary sector? Yet, on the basis of the audits, we have used Bain as 105 and 500.

Mr McGrath: Chair, it is actually —

The Chairperson: Is it worse than that?

Mr McGrath: No, it is actually the sustainable schools policy that sets those out now. You talked about the Bain report, but the figures are based on the sustainable schools policy.

The Chairperson: But it is still the same — 105.

Mr McGrath: Yes, but that is the source that is signed off by the Minister. As far as we are concerned, the Minister has made it clear that that policy holds. Therefore, the minimum for primary schools is 105.

The Chairperson: And the minimum for post-primary is 500.

Mr McGrath: Yes, the minimum. What is happening is that, because of budgetary pressures, the entitlement framework requirements and the rest, scale matters. The minimum still holds, but to be educationally and financially viable, it is quite likely that, in some cases, if you get scale, you are much better placed to deliver the educational standards and to be financial viable. When the Bain report was done and the sustainable schools policy was signed off, it was a far more benign resource position. There was not the same focus on standards, as we have rehearsed with Jonathan. There were not the explicit requirements of the entitlement framework. Naturally, it will turn out that, ideally, post-primary schools ought to be bigger if that can be brought about in a planned way. So it still holds; we are not changing either.

The Chairperson: I have a serious issue about how we can come to an objective educational assessment as to what is an optimum number for a school, either in the primary or post-primary

sector, because we bandy figures about. I have a worry, and I am on the public record as expressing my concern about what is being proposed for Ballymena under an area plan, where we are creating a super-grammar school of 2,000 pupils. Nobody has shown me the evidence that that is an optimum number. I have seen very good schools of 1,300 or 1,400. I just worry about where we are going with this. I remember asking one of your colleagues one day about pupil: teacher ratio. I asked whether increasing the pupil: teacher ratio has an impact on the outcomes in the class, and they said no.

Mr McGrath: There is no international evidence that improving that leads to different outcomes.

Our position is that the sustainable schools policy holds and there is a minimum for post-primary schools. There are drivers that are suggested in certain areas, if you can get enough critical mass. That does not necessarily imply that there is no limit to how big they could get. I suspect that we do not have enough work in general to work out whether there is a point at which you hit the law of diminishing returns so that when you are delivering some things you get an institution that is so big that children get a bit lost in it. That is why we are not saying that you just make them big, huge and grandiose.

The Chairperson: That is what worries me, because, to take the point that Jonathan made earlier, if you take the pupils out of a particular school and distribute them — I am very worried about my constituency, where there is a problem — instead of having a school that was performing at 65% A* to C, it would then be performing at 60%. What you have done is hidden and masked in there what had been your tale of underachievement and what had been your problem. That is what really worries me, and, instead of really dealing with the problem of underachievement, what we have done is scattered the problem to the four winds. It does not look as bad, because when you do all the statistics and analysis, they show that we are doing reasonably better. That is not a point about one school being better than another. It is about making sure that we do not have the problem hidden and masked because you reorganised the estate, but we still have the problem.

Mr McGrath: I am entirely in accord with that. This is about raising standards and tackling underachievement, not just creating huge institutions. However, we do not have the view that the bigger the school, the better it is. As you said, it may well be that 1,200 or 1,300 pupils is a better figure to plan for, as opposed to 500 or 600 pupils where there are real issues. With 2,000 pupils, there are issues about the degree of pastoral care provided. Children who are entering an institution that is so big and busy can feel a bit daunted at first. We may need to do further work on that. Given the requirements of the entitlement framework and others, at what point is educational viability and financial viability at one? Maybe schools do not need to get any bigger because they will begin to get the issues mentioned. However, we do not have a view on the Ballymena proposals at the minute.

The Chairperson: That is a Ballymena Learning Together (BLT) issue.

Mr Rogers: Thanks for the report. When trying to summarise it in on one A4 page, the devil is in the detail. Almost 50% of our primary schools fall below the minimum threshold, and the Chair made the point earlier that an urban school with 120 pupils may fall below the threshold, but, three miles down the road, a rural school with 120 pupils is not in that category.

On Trevor's point earlier, we all agree that a very small school can deliver quality education for children, but I would like to see a better breakdown of the numbers of pupils in schools — 90 to 105. I would like to see that breakdown as opposed to the school that has fewer than 30 pupils. It would help me greatly, because I am concerned that the viability audit will be used as a firm basis for area planning. A few other things confuse me, and I know that the Chair touched on this point earlier, but I am still not too sure about the fact that 60 primary schools are not achieving the educational criteria, whereas 66 schools are not reaching an acceptable level of attainment. Surely, the measure of educational criteria is the Key Stage 2 level, or is school leadership or something else being brought into it?

The draft rural White Paper talks about access to services, and I am very concerned that this will have a real detrimental effect on rural schools and communities. You use the word "balance", and I have also heard the words "interests of the children". It is important that we keep in perspective the viability and finances of schools, and the interests of children in getting a good education.

Mr McGrath: I entirely agree. With regard to your point about data, the material on the website has greater detail about enrolment numbers.

Mr Rogers: Is that for each board?

Mr McGrath: Yes. What we have here is a high level summary of the main findings. The detail is available.

The Chairperson: Trevor asked about the breakdown of all the enrolment numbers in relation to schools. We have that, and I will make it available to you, Sean.

Ms Boyle: I do not have a question; I just want to make a comment, and it follows on from what Jonathan said. I would like the message to get out to parents that they have a unique opportunity to ensure that their children have a better educational experience than before. I am referring to certain schools, and one in my own area is not receiving pupils in September for years 8 and 10. Those children will have the option to go to other schools. It has been stressed here today that a significant number of other schools have evidence of stress, and I appeal to parents to be cautious about the school they send their child to. In some areas, there is an affiliation to go to one or another. There are also transport problems. It is key to get that message to parents. They have a unique opportunity and it is about the quality of educational experience for the children, not just about sending them to a school that may well have to be looked at again down the road.

In my area, communication is a big problem. I appeal to schools' management and their boards of governors to communicate with parents. I have been taking calls on a daily basis over the past month from parents who do not know what is happening in their area. Again, that appeal goes out to the CCMS. Maybe the message is not coming down to schools but it is a big problem and a big issue, and it is very important that parents are getting the right message and information about what is happening with schools in their areas.

Lorraine spoke to Phil about cross-border solutions. That is a big issue in my area, particularly for Protestant children. I live less than half a mile from the border. In the Strabane/Lifford area, where I come from, there is no primary provision for Protestant children. Their nearest provision is 10 to 12 miles away. The cross-border issue is a major issue for a lot of families, so I would like more information on where that sits at the minute and the time frame and process of that.

The Chairperson: John, there seems to be some confusion. The paper states that area plans have gone to the Minister. I understand that they may not have gone to the Minister. Will you clarify the situation and whether they been shared with unions?

Mr McGrath: We are doing initial work on them and will be discussing the next steps with the Minister. We will be spending time with him over the coming days discussing where he wants us to go next —

The Chairperson: Yes, but has the Minister received the area plans?

Mr McGrath: Yes, he has them, but they have not been shared with anyone else until he decides how he wants to proceed.

The Chairperson: This is how the confusion will become more confusing: I can speak for my own board, which sought permission from the Department to consult on three areas — Carrickfergus, I think, Coleraine and Ballymena. It got permission, and a paper will go to the North Eastern Education and Library Board next week in relation to proposals for Garvagh High School, Ballee Community School in Ballymena, and another one that I forget.

There is a process, which will lead to an area plan, and which will be consulted on. In my area, the North Eastern Education and Library Board, we will have different consultations out that are on single but interrelated issues. Where is the correlation and connection between those two things? You

cannot consult solely on provision in one area without having considered the impact that it will have on everybody else.

Mr McGrath: That is the sort of issue with which we are grappling at the minute. You have summed it up. There is an area plan in for the North Eastern Education and Library Board but it is silent on certain areas because they want to embark on another process, which is raising the same sort of issues with us. On the other hand, their view is that they had their thinking developed and they want to get that out with hard proposals.

We all recognise that we have not done this before in this comprehensive way. There is learning going on with different approaches being adopted by boards at different paces in different areas. That is one of the issues we are rehearsing with the Minister, and where that gets us to? I understand your point because we have been having the same discussions internally.

The Chairperson: It is a real issue, and it is confusing people because they do not know whether it is the Ballymena learning community's plan, the North Eastern Education and Library Board's plan or the Department's plan.

It would be an absolute shame if we had an Education Committee meeting, and Diarmuid was here and we did not ask him about capital. He thought he was going to get away.

Mr Diarmuid McLean (Department of Education): I did.

The Chairperson: He thought he was going to get out without us asking him a question. You can have all the plans you like and all the rationalisation that you want but if you do not have money in the kitty to be able to provide the structure, the school building, to deliver that, you end up having split sites and all sorts of complications, such as Strabane, which is the primary example. You are saying: "Amalgamate, you have to do it, but we are sorry. You did what we said you had to do but, by the way, we have no money to give you to deal with the capital issues."

What is the situation with capital? It seems as though the investment strategy, the 50 schools, and all that has been put into the bin and we do not know what is going to happen. The Committee would like a paper clearly setting out the situation with capital and, aligned to that, the situation with special schools. I declare an interest. I have a particular interest in what is going on in relation to Castle Tower School in my constituency in Ballymena where we have been waiting for years for a decision on a new build.

However, the paper states:

"The Department has received draft area plans for stand alone Special Schools and Post-Primary Schools and will be considering these and engaging further with the Boards before these are consulted upon."

Where do we stand, because there are big issues?

Mr McGrath: We are looking at all those issues at the moment, and, indeed, are in discussion with the Minister. I cannot say anything more today, nor can Diarmuid, except that we recognise those issues and, hopefully before too long, we will be able to fill the information gap.

Mr McLean: The Minister is conscious that if we are moving forward with area planning, as you said, Chair, and that needs to facilitate amalgamations of schools, it will need to be backed up with capital investment in some instances. So, we are looking at the processes and procedures in relation to the capital budget that is available over the coming years. As John said, we hope to be able to fill that information gap in the coming period.

The Chairperson: Will that be next week, the week after, or —

Mr McGrath: Soon.

The Chairperson: As a politician, I would not want to be using the Department's definition of the word "soon". Anyway, there will be something coming, I suspect.

Mr McGrath: I just ask you to be a bit patient.

The Chairperson: More patient than I have been.

Mr McGrath: No, but it is an issue that the Minister is very seized of.

The Chairperson: I accept that. I know that is the case.

Mr McGrath: Indeed, he has a particular issue around special schools himself.

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr McGrath: There is not much difference between what you reflected and what he is reflecting to us to address that. If you just give us a bit of space to allow him to determine what he wants to do, I think he will want to come and share that with the Committee.

The Chairperson: John, Lorraine, Diarmuid, thank you very much. We appreciate your time, as always, and look forward to seeing you again.