



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Area-based Planning:
Briefing from Professor Tony Gallagher,
Special Adviser to the Committee for
Education

9 April 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 Brenda Hale
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Professor Tony Gallagher Queen's University Belfast

The Chairperson: Professor Gallagher has provided two papers: one covers the viability of primary schools; and the other summarises the area planning process to date. Tony, you are very welcome. We ask you to speak to your papers, and, if members have questions, we will take those after.

Professor Tony Gallagher (Queen's University Belfast): The shorter paper provides an overview of the situation so far. I will remind the Committee of the timelines. The viability audit data reports were published in February 2012. A draft area plan for post-primary schools was published in June 2012. A revised set of reports on post-primary schools were published in February of this year. In March of this year, the draft area plans for primary schools were published and are now out to consultation. Alongside those, the Salisbury report — a review of the common funding scheme — was published in January. The report of the ministerial advisory group on shared education is, I think, due to be published later this month.

Following consultation, we now have the revised post-primary area plans. A number of changes to the recommendations can be identified. One important area of change relates to integrated schools, where proposals to merge a number of integrated schools have been reversed, and there have been recommendations to increase the enrolment of some integrated schools. Clearly, there has been a rowing back on some suggestions.

The most notable feature of the revised area plans is the recommendations leading to the consolidation of schools into larger units through a variety of closures and amalgamations, though in some areas final recommendations have still not been identified. There are recommendations in the final plans to bring together grammar and secondary schools, though that is mainly in the maintained sector. At this point, limited progress is evident on the identification of cross-border solutions, which was flagged up early in the process.

When the revised area plans for post-primary were published, the Minister announced the establishment of an area planning steering group, which will include members from the controlled, maintained, Irish-medium and integrated sectors, though there is no mention at this stage of any representation from voluntary grammar schools. He also announced that, from later this month, the Department will publish annual statistical information for parents and others relating to the sustainability of every school.

In discussions around the time that the post-primary area plans were published, the Minister highlighted issues about the movement of pupils into Belfast to attend grammar schools, and questioned whether that was sustainable on economic and environmental grounds. However, that issue was just raised, so there are no specific suggestions at this point about what will be done with that.

The next area relates to the draft area plans for primary schools, which were published last month. I will highlight some issues arising there. The previous viability audit data suggested that various primary schools were under different degrees of stress: 1% were in formal intervention; about 7% were identified as being under stress on attainment grounds; and 8% were under financial stress due to the level of projected budget deficits. In addition, about 38% were under enrolment stress to the extent that they had enrolment below the level deemed viable by the Department.

An analysis of the viability data audit, which is in the larger report, suggested that there is a relationship between enrolment size and financial stress, though the data are highly variable. However, it also suggested that there is little or no relationship between enrolment size and whether schools are under attainment stress or intervention stress.

The recommendations in the draft area plans were a little limited, in that about 30 schools were recommended for closure, another 70 or so were recommended for a merger or amalgamation and about 18 were recommended for shared solutions. That leaves around 200 primary schools that are deemed to have a question mark over their future but with no particular suggestion about what should happen to them at this point. The Minister has said that he was looking for innovative ideas to come from local areas. The current consultation process will presumably provide an opportunity to look at that.

If you step back from the original terms of reference that the Committee asked me to look at and where things are at the moment in relation to that, you will see that one of the issues on which concern was expressed early in the process was the limited opportunity for different sectoral interests to participate in the process. On one level, the decision to establish the area planning steering group seems to go some way to addressing that particular situation, though the lack of formal representation from voluntary grammar schools remains, at this point, an anomaly.

My sense is that, if you look at the pattern of recommendations, you can see that there is still a lack of clarity over the preferred strategic shape of the education system on a number of different levels. For post-primary schools, the preference appears to be to go for a system of fewer, larger schools, with consolidation of the system. However, one of the potential consequences of the current recommendations is that the range of choice of different school types across Northern Ireland may vary quite a lot and not all choices will be available in all areas. That might be OK, but it seems to be an emerging consequence of the situation.

For primary schools, we have only draft area plans, but there is also limited clarity on the future shape of the system, particularly as it relates to small rural schools. The stress factors have identified a lot of small schools as being under pressure, but many of them have not been recommended for closure at this point. The recommendations of the Salisbury report would place significant pressure on small schools because of the removal of automatic support, but they do allow the caveat of schools making a special case for continuing to operate given their circumstances. However, at this stage, the draft area plans do not give a sense of the preferred approach from the boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the Department.

The proposals for post-primary and primary provide some examples of shared education solutions, but there is still a lack of clarity on what different forms of shared education might be available and what legal changes, if any, would be required to facilitate those solutions. Presumably, some of those issues will be addressed in the ministerial advisory group report when it comes out. What appears to be happening is that the process is now devolving to what I have described in the paper as a myriad of local situations. That may be fine if we want to have lots of tailored solutions to reflect particular circumstances in different areas, but if that is the direction that we want to go in, perhaps it is time to

move away from the top-down approach and provide some sort of enabling process that allows parents in local communities to be actively involved in looking at options and making choices for the future.

That covers the overview paper. Do you want me to —

The Chairperson: Yes, go ahead.

Professor Gallagher: The other paper that I provided tries to give an analysis of the viability audit data for primary schools, which I felt would be useful. When I was doing it, the primary draft area plans had still not been produced. The paper covers a range of areas and looks at the data that are available through the viability audit, but it was supplemented for the analysis using some information from the Department's website. The next section of the paper looks at the demographics of the schools, the distribution of management types, the social patterns in relation to free school meals and the proportion of pupils with special educational needs, and how those are distributed across the different management types and areas. The main part of the paper looks at some of the stress levels, as identified in the viability audit. Based on the available data, I can say that controlled primary schools are more likely to suffer attainment stress, whereas maintained Catholic schools are significantly less likely to suffer attainment stress. As I said, that is based on the data that were used for the report.

The main problem, in some senses, for formal intervention relates to the maintained other category of schools, which is largely the Irish-medium schools. They are statistically more likely to be in formal intervention than the other school types.

Enrolment stress is the big area of challenge or stress facing the primary sector. Again, the maintained other Irish-medium schools are more likely to suffer enrolment stress, though that is probably a consequence of the previous conditions that were put in place to allow Irish-medium schools to develop where those relatively small numbers in respect of enrolment were allowed in order to enable them to get going. Those previous decisions structurally built in the current situation.

Forty-one per cent of rural schools are below the viability level, as defined by the Department, in comparison with 23% of urban schools. That reflects the situation, which is not, I suppose, that surprising, and it is reflected in some of the data looking at distribution of schools by size across Northern Ireland.

In relation to the financial data, 47% of the schools are in deficit and 53% are in surplus, but only 8% face financial stress, as defined in the viability audit data. Financial stress is not linked to attainment stress, but there is a link of sorts to enrolment data, particularly with small schools. One of the things that comes out of the analysis is that the financial situation of small schools varies considerably, and a range of other local factors will come into that.

That provides a picture of the situation facing primary schools, which was reflected to some extent in the draft area plan reports for primary schools. There was a difference in that the draft area reports came out later, so they were able to use some more updated information; nevertheless, the patterns are broadly the same.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Tony. The information that you gave us is a very useful and timely overview of all the available information that is out there. There is one thing that the system does not lack, which is information. Various types of information is presented to us.

The Minister is coming at 3.30 pm, and we will have specific questions for him because the policy directive of all this is key to how the future will be shaped, but on the basis of what you see in relation to the area plans and the point that you make around attainment and enrolment, it is an important correlation because there seems to be a view out there that, if you get to a certain size in a school, whether it be primary or post-primary, you become educationally unviable. If you get to a very small number, there is no doubt that you will have difficulties and challenges, but it brings in this arbitrary figure, which is a problem for all of us in all our constituencies, where Bain set the figures of 105 and 500. The figure of 500 has become, by and large, irrelevant because in the area plans in the post-primary sector, we are looking at schools that have in excess of 800 pupils. We had an area planning event here some weeks ago, and it was very interesting that the maintained sector through CCMS now believes that, although it is advantageous and right to go beyond Bain and the figure of 500, it is something that needs to be resisted, and they have to go below 105 to 84, which is the figure that has

now been bandied around. In the evidence that you have and all the analysis of it, is there an optimum number that is a more reliable guide than 105, particularly in respect of primary schools?

Professor Gallagher: I do not think that I have data that allows you to say that a particular number is best. It probably relates to what is seen as an appropriate level of classes and year groups. Part of the rationale for the figure of 84 is that it allows for composite classes of no more than two year bands. There is a certain logic to that.

The broader point that comes through in the analysis is that the prior assumption that seemed to play a role at the start of this process, which was the simple correlation that small schools could not provide an educationally viable environment whereas large schools therefore did, does not stack up when you look at the evidence. That is the main point. Issues that relate to educational quality are to do with things other than simply school size. It may well be that issues around quality of teachers and quality of leadership are much more important. That is the key point.

The Chairperson: Some of the diagrams in the papers are very useful in giving us a sense of what the school estate would look like if there was to be a change, particularly in relation to the common funding formula.

People know my personal views; they know how critical I am of the Department. Sometimes, we accuse it of not being strategic in its approach to these things. In this instance, however, it has been very strategic. We cannot rationalise the school estate unless there is a fundamental change in the way in which money is distributed to the schools.

We have a situation in which some schools have huge deficits while others have huge surpluses. There could be a deficit of something in the region of £9 million but a surplus of £11 million in the system. I know that the Department's get-out-of-jail card is to say that it has 1,200 management types, which is the reason why it needs the Education and Skills Authority (ESA), Utopia and all those things, but it has been mismanaging this process now for all these years and has allowed schools to get into that position. Is there, in Sir Rob's report, a real challenge to the issue, particularly with the removal of the small schools factor? Is it not simply saying that it will be taking money from one group of schools in order to distribute it to another group of schools, which is not really dealing with the problem?

Professor Gallagher: The one significant consequence of removing small schools protection is that it removes the situation whereby schools with declining rolls automatically fall into small groups protection and are, therefore, kept alive artificially, in some senses. Presumably, that was the intent. It was also presumably why the extra caveat was put in to allow a school that fell below the enrolment level to make a case for continuing, but to do so as an exceptional circumstance.

The more striking thing about the report on the common funding formula is that, although finance is one of the policy levers that is available to encourage appropriate sorts of behaviours, what is being proposed is that finance should be used in a limited way, focused only on school size. Virtually every other aspect of using finance as a lever to encourage certain things to happen did not seem to be there. In fact, the report suggested removing most of those.

If you want to try to strategically manage the system, finance is one of the key things that you can use to try to do that, but it seemed to have a very specific and narrow focus.

Mr Kinahan: Thanks very much, Tony, for this very informative document. I was going to ask whether Tony could redo the figures for us for next time, so as to include a grammar school breakdown.

The Chairperson: Yes, I think that could be arranged.

Mr Kinahan: The financing of area planning has always bothered me. You talked to us about funding schools, capital funding, selling sites and changing things round. Is there any indication of how we can fund that?

Professor Gallagher: No data was provided as part of the viability audit process that looked at the capital issues. There was a sort of assumption in the process that consolidating the system, particularly around post-primary schools, would free up land that could be sold in order to help to fund other things, though the value of land is considerably less than it was. In practice, the only capacity that you had to try to save money was to reduce the number of teachers in the system. Otherwise, it

is very difficult to see how consolidation would save money, because the same number of pupils have to be taught, and once you go above a certain size, there is absolutely no correlation between school size and per pupil cost.

Mr Kinahan: It is one of the things that bothers me.

You touched on my second question when you were talking about innovative ideas. We are leaving it all to the schools to come up with the ideas. Do you think that any system will come into place to suggest ideas to them? There are lots of different ways out there, but we are leaving it to them to come up with the ideas instead of leading them.

Professor Gallagher: Given that such a varied set of approaches is being devolved to local areas and it is being left very much to local communities to come forward with suggestions, it seems to me that there is a good case for trying to have some sort of enabling process that offers people some indication of the options that could be available and their consequences so that, when people express preferences, they have an informed basis on which to do so. The process up to now has been very much top-down and has been presented to people, but given the situation that we are in, there is a strong case for trying to do something to enable that local decision-making.

The Chairperson: The Minister has arrived, and I do not want to run over. Are there any other pressing questions? Tony, thank you very much.