



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Service Delivery Plans: DE Briefing

26 September 2012

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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 Brenda Hale
Mr Chris Hazzard
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Mrs Katrina Godfrey Department of Education

The Chairperson: We move on to another briefing from the Department and welcome back to the Committee, Katrina Godfrey. It is a while since you have been here, Katrina, and you are very welcome. It is good to see you back.

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

The Chairperson: The briefing is on the Programme for Government (PFG) departmental delivery plans. Katrina, we ask you to make your presentation, and, then, we will have some questions for you.

Mrs Godfrey: I will not take terribly long.

First of all, thank you to the Committee for the opportunity to provide an update on the Department's Programme for Government delivery plans. I am certainly aware that, over the coming weeks, several Committees will be hearing from their Departments about those delivery plans. You are not alone in your request.

As the Committee will be aware, the Department has the lead in delivering eight of the Programme for Government commitments that were published in the Executive's PFG for 2011-15. Some of those, because of their nature, have been grouped, so you will have received five delivery plans covering those eight commitments. The delivery plans that you have received have been developed and completed in line with central guidance. They use a template that is common now to all Departments. You will also see that those are marked as version 1 plans. They are living documents, as you might reasonably expect them to be. In the next few weeks, we expect to have completed a mid-year review

of each plan, and we have a request to send any updates, which will become version 2 plans, to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). If it would be helpful, Chair, I will certainly arrange to send those updates to the Committee at the same time.

There are another couple of points worth making. We have also ensured that the Programme for Government commitments and the specific milestones are incorporated into the Department's corporate and business plans, which we are finalising at the moment. We also hope to make those available shortly to the Committee. Quite sensibly, you will see in those plans a direct read-across to the Programme for Government and the commitments that fall to the Department of Education to deliver.

As well as our own monitoring arrangements for our business plan and corporate plan, there will be central monitoring of those delivery plans by the central Programme for Government team and OFMDFM. The monitoring for the first two quarters of this year will start very shortly. After that, it will roll out on a quarterly basis. So there will be not only the Department's own monitoring but central monitoring. That has just been commissioned by OFMDFM. The process will involve us providing an update and commentary to the central team. That commentary will be verified by the central team so that it can be satisfied that Departments are reporting consistently that they have the evidence to support the progress reports. It is my understanding that all those departmental commentaries on progress will be published on the NI Direct website, so there will be very significant transparency in the reporting of progress.

This is probably stating the obvious, but I will say it anyway, within the Department, the Education Minister has made clear to all of us, and particularly to the senior responsible owners for each of the commitments, that he expects us to give full priority to ensuring that those commitments are delivered. He is taking a very close interest in making sure that progress is made.

At this point, Chair, I am conscious that members may have questions. I will certainly do my best to answer questions on the process and how it will work. If there are detailed questions on individual plans, I may have to offer to come back to the Committee. However, as I hope you know, Chair, I will do my best to answer where I can. I am happy to take questions from members on the process, plans and what happens next.

The Chairperson: Thank you. Katrina, in relation to commitments around GCSE attainment, can you clarify whether the commitment refers to all the young people at year 12, or only those who leave formal education following their GCSEs? I ask that because there seems to be a bit of confusion as to when the information is being collated?

Mrs Godfrey: The indicators that we have set for five GCSEs or equivalent at A* to C, including GCSE English and maths, is the school leavers measure, and the plan states that. So you are quite right in the latter part of what you say, Chair. The measurement is the proportion of pupils who have achieved at that level by the time they leave school. Some of those pupils will leave school at year 12, because the best option for them, or the option that they select, will be to go into further education, training, apprenticeships or employment. Many others, and you will know that it is an increasing number, will stay on at school. In any event, the measurement point that we use is the school leavers survey. That is the data point, or the benchmark, that we use to measure.

I know that you will have heard from colleagues elsewhere in the Department that is important for a number of reasons, because it makes sure that young people are supported to achieve to their full potential, for as long as they stay at school. The plan is clear, and it is the school leavers survey that we use as the measurement point.

The Chairperson: Is it five GCSEs across sectors? Is it five GCSEs, at grade A* to C, for all young people, irrespective of whether they attend a grammar school or a non-selective school?

Mrs Godfrey: Yes. That is the baseline measure that we use for the Programme for Government. Committee members will be aware that the broad education represented by five good GCSEs or equivalent, including English and maths, provides the progression route to further and higher education, well-paid and fulfilling jobs and the next step on the ladder. That is why we use that as the benchmark measure of the output of our education system.

The Chairperson: I know that I am straying into a slightly different issue, but that was not the benchmark that was used for the viability audits. Two separate benchmarks were used for that.

Mrs Godfrey: We use the five-plus GCSEs, including English and maths, as the regional benchmark for all children. In some circumstances, we use a measure of seven-plus GCSEs for schools that select the majority of their pupils, simply because if we did not do that, it would be hard to see the variations in performance and the individual performances of schools in the context of their pupils. However, the Programme for Government commitment is five-plus GCSEs or equivalent qualifications, including — this is where we are specific — GCSEs in English and maths.

The Chairperson: Katrina, as to where the Programme for Government sits, what do you think the impact of changes that may come down the road might be? Over the next number of weeks, we will consider the introduction of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA), and there continues to be a debate about GCSEs and all of that. Do you think that the targets in the Programme for Government will have to be revisited in light of those changing circumstances? How do you envisage that being taken into account?

Mrs Godfrey: The commitments in the Programme for Government can only be changed with full Executive agreement. That is very clear, so there is not an issue about what the Department may or may not decide or want to do. However, one of the key objectives in establishing ESA is to make sure that there is a clear, consistent and absolutely robust focus on helping schools to improve attainment for pupils. The establishment of ESA should strengthen and improve our ability, as a system, to support the work of teachers and school leaders to help every pupil to achieve their full potential. When the targets were being set, they were set in the context of ESA having that very clear and statutory focus on raising standards. That is a relevant factor.

The last measure in 2014-15 should not, in theory, be affected by the wider review of GCSEs that you referred to. Remember, there is always a two-year lag time for children sitting GCSEs. Therefore, any changes that my Minister decides to make, for example, would have to start with first teaching at the start of year 11, and it is difficult to see how those changes would be made mid-course for those pupils who have already embarked on a GCSE programme. That review may have implications further down the line, and we may need to look at it in the context of our 2020 targets. However, it should be perfectly fine for the 2014-15 targets.

The Chairperson: I am going to bring in Jonathan. He and I want to raise an issue in relation to levels of progression. We recently considered the statutory rule, and Jonathan and I had a meeting yesterday with principals. I have to say that the feedback on the crisis that we have was less than complimentary, and Jonathan can elaborate on that. It ties into the issue of levels of progression and the attainment of cross-curricular skills at Key Stage 3.

Mr Craig: Thanks, Chair. It was a very revealing meeting. Across all sectors, the same complaint came through, which was, basically, that the Department is throwing numerous changes and ideas at school principals. The difficulty is that it looks as if different sections of the Department are not talking to each other. While someone may come through with great ideas and wonderful new solutions and elements that they want to implement, for example, in IT, they are, at the same time, being bombarded with something else from maths or English. The real difficulty for the teacher on the ground is that, although it is OK to introduce one new element, if you are asked to implement five new elements, those individual teachers will be put under enormous pressure. They are having great difficulty coping with that and are being asked to do it literally in their own time because of the huge workload and constraints, especially on primary school teachers. There is literally not a free period for them to look at the new schedule or do online training; everything now seems to be loaded into online personal training. There is no off-site training. There is no budget for it, and the schools do not have the money. It seems that the Department does not have it either.

So, Katrina, they need someone to co-ordinate all this and to get their act together, and stop loading far too much pressure on the schools and, specifically, individual teachers who need to concentrate on the task of teaching children and not on the task of learning new methods constantly. They cannot cope with having five or six of new methods thrown at them.

Mrs Godfrey: I am genuinely disappointed to hear what you are saying, not least because, when it comes to the levels of progression, an awful lot of work was done involving teachers and their representatives at the early stages. Some of you may remember that the original plan had been for the levels of progression to be introduced about three or four years ago. In consultation and working with teachers and their representatives, we took the decision to defer, to give the preparation time. We deferred it for quite a while, so the teachers and school leaders have had an awful lot of notice

that this is the first year for the new assessments in literacy and numeracy. That decision on timescales was taken in response to teachers' concerns.

The assessment methods were, again, discussed with and worked out in conjunction with teachers, and we heard consistently from the Committee at the time and from teachers and their representatives that we had to get a balance in which the assessment methods were absolutely robust so that there could be confidence that, if you were doing them in your school and I was doing them in mine, we were doing that consistently. There was fairness and transparency, and the teacher was put at the centre of the decision-making process because, as you say, teachers are the professionals who are best placed to provide an assessment of pupils' progress.

This should not be a bureaucratic or administrative exercise, because the whole point of assessing children's performance at the end of each Key Stage in those critical skills of literacy and numeracy is so that you can use that to improve teaching and learning and improve the children's outcomes. So, if it is being presented to teachers as something rather more administrative in nature, I would have concerns about that and I will take the issue back to the Department.

You made a point about training and the concern expressed by teachers about not being out of the classroom for long. There is need for a blend of appropriate face-to-face training and online training. However, I will certainly take any issues back, Chair, to colleagues in the Department about teachers having the time to complete the online training. I will find out more about that, if that is helpful.

Mr Craig: Katrina, you also need to take back to the Department the point that we cannot have five, six or 10 different sections of the Department loading teachers with five, six or 10 different new aspects of something. We have to recognise that those people are like us. You can deal with one or two changes — or three if you are really good — but to be landed with 10 changes in one year is not feasible. The Department needs to co-ordinate itself better to ensure that that does not happen. That is the crux of what they are saying is going wrong here.

Mrs Godfrey: I will feed that back. On the point about the cross-curricular skills, we took the decision that we would not ask schools to assess literacy, numeracy and ICT all in the one year, and we have deliberately delayed the introduction of the requirements around ICT to give the literacy and numeracy time to bed in. However, you will also know that we need a robust system of assessment for literacy and numeracy. We needed to improve the system, and if we did not organise it to come in as quickly as possible — notwithstanding the point that I made about making sure that it was also sensibly timed — we would rightly be facing criticism about that, too. However, I will feed back to colleagues the points that you have heard directly from teachers around the concerns about workload issues.

Mr Craig: Those were specific concerns around the issues that they face. However, I have even bigger concerns. While you are targeting these five GCSEs, it comes back to the same issue. Where is the carrot in all this for education? There is a big stick out there, which is the inspectorate. It wields itself, and it is answerable to no one, but it causes mayhem. Therefore, where is the carrot in all of this to aid schools to get to where we need to get our children in meeting those targets?

Mrs Godfrey: From the experience of any schools and teachers that I have talked to who are involved in developing aspects of this policy, they will say very quickly that, to them, the carrot is seeing children achieve their full potential, and they are absolutely committed to that happening.

In terms of the inspectorate, we take a completely different view. All our evidence is very clear that inspection helps schools to improve. It helps teachers, school leaders and boards of governors to identify areas for improvement and take them on board. We have seen numerous stunning examples of how schools have taken the outcome of an inspection report, reflected on it and used it as a catalyst to drive forward and improve not just the quality of teaching, learning and pastoral care, but, more importantly, the outcomes that pupils achieve. Therefore, what any of us do in education is designed to help children to achieve to their full potential. We know that when you achieve your full potential, and you can achieve that equivalent level, particularly at the age of 16, your life chances are immediately enhanced. That is the most important thing for us as a Department. From speaking to professionals, it is very clear that that is the most important thing for them.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much. My concern is that the Programme for Government measures GCSEs just at one level, when it is down to illiteracy and innumeracy, and we are continually being told that there is no good measurement to be used. Yet, you said that they are looking at assessments. I will go back to my point that teachers are overstretched because of all the things that

are coming at them. Can we get some form of measurement in the Programme for Government so that we can see what is coming to move people up? Can we have a definition — or do we have a definition yet — of what we mean by shared education? It seems to vary from meaning shared facilities to what the rest of us might expect, which is sharing the skills of teaching, management and others. Finally, when you talk about publishing on the web for the public, can we make sure that the acronyms and jargon are minimised so that the public can understand it?

Mrs Godfrey: Absolutely. That is a fair point. With your permission, Chair, I will take those questions in reverse order. There is an onus on us to make sure that we provide commentary on our progress and that we provide it in terms that ordinary people can understand and not in the terms that we love so well, which are full of acronyms and jargon. I will make sure of that.

On shared education, the Committee will have seen the Minister's press release in July and you will know that he has established a working group. In that press release, he set out some parameters for the group, but we are also very conscious that the group itself will have to form a view as part of making recommendations to the Minister. If I remember correctly, that group is to report around February next year. That will very clearly set the next step forward.

To go back to your first point, you are right about what people might call a value-added measure. Most developed countries in the world, even those with the very best education systems, find that an incredibly difficult thing to do, so you do tend to look for proxies. Interestingly, one of the features of the levels of progression is that they are designed not just to work up but to work down. If we want our young people to be able to demonstrate certain skills in literacy and numeracy, we need to work out where they need to be at the end of Key Stage 3, Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 1. The levels of progression are designed exactly to do that. The other feature that we built in was that, as well as simply reporting on what percentage of pupils in your school are at or above the expected level, we would need schools to reflect how many pupils progressed at least one level. That is really important, because it means that we are measuring the progress made by individual children and not just going for the blunt instrument of asking, "How many?" When that starts to roll out — it will take a few years, because, obviously, we will just have the first Key Stage 1 pupils this summer — that will give us the makings of quite a good value-added measure, because, as well as knowing how many children are at the expected level, we will be able to see whether those children who are perhaps performing above the expected level kept that progress going and whether those who are not, perhaps because of particular educational needs, are still progressing. That will give us a much more sophisticated instrument than has been possible in the past.

Mrs Hale: Good morning, Katrina. My query is in relation to commitment 43, which is to:

"Ensure that at least one year of pre-school education is available to every family that wants it".

In Lagan Valley — and Jonathan will back me up on this — there has been a considerable deficit of places. Is there a case for performance indicators to be amended to reflect progress in respect of the number of places in the uptake of library boards, or even at more localised levels, so that we know exactly what places are available, and not available, in Lagan Valley?

Mrs Godfrey: I suppose the point is that there is no point in measuring whether there are enough places for children if the places are not in proximity to the children.

Mrs Hale: In Lagan Valley, over 200 places were not available.

Mrs Godfrey: You will see in the action plan for the commitment that some of the early work in order to make sure that the commitment is delivered is around making sure that we have the fullest level of information at a much more local level and making sure that we have, for example, the reasons why parents do not take up places. There can be different reasons for that, and one of them might well be — in some places it might be a bigger feature than others — that the places did not materialise in the areas or within reasonable travelling distance of the parents, or even in line with parental commitments and other arrangements for their families.

Examination of capacity is being done at board level, and I will certainly reflect back the point as to whether it actually needs to be done at sub-board level. An understanding and proper analysis of why parents did not take up places is really important as well. Was it because it would not have mattered where the place was and they just did not want a preschool place, or was it because they did not get a place that they thought would be right for their child? It is also important to make sure that the parents

understand the application process and that, to come back to Danny's point, it is explained without jargon and in a much more user-friendly way. That is happening at board level. I will certainly feed back the point about whether we can make sure that it is looked at at sub-board level, because if you are in Lagan Valley, the whole position of the Southern Board is not going to be particularly interesting to the parents in your constituency. They are going to be more interested in what it is like near them.

Mr Rogers: Thanks, Katrina. I go back to Jonathan's point. What he talked about is not happening in a minority of schools, but the majority of them. Teachers feel that they are really being bombarded. Take the interactive computerised assessment system (InCAS), for example. It was running for three or four years before it was scrapped, and now something else is running. Who is to say that, in three or four years, somebody else will not get the contract and it will be changed again?

I like what you said about a robust system for assessing our children's needs. I still question whether levels are the best way to do that. We really need a robust system. Knowing that a child's chronological age is eight and that their mathematical educational age is 9.9 years tells me a lot more than a level does.

Jonathan's other point was about the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). If we look here at risks and contingent measures, we see that for quality of teaching in schools, it says, "ETI inspection", and for quality of leadership, it says, "ETI". It really seems like ETI is coming down on you. To my mind, we need a robust system of self-evaluation to improve the quality of teaching, learning and leadership in schools. I was teaching as a principal when the "six pack" came out. To my mind, that is what really has to be taken on in order to improve standards.

I just want to make a couple of points about what you said earlier. With the introduction of universal credit, welfare reform, and so on, will free school meals be a measure of the level of deprivation? Do we really know that? I know that the Minister has put more money towards free school meals in each board area, but it is a difficult one. Another difficult one is the absence of historical data on the levels of progression. How can we predict GCSE performances?

Mrs Godfrey: You raised a number of issues. On your point about assessment, I suppose that is a product of what Trevor talked about earlier. In a procurement process, contracts do not last indefinitely, and, as you know, the computer adaptive assessment has changed. I was talking to a teacher last night who was saying how pleasantly surprised he is by the quality of the information it produced at the start of the school year and how he was able to use that to very good effect. That is really its primary purpose.

In respect of the levels of progression, when we tested the idea of can-do statements — I have been involved in a couple of European-level working groups — the interest from other high-performing countries in the approach we have taken to assessment is really strong, because it is in line with so much of the international evidence on the best way of determining children's progress.

In respect of the disconnect, you are right that we cannot set targets for the next couple of years because we need to use the first year almost as a baseline. Our starting point was this: where do we want our 16-year-olds to be after 12 years of compulsory education? I think that that is the right starting point. You start from the aspiration we have for that group of young people when they finish the period of time during which we, by law, force them to go to school and what it is that we think they should be able to do. That is where you work back from. So that aspiration does not change because of the type of assessment arrangement we have in place. The measurement may get more complicated and harder to present in the neat graphs that we like so much, but the overall vision for what we are about does not change. It is important, certainly in the work we do, that we keep that to the fore and that we do not get too sidetracked by the presentation of the information at the expense of the aspiration we want to have for young people at that level. As the Committee will be aware, we are increasingly setting that aspiration in an international context. Why is it that the best countries can deliver by way of outcomes for their young people at the end of compulsory schooling, and why can we not be up there with them?

On your point about the inspectorate, that is in the plans quite deliberately. We know and you know that it would not be right for us, despite the measures we have on qualifications, to form a view on a school simply by looking at its examination results. That tells us some things, but it does not tell us everything. That is where the skill and professionalism of the inspectorate are absolutely critical. It can look at the quality of teaching and learning and at what is happening in classrooms, and form an overall judgement. That tells us so much more than the simple indicator on its own. We always say that. So inspection is a bigger part of our focus on standards. We know, as you know, that there are

schools where, perhaps if you look just at the statistics, the attainment might be below average. By virtue of having an average, there will always be schools that fall below it. However, you might find that what is going on in that school is absolutely terrific. You might find that there is a new leader making real improvements, but those improvements have not translated into year 12 or year 7 results. That focus of inspection on embedding that culture of self-evaluation and supporting improvement is a key part of the strategy that we have for raising standards.

Mr Rogers: What about the welfare reform point? Our measure of deprivation is, at present, free school meals. We are not sure what the future of that is.

Mrs Godfrey: At the moment, we have looked at this from various different angles, and free school meals entitlement is the best measure that we have. It is the most consistent and objective measure. Welfare reform is an evolving situation. It may well change. We will have to adapt in respect of trigger points and eligibility points. It is too soon to know for sure how it is going to work out because there are still lots of decisions that the Executive have to take on that. However, you are right. It is something that we are keenly aware of, and we will have to keep an eye on our measurements. Although we are satisfied today that the measurement that we have is best, we equally have to be satisfied, six, 12, 18 and 24 months down the line that the measurement that we are using is the best one in that context. It does not make it easy for us, but it is what we have to do. We have to respond to changes and make sure that the measurement we have, at any point in time, is the best that we could have. However, you are absolutely right. We will have to keep that under review as we see how wider decisions on welfare reform move forward.

The Chairperson: Just before we go to Chris, I welcome the pupils of St Joseph's College in Coalisland and also the staff who are with them. You are very welcome to the Education Committee. I hope that this experience does not put you off either education or politics, but that you see what takes place. To give you some context, the Education Committee meets here every Wednesday. It is our statutory responsibility to scrutinise the Department of Education. That means that, almost on a weekly basis, we have representatives of the Department here to speak on a number of issues. We have already had a briefing from the Department on what money it has — or does not have — in relation to what is called the October monitoring rounds. We are now having a discussion with Katrina from the Department on how the Department is measuring up to the commitments that were made in the Programme for Government. The Programme for Government is the Executive saying, "These are the things we are going to do, and here is how we are going to measure them." It is then up to us to ask, "Why did you not do that? Why has that not happened?" That is what goes on here. I hope that that explains it to you. You are probably more confused now after my explanation, but I trust you enjoy the rest of your day at Stormont, and I wish you well in your education and for your future.

Katrina, you went through the issues, and I know that, next week, we are having the Department here about the levels of progression, and so on. However, a partner in the commitment to delivery of this, for example, is the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). InCAS is gone, a new contract is out, two organisations have got it, and it is a shambles. Teachers are now trying to get training for that and understand the process. We have this process in place to try to keep moving towards the end goal, which is the outcome for the pupil. However, the method that is used to manage all that is thrown up in the air because the contract came to an end and new providers are in place. Jonathan and I met some of the school principals yesterday. Across sectors, schools have dumped the process, which is C2k in the new contract, and went to GL Assessment and bought an assessment from it that the schools can use. That gives a diagnostic assessment of the pupil, and they move on. If they stay with the one supported by the Department, CCEA and C2k, it is like a huge millstone around their neck. Surely that is not a good way to progress.

Mrs Godfrey: No, and I am sure that colleagues who are more closely involved in this would be able to give you much more detail next week, Chair, but it is important also to remember that it is the law. By law, schools have to use a computer-adaptive programme specified by the Department to carry out formative assessment on their years 4 to 7 in order to report the outcomes to parents and hold a meeting with parents before the end of the autumn term. That is all very clearly specified in legislation. I would be concerned if schools thought that they could do something else, because if they do not understand the legislative position, that could create further difficulties for them. However, I will certainly mention to my colleagues who are due to brief you next week that the Committee might reasonably expect a fuller and a more informed update on the roll-out of the replacement to InCAS as part of that briefing.

The Chairperson: Before we go to Chris, I will supply a number of concerns that have been raised with me, rather than waiting until next week, and the Department having to come back again.

Mrs Godfrey: We will happily pick those up, and, if needs be and if it is helpful, we will happily lift the phone to any one of those schools that is having to deal with particularly pressing issues.

Mr Hazzard: Thank you for your briefing, Katrina. I just wanted to pick up on something you said in response to Sean; you talked about being up there with the best. A lot of this is about achieving that, and about leading change in international best practice. I was keen to see the OFMDFM guidelines state that we should bear in mind other jurisdictions and comparisons with those jurisdictions. First, is there any indication of whether our attainment targets are challenging enough and achievable in comparison to other jurisdictions, and, secondly, are we sufficiently improving our equality and outcomes between groups in comparison with other jurisdictions?

Mrs Godfrey: That is a key point. One difficulty we have is that we can look at our own system, but it is hard to compare our system with somebody else's. That is why we rely on some of the key benchmarking surveys such as the programme for international student assessment — PISA. Later this year, we will have the results from our first ever participation in an international primary survey, which I know that the previous Committee was very keen for us to participate in. We look forward to getting those results in December. What that will tell us —

The Chairperson: Is that TIMSS — Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study?

Mrs Godfrey: Yes; TIMSS, and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). TIMSS is for maths and science, and PIRLS is for reading. We will get those in December, and the more nerdy among us in the Department are excited about that. I do not expect you to comment on that. That will give us, for the first time, a sense of how our primary children at the age of eight or nine compare with children in Canada, New Zealand, Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, Singapore, Malaysia — in all those countries in which we take an interest because they seem to be doing good things. It will also show us those countries whose approaches we may not want to emulate and from whom we may want to learn lessons as to how not to do things. It will give us a really interesting benchmark of how our primary school kids do, and that will then allow us to test the robustness of our own assessment measurements.

If, for example, our new assessment arrangements tell us that 90% or 70% of kids are at the expected level, yet we find out that only 50% of them compare favourably with other countries, that will be a test for us as well. That is something that I may get more excited about than others, but that we are genuinely keen to have as another piece of information. Even if you take the Executive's wider economic strategy, you will see a theme running through it of making sure that we are up there with the best and learning from them, and we are trying to do the same thing in the Department of Education.

Mr Rogers: Just a very quick point. I think that, in addition to looking at other jurisdictions, we need to look at where there is high quality stuff going on in our own schools. I was not party to what Trevor saw, but, last Friday, I was in a school in which 67% of the pupils are entitled to free school meals, and the quality of teaching and learning that was going on there is what we need to adopt elsewhere. They mentioned one wee boy who transferred from another school in P3. A month ago, he could not form his letters. All he could do was draw half a circle. Now, he is able to form his letters. There is lots of high quality stuff going on using our Northern Ireland curriculum that needs to be highlighted and built on.

Mrs Godfrey: That has been a strong theme of the school improvement strategy and the literacy and numeracy strategy. On the latter, we almost made a virtue of saying that we are not asking any school to do anything that the good schools are not already doing, because there is so much good practice. Again, that is where inspection comes in. Inspection does not just highlight the challenges and areas where improvements clearly need to be made for the sake of children and young people. It also highlights the outstanding practice, and one of the things that we do now is to ensure that aspects of the practice of schools that are outstanding or very good are taken and put into case studies, put on the ESaGS.tv website and into training programmes. Sean, you will appreciate probably far more than me that there is nothing as credible in respect of training teachers as the practitioner who is already doing it, and doing it exceptionally well. We try to keep that point on board, and when the numeracy and literacy task force was concluding its work, it set that point as a challenge to us. It told us not to

ignore the good practice that is already here and to try to tap into that more as part of the professional development for all teachers.

The Chairperson: Katrina, I have a couple of further points, starting with the equality implication. I notice that previous information from the Department suggests that GCSE attainment varies greatly between genders, especially in English. Does the Department think that, at some stage, it will want to amend the indicators to break it down into groups in that way, given that, in the past, the Department has clearly identified that there has been a specific problem among working-class Protestant boys? A debate is going on about the future of education around whether we should retain single-sex schools. That has been lost in the rush to get schools closed and amalgamated under whatever has to be done under area planning. In light of that, I am very worried that what we have done now will lead to problems in the future. Is that under consideration by the Department?

Mrs Godfrey: We look at the data in a number of different ways, and, as schools do, we use the data that we have to pinpoint where policy interventions might be necessary. You are right to say that we have a disparity of performance between girls and boys in English. So, too, do most other countries, but that does not mean that you do not want to address it. Interestingly, we also have issues the other way when you look at girls' performance in maths compared with that of boys. Interestingly, the configuration of the gap is very different than it is when you look at English.

I suppose that there are two dimensions to this. We set indicators, but would it ever be defensible for us to set differential targets? That could have the effect of saying that we think that it is OK for one group to achieve at a lower level than another. We do not think that, because our focus is on ensuring that every young person can achieve to their full potential. We also know that high quality teaching and learning in the classroom makes the most difference, whether you are a girl or a boy, whether you are from an affluent or a disadvantaged area, or whether you are from the Protestant community or the Roman Catholic community. We know the centrality of good teaching and learning, so all our efforts have been going into trying to improve the quality of teaching and learning, to improve the quality of leadership and, to pick up on Sean's point, to support and celebrate the good when we see it, because that helps to sustain it in the longer term.

Some of the other aspects that we know are directly relevant are around those that are related to aspirations. Members will know that the Minister recently launched his valuing education campaign, which is trying to get the message across directly that you can make an awful lot of difference outside school as well. The campaign focuses on younger children and emphasises that, by doing some very simple things, you can make a difference to your child's learning and send them a hugely significant message about the value that you attach to education. That makes a big difference as well.

It is an area that we constantly keep under review. If you talk to any group of teachers or school leaders, they will tell you that they constantly keep it under review, and, in the best cases, they are inordinately skilful at differentiating their teaching in order to respond to the needs of different groups and different children in their classrooms. If you look, for example, at the literacy and numeracy strategy, we set separate targets for girls and boys, but we set them at the same level, because it really would not be acceptable for us to put effort into differential outcomes just because of gender or background. That would be wrong.

The Chairperson: You probably set a differential in respect of school types, which are made up of children from various backgrounds. You can justify doing it in one sector but find a justifiable reason for not doing it in another. I am not saying that you should, but I still cannot understand why you set two different levels, because you accept the premise that, in school A, there is a different mix of pupils, as opposed to school B.

Mrs Godfrey: It is that balance between, at the school level, setting the indicators that reflect the potential of every individual child, and us, at the system level, making sure that, when you look at the system overall, the performance is as good as it can be and reflects the investment and resources that have been put into our education system, and compares with the best in the world, not just the best locally.

The Chairperson: I have a question about the Lisanelly commitment. There was no measurement annex. The briefing states:

"Performance Indicators have been identified but a Measurement Annex has not been provided."

Is that significant?

Mrs Godfrey: No; that is very much about the nature of the performance indicators. They do not really lend themselves to measurement. It might have been a strange annex. Some of the indicators, such as those for attainment, lend themselves very well to that annex, but some, like the ones for Lisanelly, because the project is at a relatively early stage, do not. We have used the annex only when it has been appropriate to do so.

The Chairperson: There are no further questions. Thank you, Katrina. We may want to consider how the Committee can be updated on these matters and whether we do that quarterly. That is an issue for the Committee to decide, and I am sure that you will be happy to respond to us if we communicate orally or in writing with you on a quarterly basis.

Mrs Godfrey: Absolutely, Chairperson. We are committed any way to reporting to OFMDFM on a quarterly basis starting from now. The first monitoring will be for the first two quarters of this year, and there will be an annual report as well.

The Chairperson: If that is the case, and if the Committee is happy, is there any reason why we should not do the same as OFMDFM?

Mrs Godfrey: I cannot envisage any difficulty in providing the Committee with that report. On receipt of it, the Committee may decide that it wants to hear more from individual senior responsible officers or from me, as the co-ordinator.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that. Thank you, Katrina.