



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Early Years Policy: Ministerial Briefing

16 January 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Trevor Lunn
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Mr John O'Dowd	Minister of Education
Mrs Cathy Galway	Department of Education
Miss Linda Wilson	Department of Education

The Chairperson: Minister and Linda, you are very welcome. Thank you for agreeing to come to make your presentation and give us an update on the framework. I take this opportunity to wish you and the Department a happy 2013. We look forward to working with you and the Department. There will be a number of challenges for us all in 2013. We commit ourselves to trying to ensure that we get a resolution to whatever the difficulties and challenges are. You are very welcome.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Thank you very much for your kind remarks, Chair. I wish you and the Committee a happy new year as well. 2013 will be a very busy year. You are already working your way through the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) legislation. Area planning will be coming forward. We will have Bob Salisbury's report, which I hope to have with the Committee next week. So, there is a considerable amount of work coming at us. The shared education report will also be published shortly. We will no doubt be kept busy throughout the year.

I am glad to be here this morning to talk to the Committee and discuss with you my plans for early years education and the document that I issued recently called 'Learning to Learn', which sets out my Department's priorities in relation to early years education. The Committee will be well aware that, since 2010, there has been discussion and consultation in relation to early years. At that stage, it was entitled the 0-6 early years strategy. When I came into post, I was dealing with the consultation responses to that document. There were around 2,000 responses, which, it has to be said, were largely critical of the document. However, within the consultation responses, there was no agreed consensus on the way forward.

I also had to deal with the reality that there had been a number of changes in procedures for how the Executive were dealing with early years and a child's life from 0-6. Significant tranches of it were returned to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). The Executive also made a positive intervention in bringing to the fore the Delivering Social Change strategy. It was an opportunity for all Executive Ministers to involve themselves collaboratively in positive interventions. As regards my responsibility for early years, it allowed me to work with Executive colleagues on bringing forward a combined strategy.

The strategy that I have here today looks at the educational responsibilities, but it does not look at them in isolation. It sets out my priorities moving forward. We covered a number of specific areas. If it suits, I will give a short presentation and then answer members' questions.

I turn to the key proposals being consulted on. The key proposals fall into five broad categories that are reflective of the broader educational priorities and incorporate the previous broad objectives, as set out in the previous draft strategy. I emphasise throughout that it is about raising standards. It is a key focus of my Department that we raise educational outcomes for all our young people. Falling under that category, the proposed actions aim to enhance the quality of provision through redefining the programme for target-aged children in their preschool year by removing two-year-olds from the programme and reception classes and applying the principles of Every School a Good School to all early years provision funded by the Department of Education (DE).

It may be strange to bring forward proposals where the first two proposed actions are to remove something. However, it is recognised that the current provision for two-year-olds in early years is not suitable. It may actually hinder a child's development at that stage. Reception classes are also not suitable for a child at that age of development. The application of Every School a Good School to all DE-funded early years provision also brings equality of accountability to all providers. I will be creating a single foundation stage rather than having a standalone preschool curriculum separate from the revised curriculum.

In relation to closing the gap, preschool practitioners are observing an increasing prevalence of underdeveloped social, emotional and communication skills in young people compared with their expected development. We know that early advantages accumulate. Unfortunately, disadvantages accumulate as barriers to learning. The proposed actions aim to enhance our ability to meet the additional needs of children earlier by extending the pilot programmes in early years settings initiated by the review of special educational needs (SEN); reviewing the effectiveness of the Sure Start programme; refocusing the use of extended-school funding for nursery schools and units and extending that funding to non-statutory preschool settings; considering the opportunities offered by the Delivering Social Change programme, which I mentioned earlier; developing the workforce in respect of their skills and knowledge as regards early years provision; and ensuring that we have competent governance measures in place so that programmes are properly managed in all schools.

The learning environment in a school is not just about the building. It is also about the ethos and culture. It is about the participation with parents and the influence of the home-learning environment. There is a range of issues that need to be addressed to improve the early-learning environment, such as session times, settling-in times, teacher:pupil ratios, engagement with parents, and structural issues around the use of buildings and information technology. Addressing some of those issues is reasonably straightforward. Others have significant implications for existing provision and will require more in-depth consideration. As I mentioned, we also need to develop the governance and management of these settings in respect of staff development.

That is a broad run-through of the proposals. However, I think that it is better to open up these sessions to questions and answers rather than having me reading out a litany of issues. I think that that is more beneficial to you, as Chair, and members.

The Chairperson: Minister, thank you for your presentation and for the information that you had already supplied to us.

This Committee and the previous Committee have always had a concern about the ongoing delay. We did not get to the point of having a policy, but we have a framework and have set out a course of direction in relation to the continued provision of early years.

One of the issues that seems to be emanating from this, and is causing concern in some places, is the removal of reception classes. The document states that reception classes do not always provide an

appropriate preschool environment for children. There are those in the system who would probably not dispute that statement. However, by implication, the statement acknowledges that some reception classes do provide an appropriate preschool environment. The document states that removal of the provision of all reception classes will provide clarity for area planning in the future. Is the removal of a reception class likely to lead to a position where you could move from having what is a very good provision to having another provision that the inspectorate has deemed to be less than satisfactory? If the object of this is to raise standards, how will you deal with that disparity?

Mr O'Dowd: This has been on the books in terms of planning for several years now. It has been recognised in a number of reports that reception classes are not suitable for the vast majority of young people in those age ranges. You say that some are suitable, and there is always an exception to the rule. The dedication of primary-school teachers etc creates many circumstances in which children can flourish in a reception class, but, in general, it is now deemed that young people going into those settings are not having the opportunity to benefit educationally in the way they should.

You asked whether we are going to close reception classes and allow children to move into a setting that the inspectorate has deemed to be unsatisfactory. We are not. A number of measures will be put in place. First, if the setting that is deemed unsatisfactory is a statutory one, it should be on formal intervention. If it does not work its way through formal intervention, there are a number of measures that my Department can put in place, including the eventual closing of the setting, but that would be at the end of a journey.

I am planning to introduce a similar arrangement for non-statutory settings. They will also be subject to the principles of Every School a Good School. They will be put into a formal intervention programme and given support etc to work their way through that. If, at the end of that support, they are unable to come out of formal intervention, their licence to operate — for want of a better term — will be removed. We will no longer fund that setting.

Certainly, I am not going to close down any reception setting and ask the children to go into an unsatisfactory setting that is not going to provide them with good education. This will have to be done on a planned, phased basis, but it is going to have to start. We have been talking about it for too long, and it is going to have to start. In some instances, where there are a significant number of reception classes in a school, the school might wish to bring forward a development proposal for its own nursery unit within the school. If there is an area that is operating currently with preschool provision in reception classes, the logical step would be to bring forward a development proposal for a nursery unit.

The Chairperson: You have alluded to something that hits the issue on the head. The difficulty, from the practitioners' point of view, is that they will see the development proposal as a very long, slow process. Your Department has encouraged the voluntary and private sectors because of the very fact that developing proposals and moving forward within the statutory system is slow and cumbersome. If schools that have a reception would like to apply to technically change the name from being a reception to a nursery, because that is really all that they would be doing, will you be able to give an assurance that it will not be six, eight, 10 or 12 months until they get agreement to do that? Some schools have already raised that.

Mr O'Dowd: I would say to those settings, "Start planning now." The development proposal is not as difficult a process as it is maybe set out to be. I can understand the concerns of schools that once they enter a legislative process, they will go through a cumbersome process. Those schools should start planning now for the change from reception to nursery. My Department will assist any school that requires further information on how to proceed through it. If further clarity is required around that, I will be happy to issue that clarity to schools.

In the past, we have put money into the voluntary and community settings as we planned throughout the year for preschool places. That is because it is sometimes difficult to meet the demand with location, and it is quicker to do that in-year with the community and voluntary sector. With regard to long-term planning, however, development proposals are the way forward. That allows the school, community and Department to know exactly where our places are and where the settings will be.

I would certainly say to schools that they should not be put off by the development proposal. Each will be judged on its own merits, and I assure them that if they require further clarity around that, my Department will work with them, and I will offer them that in written form.

The Chairperson: I am aware of one school, in particular, where your Department and yourself turned down a proposal. If they look at the new proposals, they could think that they have been short-changed. Will they be able to revisit that issue?

Mr O'Dowd: There is no appeal mechanism. They can submit a fresh development proposal, if they believe that their circumstances are relevant to it and if they believe that they are going to be successful. I cannot sit in judgement of any development proposal, unless I see it.

The Chairperson: We always have to deal with how all these things are perceived. In the most recent process for early years, we had a situation in which, basically, you had wholesale rejection. Our paper states:

"The Department advised that 90% of respondents disagreed with the aims, visions, issues and actions set out in the draft strategy. 60-70% of organisations responding to the consultation agreed with the general thrust of the aims although they raised a range of fundamental issues with the draft strategy".

How do you see us changing that acceptance, view or opinion? How will you ensure that we will get a better response to elements of the framework than we got to the previous one?

Mr O'Dowd: I hope that I have given clarity to the sectors and to the community on how education early years will move forward. I think that the previous document was well meaning in the sense that it set out the overall principles of a 0-6 strategy. I think that the concern, particularly in the sector, was that how it was going to work was not tied down enough in the strategy. People were being asked to buy into something when they were not sure what the outcomes would be and what it would mean to their setting or sector. That caused some concerns and perhaps frustration in the sectors. They were asked to buy into something when they did not fully know what the outcomes would be.

My Learning to Learn strategy has set out clearly what each action entails, what the outcomes will be, how I propose to bring those actions forward and what it will mean to each sector. My policy deals only with what education can do, and the educational outcomes and what the Department of Education is going to do are set out quite clearly. The 0-6 strategy was far broader. At that stage, it dealt with what was almost an Executive approach. Things have changed legislatively. As I said, Delivering Social Change has been brought forward, and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) recently published its childcare strategy. We will feed into that childcare strategy, and I believe that elements of this fit neatly into it. However, I emphasise again that preschool provision is education and not childcare. The consequence of it may be that children are in care for a number of hours a day, but its principles are in education.

The Chairperson: I have a couple of other points before I go to members. I am aware of the constraints on your time, Minister.

You have the statutory system, and, from your time on the Committee in the past, you will be well aware that there has always been — it continues to a lesser or greater degree — a tension between the statutory and the private and voluntary. Every School a Good School was clearly defined as a document for the statutory provision. I welcome the fact that we are trying to get to a place where there is equilibrium across the piece, whoever the provider is. How can the Department impose the principles of Every School a Good School, which is primarily focused on statutory provision, on a sector that is private and voluntary? What reception has there been in that sector to the requirement to improve outcomes and to measure those outcomes? Some of that will be pretty challenging. Will the measurements be the same?

Mr O'Dowd: I await the consultation responses. They are starting to come in. We have to let the consultation process end and then take the time to sift through the responses and see what they are.

As to how we will bring it to bear and what authority we have, we are the funder. I think that it is only right and proper that anyone who is involved in preschool education falls under an equal measure of responsibility and expectation around outcomes. The Every School a Good School principles will be brought to bear on community and voluntary and private providers on the basis that they will be asked to sign up to its principles. When the inspections and reporting take place, we will have a mechanism whereby, if there are difficulties or challenges in a school, the broader principles of formal intervention can be brought into play.

The formal intervention process is a challenge and a support function. Certainly, schools are challenged on their failures thus far, but there is also a support function that allows schools to move forward and that helps and assists them to draw up plans to move forward. That will be the same for the community and voluntary sector. If, at the end of that and after that assistance and help, things do not work out, I am of the view that those providers should no longer be in the system. We are dealing with one year of a child's life. It is a very important year for a child's development, and I think that it is only right and proper that if those stringent responsibilities are placed on the statutory sector, they are placed on the community and voluntary and private sectors as well.

The Chairperson: Can you just clarify whether the inspectorate will, on the same basis, be able to inspect the voluntary and private sectors as opposed to the statutory sector?

Mr O'Dowd: It currently does inspect them and can report those inspections. The issue is that the follow-up actions are not on an equal footing with the statutory sector. We are going to put measures in place that ensure that the follow-up actions are taken on the same basis.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much, Minister. I am very pleased to see this coming forward and to see that the system is more combined than it was the previous time.

I will start with a general point. When I was new to the Committee, the Department made a statement in which it advised that 90% disagreed with the aims, and I understand that there were differences. Do you feel that this new way forward has dealt with many of the matters that people were complaining about and that the ongoing consultation will get us over and through the system so that we can achieve what you are trying to do?

Mr O'Dowd: I am of the view that the action plans are clear. Everyone can understand the outcomes and responsibilities that are being placed on each sector and provider and what we want to see in the policy document at the end of the consultation.

The principles of the 0-6 strategy were good, and, as I said to the Chairperson, its intent was good. However, it was broad ranging and its actions and outcomes were not clearly defined. People quite rightly said that they had been asked to buy in to something without knowing what the outcomes were, what responsibilities would rest on them or where their sector would be at the end of it. Quite rightly, they objected to it, but they thought that the broad principles were a good idea.

I think that, if people read through this document, however, they would clearly know what the actions are going to be. The question is whether they are going to agree with me during the consultation process. I do not know that yet. I hope that they do, but I will not know until the consultation process ends.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you. I will move on to discuss one or two of the actions. I want to ask about special needs, for example. It has been raised with me that, when individuals were assessed at a private nursery, that assessment was not accepted when the pupils moved up to primary school. Therefore, the statementing or the plans had to be started again. Is that going to be dealt with?

Another query, which was raised with me in Antrim, was about whether we include the parents of children who need help. It is all very well helping the children, but it is the parents who really need help looking after them.

Mr O'Dowd: My answer to both questions is yes. This document was drawn up in the wake of the lengthy discussions about the SEN proposals. So, we have learned from that, and that has also been fed in to this document.

When it comes to identifying a child's special educational needs in a nursery unit or a preschool setting, there can and should be interventions in early years settings. I am being told that that is better in statutory settings and that there is more of a relationship between the statutory settings and the boards.

Through this document, I want to see that relationship between all settings and boards so that interventions can be made. I also want to see better communications between preschool settings and primary schools for parents and practitioners. We will bring forward guidelines for that.

You will notice that we are also going to ensure that preschool settings will be part of the foundation stage of our education system. There will not be a separate curriculum for preschool settings; that will be the start of the foundation stage. There should be a seamless transition from preschool settings to primary schools, and that will include children with special educational needs.

A number of pilot schemes are running at the moment. We are going to expand those in non-statutory settings, and we will learn from those experiences. I am not saying that we have got it right yet, but I think that the experiences of the SEN proposals, the contents of this document and the pilot schemes will give us a better system than we have at present.

The Chairperson: I want to go back to the point about the seamless transition. One of the regular complaints that I get in the primary sector is about the difference and disparity between the information that is given on individual children who come from a variety of provision. I do not want to pick out any particular sector. In one case, a teacher showed me information for one pupil that was on one A4 page, while the information for another pupil was in a booklet that gave a very detailed assessment of that child's needs. How can we ensure that, whoever the provider, there is a standardised process or at least a very clear minimum of what is required to ensure that that transition is valuable and as seamless as you desire, Minister?

Mr O'Dowd: One of the actions coming out of the document is that we will have regularised information flowing between the two sectors. It refers to:

"Developing guidance, information and support materials for parents and practitioners on preparing for and managing transitions to Foundation Stage and on to Key Stage 1."

So, there will be a regularised process for that.

This is not in the framework document, but one of the things that impressed me on my recent visit to Scotland is that they have something similar to our area learning communities but at primary level. Those involved are in preschool, primary and post-primary settings. They sit down and talk about the processes that are involved, the pupils and the transitions, and they share information, etc. As strange as it may be, I am not sure that the relationship between preschool and primary school is as good as it should be or that the relationship between preschool, primary school and post-primary school is as good as it should be. I have no plans to immediately to bring forward such a proposal, but I must say that the very nature of it impressed me. I walked into the room, and all the educators in that community were sitting together, talking through their systems. That has been running for about a year or 18 months. They have learned so much from each other in that format. So, I think that that is something that is worth investigating further.

The Chairperson: You have no intention of introducing a test from preschool to primary school?

Mr O'Dowd: Not yet. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: I thought that we would clarify that point while you were here.

Miss M McIlveen: Reference has been made to the number of negative responses that were made to the previous document. This framework document is very different to the previous one, and we think that that indicates progress. Given that there is not a 12-week consultation period on this, are you satisfied that you have given sufficient time for those who are involved and who have an interest in this matter to make their views known to you?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes. The standard consultation period can be anything from eight to 12 weeks, and anything within that time frame is accepted as good practice. I have decided on an eight-week consultation period, because there is frustration both in political circles and the sector about moving the process forward. I want to ensure that we move beyond simple discussion and debate into actions. Following on from what was a quite extensive consultation period the previous time, I think that the eight-week period will allow everyone to respond in detail to my proposals. It is not a lengthy document, and anybody who is in the sector will be able to read through it quite easily. Indeed, anyone, including parents or members of the community, will be able to read through it quite easily and pick up exactly what is meant by my actions. It is then up to people to decide whether they agree with them. If they have alternatives or other ideas on implementing the actions that I have proposed, that is fine. I think that eight weeks will suffice to bring us to where we want to be.

Miss M McIlveen: Quite a substantial part of the document looks at Sure Start. May I ask whether there is something in the document for those children between nought and three years who do not live in a Sure Start area.

Mr O'Dowd: Currently, there is not; we have to look at Sure Start first. We are spending somewhere in the region of £25 million annually on Sure Start, but it has never been evaluated. The outcomes have never been evaluated, and the work that is going on has never been properly scrutinised. So, I want an evidence-based review of Sure Start to see where we go next. I want to look at what is good in Sure Start, what needs to change and what else we could be doing. I also want, as a part of that review, to look at what we do even with a programme for two-year-olds. In England, they have introduced a programme for two-year-olds, which I think is worth our investigating further. It has to be age-appropriate education for two-year-olds; we cannot simply transfer the current early years programme over to two-year-olds, because it will not work. So, that will form part of the Sure Start review.

The Delivering Social Change framework allows us to look at what we do for the 0-2 age group and how we provide support for them. My officials and I have regular engagements with the Health Minister about how we provide educational support to parents and to nought- to two-year-olds and how we follow that through. When the health visitor most recently visited my eight-week-old child, they left us a bag of reading books for the child. That happens regularly. It is a small, but important, step, because the message is that, even though the child is only eight weeks old, it is important to start reading to it. That is health and education working together in a simple, but practical, way. Those conversations are continuing, and I think that programmes of work can flow out of the Delivering Social Change programme for all our nought-to two-year-olds so that the educational experience can start from nought to two.

Miss M McIlveen: Do you plan to take that piece of work forward for those children who fall outside Sure Start areas?

Mr O'Dowd: Let us examine Sure Start to make sure that we are doing it right, targeting the right children in Sure Start and using that expenditure properly. There is also a broader programme of work coming from those. Sure Start provides services in the top 25% most deprived wards, but let us look at all the children.

Miss M McIlveen: What is the timescale for that piece of scrutiny work?

Mr O'Dowd: We have to wait until the consultation process closes and the documents are scrutinised. If, in general, no issues are brought up during the consultation that we have not thought of, or if nothing is brought up that deserves further scrutiny, the review of Sure Start will start pretty quickly. The discussions in the Delivering Social Change programme are ongoing, as are my discussions with the Health Minister and my officials' discussions with him on how we bring further support to that nought- to two-year-old bracket.

Miss M McIlveen: Are you content that this document will help to deliver social change?

Mr O'Dowd: I think that it will. I think that the document will assist in its broadest remit, as well as in the narrow focus of those families and communities who need direct intervention. If we get the preschool education right, it will pay dividends in our primary schools and post-primary schools. If we are developing well-educated and well-equipped young people, that, in its very principles, creates social change.

Miss M McIlveen: How does that align with the childcare strategy?

Mr O'Dowd: We have to respond to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's (OFMDFM) childcare strategy. I have always advocated the idea that preschool education is education; it is not childcare. As I said, its consequences are clearly that children are in care. However, we do not develop primary schools or post-primary schools for childcare purposes; we develop them for educational purposes. I am studying OFMDFM's document. We will respond to it, and I am engaging with OFMDFM on how my policy fits in with its policy and how we move childcare forward. There are proposals in the OFMDFM document about using school settings and how we use

schools better and about using them for childcare purposes in the period in a child's day after school, for instance. I think that all those proposals are worth further exploration.

Miss M McIlveen: Finally, there does not appear to be any mechanism in the document for measuring progress. How is the Department going to know that it is making a difference?

Mr O'Dowd: The Department will know that through inspection reports from the inspectorate, as it does with primary schools or post-primary schools. They will be the mechanism to make sure that we are making a difference. However, it may well be worth having a review period in two or three years' time, after the document moves forward and when it has bedded in. It might be worth holding an overall review of the entire strategy. In the meantime, I think that our inspection process allows us to monitor the effectiveness of the proposals that are contained within.

Ms Boyle: You are very welcome, Minister. There is evidence to suggest that there is a greater risk of children who are young in their academic year suffering educationally and psychologically. There is also a significant proportion of parents who want their child to remain in a preschool setting, even though the child is the appropriate age for school. The parents want them to remain in preschool until they are five. There is a growing argument for that. Will the Department be carrying out a review on the school starting age?

Mr O'Dowd: Not at this stage. I am aware of the debate and the school starting age, and there is a growing debate around it and conflicting points of view on it. There is the individual parent's right to make that choice. I am not opposed to that, and I am not in favour of it, because I believe that further research, evidence and a debate are required before any of us can come to a position and say that that is the right thing to do. If a child starts school at a later stage or is held back in the preschool setting for another year, there is some evidence showing that doing two years in a preschool setting is not beneficial to the child and that it may actually restrict the child's development at that stage. That is one argument in this case. If there are a number of older children in the preschool setting, you also have to ask what effect that will have on the younger majority in their relationships, confidence etc. That will also have to be taken into account.

A debate is going on out there, and I think that it needs to continue. It needs to be evidence based. Those involved have to build up their arguments so that they can make presentations to policymakers such as the Committee and others. I am not in a position to say whether they are right or wrong, so I am not proposing that we bring forward a policy at the moment.

I think that changing the overall school starting age would create such a significant structural change to many workings in our society that a broader Executive debate would be required. Children go to school at the starting age that we know now. Parents and families plan for that, and many of our daily work lives and systems are planned around it. A childcare strategy is coming out of OFMDFM etc, and all that will have to be taken into account. So, it is simply not a decision that the Department of Education can take on its own. There would have to be an Executive discussion about the broader societal and economic implications.

Ms Boyle: What assistance does the Department give to parents who want to keep their children at home until they are five? Do they have to go through an appeals process? Is there a resource for them to go to the Department and say —

Mr O'Dowd: There is a mechanism for them to go to the Department, Michaela, but I do not have all the information on that in front of me. If it is OK, I will write to the Chair of the Committee and give you it. There is a mechanism in place whereby a parent can appeal to the Department and go through that way.

Ms Boyle: Is there any feedback on where the nurture groups sit at the minute? It would be helpful for me and constituents to know that.

Mr O'Dowd: We are working on two elements of nurture units. There are nurture units that were funded but whose funding has run out. I have asked the Department to examine whether it is feasible for us to continue funding those nurture units, and it is working on that.

There are also those nurture units that were announced as part of OFMDFM's proposal. DSD and the Department of Education are liaising on where those should be most suitably placed and on how we

can move forward with that. I expect an announcement on that very shortly. That is progressing well, and I am content that we will be in a position to make an announcement on that very shortly.

Whenever I have gone out and spoken to those who provide nurture units in their schools, I have been very impressed by the simplicity of the process. Teachers can intervene and offer short-term assistance to a child that has long-term benefit. As I said, we will see whether we can fund those units that have run out of funding. That other proposal will come forward, but nurture units are another area in which further investigation will be required into how the Department of Education and perhaps others develop a long-term policy.

Mrs Dobson: Minister, thank you very much for your briefing. You will be aware of concerns that were raised with you by the community of Richmount, which is just outside Portadown and in our constituency, regarding the provision of preschool education places for local children. I know that people in that community have spoken to you directly about the situation, and I have also written to you. I write to you on this matter very regularly, as you know. Do you believe that it is fair that families are made to seek places at inconvenient distances from their homes and perhaps outside their own communities?

Mr O'Dowd: I should declare an interest, because Richmount is in my constituency. I have been lobbying on this matter as a constituency MLA. The PEAGs in each board are the bodies that are best placed to identify where there is need for preschool provision. As part of my proposals, we are going to look at how PEAGs operate. For example, is there another way of doing it? Are there better working practices? What is the best way to do this moving forward? That is where the statutory regulation points us when we are looking at preschool places.

There will always be the issue of travel distances, particularly in rural communities. I have said before that I do not want young people travelling excessive distances to obtain preschool provision. Indeed, this year alone, we have made funding available for an additional 650 preschool places. We have asked the boards and the PEAGs to keep the Department of Education up to date as this process rolls out. We have said that they should let us know if they require further funding for more places, and we have set aside a pot of money to make those places available.

Should preschool children travel outside their own community to preschool settings? In an ideal world, yes. We talk about shared education etc. I want a greater remit for shared education in our education system. However, we also have to reflect the realities of the situation and the society that we live in. Quite justifiably, some parents feel uncomfortable about going to areas that they believe may be hostile to them. That should be taken into account when planning preschool provision, but it is currently not.

Preschool provision is non-sectoral. However, there are certain circumstances where we just have to accept — reluctantly as that may be — the reality of the world that we live in. Despite many people's best efforts, the situation has not changed in certain places. Parents have justifiable and genuine concerns about travelling into an area or leaving their children in that area, and I think that that has to be taken into account. It is certainly the role of PEAGs to plan non-statutory preschool provision. In this case, I have advised the Richmount group to continue to lobby PEAGs.

Mrs Dobson: I have written to the SELB, and the community felt that the response was both abrupt and arrogant. What advice would you give to the people in the Richmount community as they seek to resolve the future of the education of their children?

Mr O'Dowd: I do not think that I have seen the board's exact response to Richmount. I would certainly hope that no public sector provider is abrupt or rude with any of our citizens. We should always treat people with the utmost respect when we engage with them. My advice to people in the Richmount community is that they should continue to lobby their elected representatives and the board about provision in that area. I have advised people in Richmount that, as an MLA, I can give them advice but that, as Minister, I cannot intervene directly in either my own constituency or any other; the matter has to be dealt with through the proper procedures.

Mrs Dobson: Do you feel that there is an underlying injustice for communities such as Richmount in the way that people are required to seek education for their children? You spoke about an ideal world. We know that it is not an ideal world, and you are very familiar with the situation. Do you feel that there is an injustice here that needs to be addressed?

Mr O'Dowd: I might not necessarily use the word "injustice". However, we have to identify the reality in certain areas where we deliver public services. Some parents are uncomfortable travelling into those areas or leaving their children there, and we have to take that into account.

Mrs Dobson: Do you plan to address this matter?

Mr O'Dowd: We have a contradiction in these terms. We have an Executive strategy to increase shared education. I am waiting on a report from the shared education ministerial advisory group, and I will wait until I receive that report before taking any further measures on this issue in any of our education sectors. However, we should ultimately strive to ensure that we move towards greater sharing, particularly in education. So, before I commit to making changes in any of our sectors, let us wait on the shared education report. Let us see what it identifies for us as ways forward and as the perceptions and the reality, as well as any legislative changes that we need to make.

Mrs Dobson: As you know, stakeholder advisory groups, departmental strategies and revised strategies mean very little to the parents who are unable to get the preschool places. You will also know that many parents are forced to make career changes because provision is not available. Can you give a guarantee that the Programme for Government commitment to give a preschool place to every child will be met? When will it be met?

Mr O'Dowd: I would not say that many people have to make career changes. Some 84% of last year's applicants got their first preference. That means that quite a high number got their first-preference call in any of our sectors. This year, we have made 650 additional places available to the boards. I have told the boards to continue to liaise with my Department if further places are required. Indeed, my Department has taken more of a hands-on approach to this process this year than in previous years. We have learned, and we continue to learn, from this process. We are building up an entirely new education sector. It is like building the primary school sector from the beginning. We are building the preschool sector over these years.

Last year, I think that the number was 24. Is that right?

Miss Linda Wilson (Department of Education): Of those who stuck with the process, yes.

Mr O'Dowd: Yes; of those who stuck with the process, 24 did not get placed. Around 500 parents decided not to stick with the process and did not go through stage 2 or even engage with the Department after that.

So, last year, we placed over 23,000 children. The vast majority of parents stuck with the process, and their children were placed. Can we guarantee parents that they will get their first preference? No — no more than I can guarantee that at primary or post-primary level.

Can I guarantee that we will reach the Programme for Government commitment? I will guarantee that we have made the financial and personnel resources available to assist the boards in delivering that. We will improve on last year's experience, and I have no doubt that, next year, we will improve on the experience again.

Mrs Dobson: How far away are we from allowing additional private and voluntary sector preschool provision? I understand that you are developing a protocol; the Chairperson touched on that.

Mr O'Dowd: Additional private and voluntary providers can come on board at any time. They have to apply to their PEAGs to be a recognised provider. That is what happened at Richmount Primary School, which is the school that you referred to. They can come on board at any time.

One of the proposals that I made in the document is that we look at the number of pupils who are allowed in a nursery class and increase it from 26 to 30. We will have further discussions with schools and providers on how we can work that out.

The numbers set in non-statutory settings are regulated by the Department of Health. We will have further discussions about those numbers, because, in any setting, we have to take into account the child's health and well-being, as well as their educational experience. So, in this document we are proposing a number of changes in that area. We are making additional places available, and private,

community and voluntary settings should contact their local PEAGs to see whether they can be registered as providers.

Mrs Dobson: I could go on all day, but I will stick to one final question. I have not mentioned Waringstown.

The Chairperson: Can we move outside the confines of Upper Bann?

Mrs Dobson: Yes. I said that I will not mention Waringstown. In your briefing, Minister, you mentioned 'Learning to Learn' and that that is subject to a focused consultation. Are you concerned that it will be too narrowly focused? It has been two and half years since parents' views were sought.

Mr O'Dowd: I asked for a focused consultation on the proposals in this document. I cannot stop anybody responding to me or raising issues in any manner that they wish. However, what is required now after two and a half years of debate, or perhaps longer, on an early years strategy, is a strategy. Yes, it has to be the right strategy. I believe that we have gone a significant way in listening to the concerns of parents and providers in the sector. We have brought this document forward, but it is only one part of the jigsaw.

OFMDFM's childcare strategy is out for consultation, and Delivering Social Change also continues to roll out programmes. So, I think that the Department of Education has provided a clear set of proposals. However, how people choose to respond to those proposals and the parameters within which they set that is entirely up to them.

Mrs Dobson: I have one final thought, Minister. Yet again, we have another framework, another strategy and another document. Where the early years strategy is concerned, when will we begin to see delivery on that meets the needs of parents? It has been two and a half years since the draft strategy was launched. When will we see delivery?

Mr O'Dowd: We have not sat still over the past two and a half years on early years provision. We have seen a continuing roll-out of preschool provision. We are spending somewhere in the region of £200 million on early years interventions, including foundation stage and preschool settings. I think that we are currently spending around £87 million on preschool settings, so there is significant investment in preschool education as well.

I mentioned to Miss McIlveen the ongoing programmes of work between my Department and the Health Department and the programmes of work that are being rolled out under Delivering Social Change. So, it is not the case that the Department is sitting back waiting for a strategy; a rolling programme of work is going on. We want to ensure that we have a written policy in place so that everyone knows the framework under which they are working and operating. There are changes in the document that will ensure that we have a viable education strategy going into the future.

We have 23,000 children in preschool settings, 84% of parents getting their first choice, 650 additional places being made available this year and continuing engagement going on, so we have not been sitting still.

Mrs Dobson: I think that it is important to focus on the ones who have been left behind, too.

Mr O'Dowd: How many have been left behind?

Mrs Dobson: Linda knows. We have discussed in great detail the number of children who do not go through the different stages and just drop out.

Mr O'Dowd: Fair enough, but let us talk about primary school settings; if parents put down only one preference for a primary school, the system would not work. I am not saying that our system has been as good as it should have been. We are getting there, and I think that we have made significant changes over the past number of years. Indeed, this year, we issued a simple leaflet to parents on how to follow the process. We are talking about a non-statutory year of education. There is parental preference in the system, but there is not parental choice. Parents can set out a list of where they would prefer their child to go, but there is nothing that says that their child will obtain a place with provider a, b or c. The vast majority of pupils are placed where they need to be and where they

receive their early years intervention free for that year. So, I think that the system is largely working. Of course it can be improved, and we continue to offer improvements.

Mrs Dobson: I will pass on your comments to the parents who come to my constituency office. Thank you, Chair.

Mr O'Dowd: Certainly do pass on my comments, but if your concern is about everyone getting their first place of preference, I can tell you that that system is impossible to work.

The Chairperson: Jonathan, do you want to make a comment before I move on to Trevor?

Mr Craig: Yes. It is on the back of what has been asked. I noted carefully what you said. Almost £87 million has been spent on this so far. I agree with some of the comments that were made, although not all of them, and I have personal experience of this. Are you, as a Minister, satisfied that there is a proper geographical spread of provision? There are rural areas in my constituency where there is clearly not enough provision, and that has led to parents, especially parents of preschool children, having to travel 13, 15 or maybe 20-odd miles to get provision for their children. That provision will not necessarily be at somewhere that would automatically transfer children to the local primary schools, which leads to further difficulties when parents are looking for primary school provision. Are you convinced that the strategy is right with regard to the geographical spread? Is there anything further that you, as Minister, can do to rectify some of the anomalies?

Mr O'Dowd: I am not satisfied that we have got it right yet in terms of the geographical locations, in the same way as I am not satisfied that we have got it right with primary schools and post-primary schools, but I believe that, over the past number of years, we have been improving the preschool sector year on year. The lessons are being learned. The Department of Education now takes a hands-on approach to this. Whereas before it was the sole responsibility of the boards, there is now greater engagement than ever between my officials and the boards in the planning of the provision of these services. That has seen a major improvement. The finances have also been made available. Finance is not always the answer, but, in this case, it certainly was part of the answer.

As we develop the system, there will be geographical locations, particularly in rural communities, where we have not got it right yet and where we have to improve. I am satisfied that we have the practices in place, and I believe that once we move towards the Learning to Learn strategy, we will improve the policies, etc, and continue to see improvement year on year. Fair enough, the media focus on this year on year and have stories from individual parents, but they are not going to interview the 23,000 parents who have had their children placed or the 84% of parents who received their first preference. Those stories will not make the news headlines, but the other stories will. That is fair enough. That is how the world works, and we will deal with that as it comes along. Within some of the media stuff, there are some useful pieces of information that we pick up, but I think that we are improving year on year and that improvements will continue to be made.

Mr Craig: Minister, I do not disagree that you are improving year on year. I think that the level of complaints that we receive in our constituencies indicates that that is the case. That said, are you absolutely convinced that the Department and those charged with the delivery of all this are keeping a close enough eye on demographic changes, ie the number of children being born ever year? I still cannot fathom why it took three years for supply to meet demand in my constituency when all the figures were there to prove what was going on.

Mr O'Dowd: I am convinced that my Department and the boards know exactly what my views are on this matter. I have made them crystal clear.

Sometimes the difficulty with preschool provision is that a child might be born in a town, village or vicinity and be on the birth register for that area, but that does not automatically mean that they will continue to live there. It also does not automatically mean that the parents of that child will either seek preschool provision or seek preschool provision in a certain location. All that has to be taken into account, but, yes, there could have been better planning in previous years, and I think that we now have better planning in place. If there are lessons that need to be learned, we will continue to learn them. The additional funding for 650 places is going to go a long way towards doing this. However, I emphasise again that the boards have been told that once they identify an issue, even with their additional places, they should come back to us and we will make the funding available to correct it.

Mr Lunn: Minister, thanks for your presentation. My questions are on the same topic; you may be getting a bit sick of it by now. I have to say that, if you compare the situation three or four years ago with the situation now, particularly in Lagan Valley, an area that I am familiar with, you can see that the transformation has been dramatic. This year, fair enough, there were a few difficult cases, but a very few. I am thinking back to four years ago, when we were inundated at a certain time of the year, but I think that the Department is now coming close to solving a problem that is never going to be totally soluble. You referred to demographic change, and there are always going to be pockets where there is a problem. For the record, this year, we have had an almost peace in Lagan Valley as far as parents' complaints about this issue are concerned.

I think that there is a lot to welcome in the strategy. I would like to think that it will be far more easily received by those who matter than the last one was. It is clearer, and you are addressing some of the things that have caused concern previously.

I turn now to the process to draw the statutory and voluntary sectors more closely together, and perhaps tie in the voluntary sector more so as regards inspections, the curriculum, and so on. Will there be any attempt to standardise the qualifications of the teachers in the two sectors?

Mr O'Dowd: On your first comment on provision, the closing date for applications was last Friday and the boards will now be sorting through those. I have no doubt that there will be parents who are dissatisfied, and we will have to look at each of those cases. I think that, over the past four or five years, the importance of early years education has become more prevalent. More and more parents are seeking it. The demand was not being met at that time, but we are now starting to catch up with demand. It is a good thing that more and more parents want their children to be involved in early years education. The benefits of that will be reaped in later years in education and in our broader society.

You mentioned bringing the community and voluntary sector and the statutory sector closer together. I remember sitting in this room three years ago when we were going through the 0-6 strategy. We had representatives of the community and voluntary sector and the statutory sector in, and it was a frosty meeting, to say the least. I think that relationships have improved greatly since then. I also think that the proposal on cluster groups in the document, which brings the statutory, community and private sectors together to learn about best practice, will also help to improve those relationships. It will allow practice to be shared and relationships to be built up. That will be beneficial for the sectors, but it will also be beneficial for the early years educational outcomes of the young people.

You asked about standardising the qualifications. We are going to review the qualifications in the non-statutory settings. By and large, those are governed by the Health Department, and we are discussing with it how we can build on the qualifications that are currently there and help to improve those. We are also going to look at increasing the number of training days for the non-statutory sector to make it more equivalent to the number in the statutory sector.

In my view, there will always be mixed provision. You will have the statutory setting with the teacher in the classroom and the non-statutory sector with non-teaching staff who should be well qualified. I think that the qualifications in that sector need to be examined and built on.

Mr Lunn: Is it not a complete nonsense that one sector should be governed by the Health Department rather than the Education Department?

Mr O'Dowd: It is the way that it has built up over a period of years. I think we can work together on it. Ideally, from a personal point of view, I would like to see it completely under the Department of Education, with me governing all of those settings, but it is not an immediate cause of concern for me. I think that we can work with the Health Department on all areas of commonality around these matters at this stage. In the future, it should be under one Department.

Mr Lunn: It would be equally ridiculous if you had control of health centres or hospitals, but that is by the way. The fact that the Health Department is organising the qualification levels for educationalists is strange to me.

Mr O'Dowd: They are seen as playgroups. Originally, that was their role. They were playgroups and child-related, but their role has changed.

Mr Lunn: But you want them to be more than that.

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, certainly. They are education settings.

Mr Lunn: With regard to the placement of children, when I talked about the ones who were placed this year, I really meant the ones who were placed last year. There is another test coming very shortly.

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, fair enough.

Mr Lunn: You talk about the situation with two-year-olds. Key action 1.1(b) states:

"Retaining a power for nursery schools and units to provide services for two year olds, if needed, outside of the pre-school education programme."

You may have dealt with that issue, but could you expand on that for me?

Mr O'Dowd: What I mean by that is that, currently, preschools can accept two-year-olds when all the other places are filled, and some do. In fact, there may be 500 or 600 children in any year in preschool settings. It is not the proper setting for a two-year-old. They do not offer the necessary age-appropriate education for a two-year-old. I am keeping the power to allow, at a future date, appropriate programmes for two-year-olds, where the class, for want of a better term, will be made up of two-year-olds. It relates to Miss McIlveen's question. It is a rolling programme for two-year-olds. I want to examine further what is happening in England and see whether we can use that here. There are programmes in England, particularly in socially deprived areas, that, according to some reports, are proving to be beneficial for the social development of children and that even prepare them for going into the preschool setting. There are also socioeconomic benefits for the broader community. I am going to keep that power where I can provide those courses.

Mr Lunn: One of the things to be welcomed in this is the fact that you have defined exactly the age range for the preschool year. The situation around two-year-olds was unacceptable in one respect: in some situations, two-year-olds were getting places ahead of three-year-olds, which was absolutely outrageous. I hope that this has dealt with that once and for all. As I said, subject to consultation, there is a lot to welcome here.

Mr Rogers: Thank you, Minister, for your briefing. You are very welcome. I want to go back to one of your guiding principles:

"Education and learning begins at birth".

Indeed, many people would dispute that; research tells us that the moods and actions of a baby in the womb are detected by the mother.

My question is to do with the whole area of language acquisition. To me, that is one of the key areas that we need to address if we want to raise our standards and improve. I have taken on board what you said to Michelle. I am a firm advocate of what happens in the Sure Start programme, and the idea of a review is very good, but not every child in a disadvantaged ward needs that sort of help. Lots of children in the other 75% are socially deprived children but are not living in a socially deprived area. What steps are being taken to begin to address the area of language acquisition? If it is left until they go to preschool, it is a problem, and if it is left until they go to primary school, it is a major problem. I take on board what you said about the health visitor, and that you, as a parent, sit down and read with your baby. Unfortunately, not everybody does that. That is my first point.

Mr O'Dowd: This comes down to parenting skills and someone's knowledge or ability to have parenting skills, which is not always a natural transition for someone to have. If the parent has had a bad experience as a child, they will have difficulty in transferring any form of skills into their own life or that of their children. That is a broader societal issue, in which education certainly has a role to play. I think the Executive's Delivering Social Change programme has a role to play as well, and I am aware that the Health Department is also dealing with those issues around that.

Maybe, as a society, part of the problem is that we rely on others to educate our children and that we see education as a responsibility of teachers, be that in preschool settings or post-primary settings. We have to get the message out that the most important educators in a child's life are the parents, guardians, grandparents, aunts, uncles and siblings. Those are the people who give the child a

foundation. There are simple things, like talking to your child, that we no longer do, perhaps because of our busy lives or this age of modern technology or 24-hour television, or whatever. We do not have that simple conversation with the child. Perhaps the child is the wee person who runs round the house who nobody engages with. That is a mistake, for a variety of reasons. It is vital that you engage with your child and talk to them about their daily life.

I have started a publicity campaign around the importance of the parental role in education. We have started with the basics of preschool education; teaching your child how to count, the importance of talking to your child, and those sorts of things. I think that that is an important role. I am aware that health also plays, and is playing, an important role in it. The days of the health visitor visiting the home, weighing the baby and talking to the mother, in particular — I think that that needs to be broadened to involve the father — about the child's eating habits, and checking to make sure that the child is all right, have changed completely. They now talk to the mother about a range of things in the child's life and health. That simple thing of leaving the books and talking to the child is important. You need to talk to and engage with the child as well.

So, small steps are being taken, and I think they are important. Different programmes across Departments also now recognise this is an issue and are looking at how we deal with it. However, I cannot say it often enough: parents are the first and most important educators in a child's life, from nought right through.

Mr Rogers: I acknowledge the work that you have done on that, but I think that there is still a lot more to be done on language.

If the health visitor sees a little problem with the child's eyesight, or whatever, an appointment will be made with the specialist, etc. Very often, the problem is rectified within a few years. I know that I cannot compare language acquisition or special educational needs with an eyesight issue, but there is a bit of a disconnect with regard to a child being diagnosed with a particular educational need and any action being taken. It could maybe take six months or a year before any action is taken. That is a major concern, because six months in a child's learning life is a long time.

Mr O'Dowd: You are absolutely right, and we have identified that as part of the SEN review. We have shortened the periods of time and looked at who is responsible at the early stages of identifying a child's special educational needs. That can be the basis of language acquisition as well. That should be identified in a preschool setting, and there should be assistance either from the school or elsewhere. It should certainly be identified; the parents should be spoken to about it; and, if further support regarding language acquisition is required, that support should be made available from a statutory agency. In my opening presentation, I said that a number of settings are now reporting an increase in language difficulties among children, and difficulties with social skills, etc. They are being identified. The SEN pilots that we have in place are looking at how we offer quicker, more effective support to the school and to the parents. Measures are in place to identify that. Again, hopefully, the first identifier of such a problem will be the parent.

Mr Rogers: I have a final point, Chair, on monitoring attendance in preschool. It is not compulsory to attend preschool. That can sometimes lead to an issue when they start primary school, in that they do not see attendance as being all that important. How can that be addressed?

Mr O'Dowd: It is not a statutory section of school. It would have to be addressed informally, and, again, I think it is about the preschool setting engaging with parents about the importance of preschool. First, they have obtained the place; secondly, that place is important to the child's development. It is not an issue that has been regularly reported to me, but it can be a problem. If a child is not attending a preschool setting, it is a parental issue in the sense that it is the parent who is not bringing that child to the setting. It is as much about engaging with parents on the need to get into that regular routine and habit of bringing their child to the preschool setting and to primary school. Then, as the child gets older, the child will be facilitated to get to school himself or herself, but, certainly, the parent should be ensuring that the child is at school. It is not a problem that is regularly reported to me, but I have no doubt that it exists.

Mr Hazzard: Thank you for your briefing, Minister. I want to follow on from Sean and Trevor's point about the positives of collaboration with other Departments, be it the Health Department or DSD. You also mentioned OFMDFM and Delivering Social Change and your Department's own campaign of getting involved. What is the scope? What is the potential in collaborating with OFMDFM's framework for social change?

Mr O'Dowd: The potential is boundless in the sense that we now recognise that early intervention is vital, not only for the individual child but for society, in developing good citizens and citizens who can contribute through their own well-being and broader society's well-being. The Delivering Social Change programme allows Departments to work together and to bring proposals to the table. That allows Ministers to discuss with other Ministers and senior officials how to move it forward in a collective way and to discuss how a proposal from, say, the Department of Education would affect a programme of work that might be going on with health, justice, or elsewhere. It allows for that collaborative, joined-up thinking and joined-up government, for which there is so much demand. There is a funding mechanism to move that forward. So, it is vital.

Any early years development has to be research-based, however, and we have to assure ourselves that it is going to pay dividends in the future. We could join the herd and rush towards early years but forget about the rest of the programmes of work we are involved in and, indeed, the rest of a child's development throughout their school life. Children go through different physical and emotional changes within their life in primary school and, particularly, post-primary school. So, we have to ensure that we have the proper policies and programmes of work in place across the Executive as well.

Mr Hazzard: I move now to financing the framework. What impact will there be, if any, on how we manage or implement existing services?

Mr O'Dowd: I hope not to have to invade any finances from the rest of my Department to deal with the early years strategy. This is a preliminary estimate, but we estimate that somewhere between £3 million and £5 million per annum will be required to bring this strategy to fruition over the next number of years. I hope to be able to deal with that from within my own budget.

As with every other programme of work, as we develop the policy, if we find that there are areas of early years that no longer fit into this strategy, they will no longer be funded. So, we would use that funding as part of the strategy as well.

Mr Lunn: The flexibility in the class sizes that you are planning to introduce would mean an extra four per unit. How many extra places would that provide, if you multiply it by the number of units available?

Mrs Cathy Galway (Department of Education): We have 97 nursery units and 222 nursery classes, but each of them could have 104 or 52. The potential is huge, but we do not know the extent to which nurseries and nursery units would be able to accommodate the extra children. So, until such times as we know how many could actually meet the criteria, I cannot say. Plus, it would only be for target-age children and where the nursery unit is oversubscribed. We could not go to the full remit because they would not all be able to meet the criteria. We do not want to just say that it goes up to 30. It would be a temporary variation, year on year.

Mr Lunn: It sounds as if it has the potential to mop up the figures that we have talked about for the past two or three years.

Mrs Galway: It is certainly significant, if they can do it, but it would be a temporary variation. It would be a way of creating extra space within the statutory sector, but accommodation might restrict some of our ability to do that.

Mr Lunn: I was disappointed when you said that it is going to be year on year. If the accommodation is suitable, why restrict it to year on year?

Mrs Galway: Because we do not know whether the school will be oversubscribed every year.

Mr O'Dowd: One of the areas that we have to look at in area planning is the preschool setting. So, initially, it could be year on year, but, as part of an area planning process, it could eventually be those sorts of numbers. There may also be a development proposal to increase your numbers permanently, as is the case with primary or post-primary schools at the moment.

Mr Lunn: I will not be cynical about that, but it takes forever.

Mr O'Dowd: I do not think that we should send out the message that development proposals take forever. Development proposals are less cumbersome than first thought. That is my view anyway.

The Chairperson: Is that the ones that you refuse or the ones that you endorse?

Mr O'Dowd: It is never pleasant to refuse anything, but sometimes it is the right thing to do.

Mr Lunn: You mean they endorse them? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Kinahan: We talked about Sure Start and the document. The target was to change from the top 20% disadvantaged wards to the top 25%, but, at the same time, you were reviewing it. Can we be sure that the review will not stop that intended increase?

Mr O'Dowd: No, the review is not intended to restrict the 25% category. We are looking at the work of Sure Start, what exactly Sure Start does, what the benefits of that are, whether there are other programmes of work that should be involved and whether money should be used within a Sure Start framework in a better way, etc. The general principles of intervention through the Sure Start programme are good, but we have to assure ourselves that, after the number of years that it has been running and the significant amounts of public money that have been spent on it, we are working it the proper way.

The Chairperson: I will make a couple of brief remarks before we bring this to a conclusion. Does the Department sit on the Delivering Social Change board or the group?

Mr O'Dowd: At ministerial level, I sit on it, yes.

The Chairperson: Is there a board? What is the structure in terms of what oversees the delivery?

Miss L Wilson: The programme board.

The Chairperson: Does the Department sit on it?

Miss L Wilson: Yes, the deputy secretary from the Department sits on it.

The Chairperson: Repeatedly, through the presentation, we heard "if it was statutory" or "it is not statutory". The simplest way to address a lot of those issues is to make preschool provision statutory.

Mr O'Dowd: It is simple on the face of it, but, in terms of the workforce and the infrastructure that we have in place, you are talking about significant job reduction, closure of a significant number of community projects and the removal of what, by and large, is a good — very good, in many instances — educational provider, which, I think, allows the community to become involved in education, which is a good thing. I do not think the answer is to make it all statutory. The answer is to ensure that, regardless of the title of the provider, there is good or excellent provision going on in that setting. I think the inspectorate is a good way of doing that.

The Chairperson: That leads on to the ultimate challenge, which has always been an issue around statutory and non-statutory provision. I saw one comment of one setting that said that, if you were going to the hospital, you would not want someone who was just qualified in first aid to be able to deliver a quality outcome in terms of health provision. I do not want to disparage the many settings where there is good provision, but, when it comes to achieving that outcome of raising standards, ensuring that that disparity is bridged and that you are confident that, whatever setting it is, it can secure a quality outcome, we certainly have to have at least some minimum standard that says, "This is what you are required to have if you are going to get a particular outcome and if we are going to progress and make change in the future." How do we ensure that that is actually delivered as a result of this framework?

Mr O'Dowd: Through the framework initially, and also through the inspection process. The standards are improving across the sectors. Nursery schools are the leaders. Nursery units and non-statutory providers in the community, voluntary and private sectors will follow up. There are problems across those ranges, but we have shown that the way in which we raise standards with other providers in our

education system is through inspection, encouragement and the facilitation and sharing of best practice. That will work as well within the preschool settings.

We are bringing together the cluster groups, which will share good practice and learn from each other. There will be mentors and support mechanisms within that for individual work streams. We are looking at the governance arrangements across the board, including the management of community and voluntary settings, to ensure that. We are working with the Health Department in relation to the qualifications required to work in a community and voluntary setting if it is providing education, and through the rigorous inspections that our primary schools, post-primary schools and nursery schools are familiar with. There is a challenge and support function within that. If the support function does not work, the ultimate decision can be to close. I am bringing that into play in a community and voluntary setting as well. If you cannot provide a proper standard of educational care to the young people in your care, you will not receive funding from my Department.

The Chairperson: Finally, I know that Sir Bob Salisbury's report is specifically about the review of the common funding formula, but will any element of that look at the issue of funding for preschool provision? In a statement that you made in December 2012, you said:

"Some proposals may involve a reallocation of early years funding outside the schools budget; others will require additional investment." — [Official Report, Vol 80, No 2, p 3, col 1].

Mr O'Dowd: As I said earlier in my answer to Chris, if programmes are running that do not fit into the current policy, I will no longer fund them. I am not talking about dealing with preschool funding through that at this time. Bob Salisbury's report arrived on my desk this morning. I am going to read it and issue it to the Committee next week. I do not know what he has said. He may well have touched on it.

The Chairperson: OK. Just for your information, Minister, as a result of the Committee's work, we are having an early years event this afternoon. Over 16 organisations have indicated that they will attend the event, which is positive. I trust that the event will inform us, but, ultimately, it will also inform the Department, and if any specific issues are raised, we intend to forward that information to you. In the meantime, Minister, thank you for your attendance.