



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Programme for Government/Business Plan:
DE Briefing

11 September 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:

Mrs Katrina Godfrey	Department of Education
Dr David Hughes	Department of Education
Mr John McGrath	Department of Education

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr John McGrath, deputy secretary of the Department; Katrina Godfrey, director of planning and performance management; and David Hughes, director of curriculum, qualifications and standards. You are very welcome to the Committee. John, please make some opening comments and then we will take questions from members.

Mr John McGrath (Department of Education): We welcome the opportunity to brief the Committee on progress with the Department of Education (DE) Programme for Government (PFG) commitments and the Department's business plan. I will open with a high-level update on both.

I turn first to the Programme for Government commitments. We are the lead Department for eight of the Programme for Government commitments. Each commitment has a series of milestone targets spanning the Programme for Government period to 2015. As the Committee knows, the Department has agreed detailed delivery plans for its PFG commitments. We also provide quarterly reports to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) on the Department's progress in delivering them. The progress reports are also shared with the Committee. Our letter of 6 August 2013 provided the Committee with updates on our progress at the end of June, which was the end of the first quarter.

Overall, we believe that we are making good progress on the commitments related to raising standards, preschool, shared education and the Lisanelly campus. The Committee is well aware that the pace of progress on the Education Bill means some likely slippage on the 2013 timescale for the

Education and Skills Authority (ESA). It is fair to say, however, that there are particular challenges relating to the commitment to raise attainment levels at GCSE for our disadvantaged pupils. We deliberately set an ambitious target to match our ambition — and the Minister's ambition — for those young people. Progress is being made, but the Minister is keen to see its pace increase significantly, so we are working hard to put in place additional measures and David will be able to elaborate on that as we proceed.

Turning to the Department's business plan, the Committee will recall that, last autumn, we published the corporate plan for education, which set out the Minister's strategic priorities for our education service. Our own departmental business plan flows directly from that document, and the corporate plan itself flows from the Programme for Government. And then, equally, the business plans of the boards, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the other bodies that we fund flow from our business plan. So, it is a vertically integrated system from the Programme for Government down to our non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) and, ultimately, to schools and more widely to early years and youth services.

At the end of the year, we conducted a review of our progress in delivering the business plan targets that we set for the 2012-13 financial year. Again, our letter of 1 August provided full details of that progress to the Committee. We will be engaging in a similar process at the end of the current year. Additionally, we expect all our funded bodies to be equally transparent in publishing, after the year-end, details of their progress in delivering their business plan targets.

At this stage, I will draw a line. I am conscious that the Committee has a number of questions. I am happy to take those and any comments.

The Chairperson: Thank you, John. The difficulty that we have with this is where we start. Unfortunately, we have allocated ourselves only an hour. I have questions enough to keep us going for an hour, but I do not want to bore everybody else as I normally do. There is a raft of issues in there, and it opens up a considerable number of questions. We are dealing with all the issues in relation to the Department, so it is a pretty extensive coverage of what has been set out.

Mr McGrath: We are conscious of that ourselves. We said that earlier. Every bit of our business is here.

The Chairperson: Yes, and, as I was just saying to the Committee Clerk before the commencement of the meeting, we may consider giving it more time after today. In fairness to members and the Department, we need to tease out a lot more of these issues. So, we may revisit our work programme, in conjunction with the Department, and try to come back on this.

I will make a start. In the summer, the Department advised us of the GCSE results and suggested that the targets for improvement in attainment are likely to be achieved in 2014-15. In respect of how we achieve improvement in GCSEs, we seem to have a situation where we have a set of figures from the Department that says one thing and a set from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) that says something else. For example, the Department sets it on the basis of school leavers. Of course, we need to remember that school leavers could be two years on from getting their GCSE results because they could have gone on to do A levels. When we look at the figures, we see that the validated data for 2011-12 shows an attainment level of 62%. That is above the target for 2013, which was 61%, and it is a significant improvement on the figure for 2010-11, which was 59.5%. Now, that contrasts with the figures that NISRA gave us, because NISRA's statistical press release that was issued in March 2013 for examination performance in schools gives data for all the year 12 pupils taking their GCSEs in 2011-12. That shows only 60.1% of all year 12 pupils in 2011-12 attaining five good GCSEs including English and maths, and there was no improvement on the previous year. I wrote to NISRA and asked it about that, because I had two sets of statistical analysis that differed, but I am not much wiser for having received the reply. I do not want to be disrespectful to NISRA or the Department, but could someone tell us which figures are the ones that we can use to say that genuine progress has been made and we have fair and accurate figures for attainment?

Mr McGrath: I will ask Katrina to lead on that, as she has responsibility for statistics in the Department.

Mrs Katrina Godfrey (Department of Education): First, I want to make the point that both sets of data that you spoke of have been produced by NISRA. One relates to school leavers, as you said,

and one is the year 12 data. We use the school leavers data as the benchmark. It is very important when setting targets that you publish, at the outset, the benchmark against which you are measuring those targets, and we have been very clear that we always use the school leavers data. There are a couple of reasons for that. First, the school leavers data counts every child. Secondly, the summary of annual examination results (SAER) data, which is for year 12s and year 14s, as I understand it, counts only the children who were entered for examinations. So, the school leavers data gives us a better sense of how the system is performing. That is why our benchmarks are always taken from the school leavers data. You will see very clearly that we use and are very transparent about saying that we set targets based on school leavers data. That is our benchmark; that is how we measure our progress against the target. There should not be any confusion about that because we always say it. The Programme for Government delivery plan, for example, requires us to have a measurement annex that explains what benchmark and what data source we are using, and we use school leavers.

The Chairperson: Katrina, I do not want to fall out with statisticians, but, in simple layman's terms, which of the two figures is right? That is all we want to know, because there is a discrepancy in the attainment figures. There is also a discrepancy in the statistical information supplied by NISRA relating to five good GCSEs including English and maths for year 12, free-school-meal pupils. That figure was 36.4%, yet the Department said that it was 34.1%. Again, which of those two figures is right?

Mrs Godfrey: It should be very clear, because when we set a target —

The Chairperson: But it is not. That is the problem: it is not very clear.

Mrs Godfrey: When we set a target, we set it against a measurement source. The measurement source is the school leavers survey; the target is measured against performance in the school leavers survey. So, that is absolutely clear. As I said, the school leavers survey has the advantage that it counts all our pupils, not just those entered for examinations. We think that that is a better indicator. We have absolute transparency in that we say, when we are setting a target, that it relates to school leavers and we measure it with the school leavers survey, which is a national statistics product validated under the legislation that relates to official statistics.

The Chairperson: So, from the Department's figures, can we then conclude that year 12 data shows no improvement in GCSE attainment?

Mrs Godfrey: I have not brought the year 12 data with me, but we can confirm that with the Committee Clerk afterwards. What I can say is that the targets are set in relation to school leavers. Year 12 is an important milestone, and David can say a little bit more about how we use those milestones to make sure that there is the necessary traction, but the starting point is that the targets are set with reference to school leavers because we think that that is a more transparent and robust means of doing it. David, do you want to pick up on that point?

Dr David Hughes (Department of Education): Yes. If it is a question of which set of data you want to pay more attention to, I think that it is worth bearing in mind the reason why the Department uses the school leavers data. As Katrina said, it is because it counts all school leavers, including those who may not have sat five GCSEs. It will count those who are sitting their qualifications again and are not in year 12. So, it is a better measure of the system, rather than just performance in the set of exams taken that summer, in effect. It is a good system measure because it is a fairer count of what has been achieved in the system as a whole. That is why the Department uses those for the headline measures.

The Chairperson: What conversations does the Department have with NISRA about the publication of data?

Mrs Godfrey: The Department's statisticians are NISRA statisticians. They take full responsibility for publishing the data in line with the NISRA requirements, the code of practice for official statistics and the legislation that relates to national statistics. All of those figures are published under the auspices of NISRA by professional statisticians working to that code and that legislation.

The Chairperson: Other members may want to come back to that, but it is an issue of concern that, I think, is still open to ambiguity.

Mr McGrath: The point that Katrina made is that we use the school leaver data. The baseline position for the Programme for Government is derived from the school leaver data and performance is then drawn from the school leaver data, and that is consistent the whole way through. To return to the stats, we have been very clear and unambiguous where we are measuring ourselves. If you take that as read, it is not ambiguous at all. With regard to your point, I grant you that the figures show that there is not significant progress. The baseline was 60.1%, and it is still 60.1%, which, I think, is the point that you are making.

The Chairperson: Yes, exactly.

Mr McGrath: However, we are being very clear that that is the baseline, and that is where we are.

The Chairperson: Katrina said that she has not brought the figures with her, and I think that, for some reason, there is an issue in the Department about validating figures. However, have we any indication of where we are this year?

Mrs Godfrey: No, Chair, it is simply too early to say. Obviously, schools get their results, but they get them from a wide number of awarding bodies, and that takes a bit of time. There is quite a significant lag time in getting some of the information in from the different awarding organisations, and then also carrying out the equalisation. You will be conscious that there will be qualifications other than GCSEs that pupils study. We have to make sure that they are properly counted as equivalents to make sure that every pupil's achievements are properly recognised, so that is a process. The next summary of annual examination results data should be published in November.

The Chairperson: Before we go to members, I will move on to another issue, which is levels of progression. I noticed that the Department has not yet set targets for communications and using maths attainment. I could be tongue-in-cheek and say that there would be nothing new in that — the Department not setting targets on communications. However, I will resist. Nevertheless, we are being told that the reason why this issue cannot be achieved is because of action by teachers. Is it not more the case that it is because there is no buy-in from teachers as to the value and the worth of what they are being asked to do? David knows that primary school principals in my constituency met the Department and expressed grave concern about the process relating to levels of attainment, and yet we are now told by the Department that it has not even set the targets for communications and using maths attainments at Key Stage 2 and 3 in 2012-13 and 2013-14, and it tries to use some action that teachers are taking as the reason why we are not making progress in this. What is the Department's view on levels of progression? We were told that CCEA was to conduct a review of levels of progression. Do we know where that is at? Will a new baseline for assessment be developed from this year on an ongoing basis? Where are we at?

Dr Hughes: There are a number of issues. First, you mentioned the CCEA review of the experience in the last academic year. That was conducted, and CCEA's report has gone to and is with the Minister. He is paying very close attention to that matter with the intention of making it very clear what the arrangements are for this starting academic year. The other point is about setting the targets for forthcoming years, and that has always been the case. Even if the entire teaching profession had embraced the levels of progression enthusiastically last year, we would still be saying that we will not have set targets for future years until we have a baseline and a clear indication of how the targets should be set. We have to set targets on the basis of a clear evidential base, and that has always been the case. It is not that the Department's position has changed on that: that has always been the case.

The Chairperson: But, David, are we not in a situation where you are informing us that CCEA carried out a review, the recommendations are with the Minister for this academic year, and we are now sitting at the second or third week into the school year and teachers still do not know what they are expected to be judged against? Is that not indicative of the way in which teachers are thrown into this — I will say it as I think it is — mess? No work has been done with the teachers to bring forward an agreed position on how this is done. More importantly, it is about the worth and the value of what they are being asked to do, because they are not convinced that this will give them information that they can give to a parent and say that they can stand over it. We have seen correspondence from teachers who have written to parents and told them that they cannot stand over that.

Dr Hughes: First, to come back to the point that you made at the beginning, a lot of work has been done with teachers in workshops that the Department and CCEA have taken with teachers, and I

appreciate that those have been very important forums to clearly hear the message from teachers about the experience last year. There are a number of key points that teachers and principals are making about the end of key stage assessment arrangements and the levels of progression. They all need to be taken on board. The teachers' understanding of the process and the arrangements and the value of those assessments at the end of each key stage is very important. It also has to be taken into consideration that assessment is used for accountability purposes, which, I am sure the Committee will be aware, is important as well. Those different purposes of having that data need to be balanced against each other and need to be weighed up.

The Chairperson: So, when do we expect to see some direction from the Department and the Minister to schools that tells them what they are now going to do?

The other point is this: how is the Department dealing with the ongoing teacher union action on this matter? It seems as though that is all clouded in some sort of a mist, but this is a very serious issue for schools and parents.

Dr Hughes: The first point that I can make is that colleagues and I are meeting the Minister on that very subject tomorrow afternoon. We anticipate that a clear position on this coming year is imminent.

The Chairperson: John, what comment do you want to make about the ongoing teacher action?

Mr McGrath: I do not think that I have too much more to add to what David said. Industrial action is something that we would wish not to have. Clearly, unions have the right to decide what they wish to do on this issue. It has been a running sore for some time, and we would hope to work its way out of the system.

The Chairperson: I have just one brief point, and that is about teaching training and the education workforce. When we go through the paper — the business plan, in particular — we see what has been achieved, substantially achieved, likely to be achieved but with some delay, not achieved or status pending. My view of education is that a good workforce gives you good outcomes, leadership and all those things that we all say are what we want to achieve. However, when we come to the school workforce review, the paper states that it is likely to be achieved but with some delay; when we come to underperforming principals, it states that it is likely to be achieved but with some delay; when we come to underperforming teachers, it states that it is likely to be achieved but with some delay; when we come to a model for the provision of professional development, it states that it is likely to be achieved but with some delay; when we come to the management of teacher attendance, it states that it is likely to be achieved but with some delay; and when we come to the way forward for teacher education, it states that it is likely to be achieved but with some delay. What attention are we giving to our teachers to try to ensure that the things that are core and central to ensuring that they have the relevant tools to teach our children are being done when that is the case for six out of seven commitments? It is not a very good statistic.

Mr McGrath: The Minister has flagged up the importance of issues with the workforce, school leadership and professional development, and he highlighted the fact that those are among the next key pieces of the jigsaw. Most of the key policies are in place. The school and the classroom are the focal places in which to drive up standards, so weaknesses in school leadership and management and leadership issues need to be addressed. Chair, you flagged up what corporate goal 3 states about the workforce. You mentioned commitments likely to be achieved with some delay, but, in fact, a number of them have now been achieved. There is a significant workload on the workforce side that we are struggling to handle. A number of issues with pay and pay remits have created complications that we need to deal with. We will bring forward the strategy on leadership and professional development to set a context in which to deal with those issues. That is uppermost in the Minister's mind and, indeed, across the Department, because, to go back to the most recent chief inspector's report, we continue to have significant weaknesses in school leadership. That has been flagged up over the past 10 years, so we are not getting traction in that area. If we do not get significant traction on that piece of the jigsaw, we will not be able to achieve the targets that we have set for raising standards in this Programme for Government and beyond.

You are right; I agree with you that it is a central and important area. We would like to have seen more progress, but we are in close dialogue with the trade unions. We do not always agree on the route to improving school leadership, but I do not think that there is any doubt that the detail in successive chief inspector's reports shows that we have an issue there to deal with, and we cannot keep pushing it in front of us.

The Chairperson: I understand the issues with the joint working party (JWP) and that the discussions and negotiations have to go on. However, in the end-year report, the Department comments on the school workforce review:

"Whilst work is ongoing the target date will not be met as WPT is addressing other immediate priorities; the parameters for Pay Remits have continued to change through the year with designation of 4 new NDPBs and VG/GMI schools designated as public bodies."

It continues:

"Additional resource is being sourced and a new team will be established in the 2013-14 business planning year to manage pay remit/honoraria workload, after which full focus in WPT will be on the review."

What does that mean? Does that mean that you are establishing another group to look at the issue? Can you clarify what is meant by:

"Additional resource is being sourced and a new team will be established"?

Mr McGrath: That means that the team originally responsible for doing work on the school workforce review has become side-routed into dealing with a number of issues on pay remits, which came up over the past two years. The urgent overtakes the important, and issues arising from irregular payments had to be dealt with. We also have to bring voluntary grammars and grant-maintained integrated schools (GMI) into the ambit of the pay remit, which is a huge piece of work. The team that was supposed to deal with the workforce review had to deal with that as an urgent priority. We have now set up a specific team to deal with the pay remit to free up the team that was originally supposed to do the workforce review and take that ahead. That is what is being said, albeit in more tortuous language, perhaps.

Mr Lunn: I will reverse course here. I want to ask you about commitment 70, which is significantly to progress work on the Lisanelly shared education campus. It is hard to argue whether or not that commitment is being met. "Significantly progress" could mean a lot of things. The comment in our paper that worries me is that:

"The Department has identified long term financial commitment to the site (£120m over 5-10 years from 2015) as a significant (level 4) risk."

A level 4 risk means that there is strong probability of a commitment not being achieved, with only a limited chance of reversal. What does that mean for our confidence that Lisanelly will move forward in anywhere near the projected timescale?

Mr McGrath: The delivery plans are, rightly, rigorous. We are supposed to flag up likely risks, so we include them. These are snapshots in time for last year's business plan and the Programme for Government commitment. As we sit here today, the Lisanelly venture is in a very positive place. The outline business case has been cleared. Within that, the individual business case for the replacement of Arvalee special school has been cleared, and that work is proceeding, as will the link demolition on the site, so, effectively, the first phase of Lisanelly is now proceeding. We are carrying out a vested survey of the site, and demolition in some areas will begin in a matter of weeks.

The Minister is ready to make a financial commitment for the main funding of Lisanelly over the years ahead. We have a memorandum of understanding with the six schools, which was finished before the summer, and liaison and coordination with the schools will go up a measure now that the new school term has started. We will put in place a programme delivery team to take forward this venture of £120 million or £130 million, and before long we will go out for the professional services design contract, which will be worth £10 million or £11 million. In our view, we are now moving into a delivery, rather than a debating, phase on Lisanelly.

Mr Lunn: That is why I said that it is hard to argue that there is significant progress. That simply jars with another comment that there is a very significant risk to the financial commitment to the site. Those risk ratings go from "minimal impact" to:

"commitment immediately not achieved with no possibility of reversal".

Lisanelly is graded is just one step behind that:

"strong probability of the commitment not being achieved with only limited chance of reversal".

I know that we could argue about that for some time. However, I will move on. The big announcement before recess on Together: Building a United Community (TBUC) stated that there were to be 10 of those projects. Lisanelly is costing £120 million — if it ever stays within budget. Fair enough; I hope that it does and that it progresses. However, 10 such projects on the same scale would make a nonsense of the financial commitment in TBUC.

Mr McGrath: The commitment is to have 10 more shared campuses on the go within five years. It does not specify, and nor should it, that there will be 10 on the same scale, because we need to work according to circumstances. Lisanelly is probably unique. I doubt whether there is anywhere else in Northern Ireland with a site of that dimension. We are working on that programme for shared campuses. The work is at an early stage, but it will have some flexibility on scale and what constitutes a campus. Subject to ministerial agreement, we will look for expressions of interest. Indeed, the ink was hardly dry on the TBUC document when bids were coming in. You will know of a number of places where there is potential, but we will not go and say, "Here is a blueprint that you must fit within", because, whether it is Armagh, Limavady or Ballycastle, there are things to encourage a shared campus, but perhaps we will be fairly creative about what we define as a campus in some cases.

Mr Lunn: Given what was revealed in that document, I think it fair to say that, in some departmental situations, it came as a bit of a surprise to the Minister, and I have a feeling that, in this case, the Minister of Education may not have been totally consulted. Have you any comment on that?

Mr McGrath: Whether the Minister was surprised or not, Trevor, I think that that is a matter for you to ask the Minister.

Mr Lunn: I will.

Mr McGrath: You will know that there are a number of ideas that predate that, and discussions are going on in different venues around the North anyway. The issue will be whether we can harness those to fit the ambitions to share in the TBUC document. However, we are very clear that we also want to drive forward initiatives, which are things that we want to do anyway. The area planning process will identify the pattern of schools that we want. The shared campus initiative will be a way of adding to that; it will not be instead of it. We will not take forward as shared campuses schools that we do not believe are part of the future.

Mr Lunn: There is a commitment to provide at least one year of preschool education for every family who wants it. To my mind, that is almost achieved. I give the Department considerable credit for the progress that it has made in that respect. However, a comment in our paper — I do not know whether you have it — is about funded integrated preschool places. It states that there are only 735, and those are heavily oversubscribed. The comment that catches my eye is that:

"DE has turned down some proposals for increases in integrated preschool provision. The Department argued that preschool provision is not sectoral."

Is the Department really saying that a preschool unit attached to a controlled school is not part of the controlled sector?

Mr McGrath: This is a difficult issue, Trevor. I know that the issue of access to integrated preschool also works its way through the system. The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) would argue that that means that there are fewer kids who go into the integrated sector from the start, and, therefore, you are dampening post-primary demand, ultimately. We will continue to look at the issue. Policy on early years provision is continuing to develop. For the Department, a number of years ago, early years provision was, basically, a bit of an add-on to the school system. The Minister's

view now is that early years provision is fundamental to raising standards and developing children for life, so preschool is the first part of the education system.

Mr Lunn: Yes, and the Department's legal requirement to encourage and facilitate integrated education applies to preschool as well.

You did not answer my question. Does the Department regard preschool provision as non-sectoral? That amazes me.

Mr McGrath: We will look at that because of the duties that the Department has in Irish-medium and integrated education, and the previous Treacy judgement. A number of issues are likely to be looked at through a different prism. I cannot, at this moment, say whether that will change the approach taken. However, I know that there is an issue and that an argument has been made. It is not unreasonable for advocates to make the case that, because there is that duty and because it has been clarified to some extent by the Treacy judgement, approaches in the past may need to be revisited, and we may well do that.

Mr Lunn: Our paper continues:

"Thus when an integrated school seeks to provide or increase provision of preschool places, the proposal is considered in the light of all preschool provision in the area regardless of the sector."

Mr McGrath: That is how we do it now.

Mr Lunn: That is not realistic. Let us say that a maintained school has a preschool unit and wants to increase its capacity: does the Department really take into account the amount of preschool provision available in controlled schools in the locality?

Mr McGrath: We take into account all provision. Remember, when we talk about preschool, we are not talking about just nursery education; we are talking about what was previously described as playgroup provision in the voluntary sector, which is non-sectoral. Trying to plan preschool provision is highly complex, which is why there are some glitches: we have enough provision but not necessarily in the right place, so there is some fine-tuning. As you say, we are close to being able to deliver for everybody. It is a very difficult education economy to manage because there are so many providers and there are sectoral issues. In addition to it being complex, we still have to work on the basis that there are only so many children in the system. Putting more children in somewhere means working out where you will take them from.

Mr Lunn: Yes, I did not want to —

The Chairperson: Would an early years policy be helpful? I do not know. Maybe that is too obvious.

Mr McGrath: We have an early years policy. That is a radical suggestion, Chair.

The Chairperson: It is. It has been around since 2000.

Mr Lunn: Chair, I think that I may have given the Department too much praise on this. The point is that the overall figure is 20,000-odd. The number of dissatisfied parents has now reduced to the lowest level that I can remember. That is why I praised you, but this sector is, frankly, losing out. I will not say that it is being victimised, though that could be the case, but it is losing out. NICIE's concern, as you identified, is that children are, largely, being lost to the integrated sector, and that situation builds.

Mr McGrath: I said that that was the contention; I was not necessarily agreeing with it. On that assumption, a child who goes to an "integrated preschool" will stay in integrated education throughout. That would need some validation. There are leakages in and out of different sectors as children go through education.

Mr Lunn: I am finished now, Chairman. Everything needs validation, but, if parents take the decision to send their nursery-age children to an integrated school, it would not be too hard to validate their long-term intention, and that is where the loss is.

Mrs Dobson: I agree with your earlier comments, Chair. It is difficult to know where to start with this. I will follow on from Trevor's comment on preschool, which is commitment 43. In your risk assessment, you grade the impact of:

"Low public confidence in the programme because of placement difficulties."

as just 1 out of 5. Yet, every year, I — as, I am sure, do many other members of the Committee — receive strong complaints through our offices, mainly from working parents who are unable to get places for their children. I put it to you, John, that they do not have "low" confidence in the programme; many have no confidence in it. Why do you grade the impact of low confidence at the lowest level? It makes it seem as though the Department is not worried about low public confidence.

Mr McGrath: No. What we are doing here, we do very honestly. We ask what the risks are. We say that there is a risk to the delivery of this target because of low public confidence. We say that the likely impact is low, and the reality is that that is true because we are, effectively, near enough to delivering the target. So the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

Mrs Dobson: Is the proof of the pudding not in the number of parents who completely drop out of the system every year because of a total lack of confidence when they do not get places? You say in your update that 99.8% of children obtained a funded preschool place, but, crucially, that is only parents who have continued to engage with the process. We all know how many drop out. So this process has been a problem year-on-year. Why has there been no change in that? I ask you again: why did you grade this goal as achieved in another part of the document when children are either being turned away or offered places miles from home? Surely you realise the extent of exasperation felt every single year?

Mr McGrath: Surely the issue is that all this paperwork is about the commitment. It is all geared towards the Programme for Government commitment:

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

If some families — for good reasons, such as domestic circumstances or whatever — decide not to continue in the process, that is their choice. We do our best. Some families drop out and then come back in at the end, but we do our best to provide it for those families who want it, which means that they have to stick in the system for long enough.

Mrs Dobson: A lot of families want it but are exasperated by the system when offered places miles and miles from home. If some ludicrous suggestion is made, they drop out.

Mr McGrath: I think it important that we are talking about an overall target, and we are at 99.8%. OK, some people drop out, but that figure reflects colossal progress in recent years. A target of delivering a service to everyone who wants it is incredibly ambitious. In the same location, there will always be some who judge an offered preschool place as local and others who deem it too far away. There will always be glitches.

I think that what the Department and the wider system have done in recent years is very impressive. In order to get a better, near-perfect match between the distribution of places and people's preferences, there is still fine-tuning to be done to deal with the sorts of issues that you talk about, Jo-Anne. Perfection is beyond this and most Departments.

Mrs Dobson: There is certainly little regard for the people who drop out through sheer frustration. You said that the target was "ambitious", but it is a Programme for Government commitment that every child should get a place and no one should be turned away.

Mr McGrath: It is available to every family who wants it, but some families drop out of the system, and, as I said, it may be for good reason —

Mrs Dobson: They still want a place. They drop out through sheer frustration.

Mr McGrath: This is how we define a commitment. We are doing our absolute best in this area and will continue to try to fine-tune and make adjustments to the pattern so that it more closely reflects what people want and where. We are not saying, "That is it. It is done, it is over." We will keep fine-

tuning, but it is an incredibly difficult process to match 20-000-odd children each year to parents' preferences. It has to be said that, in many cases, parents' preferences may well be dictated by their work patterns, which are beyond what we can cater for. We have to provide preschool education, not provide day care to suit people's domestic commitments. Undoubtedly, some people, if they do not get the offer that they would like, decide that they will not stick with it, and they make their own arrangements. We have to cater for that. It is a free country, and people are entitled to do that.

Mrs Dobson: To me, it shows little regard for public confidence and parents who do not get a place for their child. You mentioned parents who receive an offer, but, if they are living in Banbridge and are offered a place in Lisburn or Newry, it is hardly feasible for them to take up that offer. I do not think that we will agree on this, John, but I know that, year-on-year, the parents who come to me —

Mr McGrath: Jo-Anne, I will not argue. Some parents who aspire to a place in a particular area or in a preschool adjacent to them who may well have ended up disappointed. It is difficult to make 100% of the people happy 100% of the time. We are working on it, but I will stress that, if you look at the risk register, we are honest. We include the risks, as we are supposed to do, so we recognise that there could be an issue of public confidence. We have to make our assessment, which will be challenged on the probability of the risk and the impact of it. We are very open about that.

The results suggest that the impact level is fair enough and accurate, and the probability is also accurate. We spend a lot of time on this work because the world in which we now live requires a risk register for every plan. Our being honest and robust about it leads to an exchange such as this with observers such as you. Why did you include the risk of "low public confidence"? We could be less transparent and say that there is no risk there because everybody has full confidence, but we are being honest because, as you rightly say, there are people —

Mrs Dobson: I would have assessed low public confidence as being a far higher risk.

I will move on quickly to a supplementary, Chair. You said that the results of a review of the process are being analysed. When are we likely to see those, and can you give us any indication at this stage of what the review is likely to recommend?

Mrs Godfrey: I do not have a precise date, Jo-Anne, but I can follow up on it and inform the Clerk. Picking up on the point that you made to John, I reiterate that we are not complacent about this. The number of parents falling out of the process went down considerably last year from the year before, and this year from last year, so we know that we are making progress. We have 22,500 kids, 99.8% of whom are being placed, so I think that the figures speak for themselves. We are not complacent. A survey has tried to identify the reasons why that small number of parents do not engage all the way through, and that will be really important, as John said, in informing the next stage of the work.

Mrs Dobson: OK. Katrina, you may be able to clear this up. I understand that there is currently a moratorium on the funding for a new full-time preschool provision. Is that correct?

Mr McGrath: No, I do not think that there is a moratorium. The Minister will publish 'Learning to Learn — A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning'. In looking at the mixed pattern of places that we have for nursery, playgroups, full-time and part-time, we have been determining whether that is the appropriate mix to have, whether there is a case for having a consistent offer, rather than that mix, and whether coming to a view on that is the right thing to do before starting to increasing provision, particularly of full-time places.

Mrs Dobson: Is it the Department's wish that the preschool education programme (PSEP) provision will be mainly part-time?

Mr McGrath: That will come out of 'Learning to Learn'.

Mrs Godfrey: We have undertaken some fairly significant and widespread research into that. The evidence does not suggest any additional educational benefits from full-time compared with part-time.

Mrs Dobson: Katrina, it would be very useful to have more detail on how the Department currently manages future preschool demand. I think that it should be community-led rather than leadership-led. As you know, I have raised concerns about vastly oversubscribed areas and how that situation is dealt

with. How are you future-proofing this against, for example, birth rates? Can you provide any analysis of that?

Mrs Godfrey: That is monitored very carefully with NISRA at headquarters level. We then get access to a lot of data, which helps in the modelling of population changes. I think that that is normally at district council area level. That gives us information on predictions over a period so that we can start to plan. A lot of that feeds on into the area of planning work as well, because there are changes in demography. We are still seeing a decline in post-primary. We are seeing a stabilisation, and, in some years, peaks and increases. They are not evenly scattered across Northern Ireland. That is why we have to take it down to district council level, because the picture from council area to council area will be quite different. That information is gathered and shared with us and, I know, is a key part of some of the modelling done in the planning of provision in the estate.

Mr McGrath: As Katrina said, the pattern is not consistent across the North. The increase in births is marked in the Southern Board area, and that has worked its way through. It will then work its way through into primary school places. We watch that very closely.

It is important to make the point that full-time preschool places do not necessarily give any more educational benefit than part-time places. Frequently, increasing from part-time to full-time places means that more children are there full-time. That does not increase the spread; it just means that some children are there for longer each day. If there is no educational benefit from being there for longer in the day, it is debatable whether it is a good use of taxpayers' money for education purposes. It may be convenient for certain families, but that is not what the programme is there for. The argument about going from part-time to full-time is not as straightforward as it may seem.

The Chairperson: I will come back to this, John, but I want to mark this point now, and maybe the Department will give us an update. A review of early years was carried out. I understand that there have been some discussions about a report between the early years organisation and the Department. There was a draft report. I find this very unusual: a body is funded by the Department; the Department instigates a review of that arrangement; and the Department then allows the body to comment on the document before the Department publishes it.

Mr McGrath: Do you mean that the Department allows that same organisation to comment on it?

The Chairperson: Yes. There is a report on the early years organisation, which was given a contract in 2004 as a result of the expansion programme. On behalf of the Department, it delivers the school expansion programme and elements of early years provision. In 2012, the Department decided that, as it had not looked at the organisation since 2004, it would have a wee look at what was going on.

The Department produces a draft report, which has a number of inaccuracies. The Department then asks the organisation on which it is reporting for its comments. We are still waiting for that report — it has not seen the light of day. So we now have preschool provision that will either lose or receive no increase in its money because the Department changed the application rules so that having a surplus in a bank account, which could be as little as £9.00, means that there will be no more money. I am putting down the marker now that I believe that certain preschool provisions will be adversely affected as a result of what has not even come into the public domain yet.

Mr McGrath: I am not close to the detail of that, Chair.

The Chairperson: That is why I am just saying that; I want it to be noted.

Mr McGrath: I will make the point that, if we review or investigate some issue in an organisation and a draft report is produced, the normal convention is that you give it to that organisation and ask whether it is factually accurate.

The Chairperson: That is OK. That is all that I wanted to clarify.

Mr McGrath: Normally, there is that look. Otherwise, whether it is audit or external, natural justice suggests that you should say, "These are the conclusions", and then you would move to finalise it. It does not indicate any dilution of the rigour of the process, but it is fairer.

The Chairperson: An update or a paper on that whole process in the early years programme would be very helpful to inform the Committee.

Mr McGrath: If the Clerk picks up and writes to us, we will come back on that.

Mr Rogers: You are very welcome. I know that the Chair talked extensively about targets. To me, targets are useful only if they effect improvement. If you look at NISRA targets, you see that we are not making any improvement with year 12 students. I think that it is a bit of a sticking-plaster approach to use leaving school as a meaningful target. That is because the young people can come back in lower sixth and repeat their maths and English. If they fail again, they can come back, and so on. To me, the real problems that we have with literacy and numeracy are not being addressed. Although I welcome the extra teachers that were announced and that are now in place for the end of Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4, if we are really going to improve, we have to address numeracy and literacy at an earlier stage. If we take post-primary level, for example, that needs to be addressed as soon the pupils come in. If a child comes in with a reading age of eight, it is a bit late to put in a bit of extra help when they are in year 12. So, that is my comment on that. I agree with what the Chair said.

Teachers' action was talked about. Why are we in the situation where a letter has come out from the Department stating that teachers will not get their increments in September?

Mr McGrath: I will deal with your comments in reverse order if you want, and David might want to say something about literacy and numeracy in general. The issue about teachers' increments is that, first of all, all pay progression has to be approved under executive pay policy by the Finance Minister. The vehicle for that is that you produce a pay remit, which goes to DFP for approval and has to be signed off by the Finance Minister. In normal years, that remit would include both incremental rises and whatever the pay award would be. That has to be kept within the envelope of public sector pay policy. As you know, there has been a freeze in teachers' pay for the past couple of years. So, this year, to produce the normal remit, we have put in the incremental data and the pay award.

Unfortunately, the process to determine an agreed pay award has barely begun. Indeed, teaching unions submitted their claim only this week. That meant, therefore, that we could not get approval from DFP for the incremental element of it because it was being delayed by the pay award element. At the Minister's behest, we have exceptionally agreed with DFP that we will split the normal remit in two. We will produce urgently a remit that covers the increments and get approval for that. When the pay award is determined, we will get approval for that, with both of them having added up and still staying within the overall envelope. That has meant, unfortunately, that the increments that are normally due in September will not be paid. However, the hope is that we will catch up by October.

Mr Rogers: When you were in a situation where you saw that you had not received claims from the unions, etc, could that not have been decoupled earlier, in July or August, so that teachers got their increments?

Mr McGrath: With hindsight, that is a fair question. We are going to have a look into that. This is not meant as any criticism; it is just a fact, but DFP's standing approach to date is that it tends to want pay remits to be integrated. Earlier, we might have had some aspiration to be further on in the pay award discussion than we are. I was quite shocked to discover that the claim came in only this week. With hindsight, perhaps that should have been addressed earlier.

I think that that is a fair question. That is why the Minister is keen that such delay as is necessary be restricted to one month. The hope is that we will get this sorted so that staff's October pay reflects the increment that they are entitled to and the payment for September that they have not got. We are using our best endeavours on that.

Mr Rogers: The next question is very quick. When do expect the Sure Start review to be completed?

Mr McGrath: That I am not sure on, Sean. I am not sure that we have got sufficiently far on to be able to say what the end date is. Again, however, if the Committee Clerk writes to us, we will come back to you on that.

Mr Rogers: I hope that it would be as soon as possible.

Mr McGrath: We will come back to you as soon as possible.

Mr Rogers: The next point is about the development of teachers and school leadership. You said that that is part of the jigsaw. To me, it is the picture from which you form the jigsaw. Teacher development is fundamental to school improvement and everything else. It frustrates me that with savings etc that you had to make, and with the ESA situation, the CASS service has been decimated. It is very hard to effect improvement in a board area, say in maths, if you have maybe one post-primary maths adviser. To me, that is an awful problem.

I have one or two quick points on preschool to make that are related to Jo-Anne's point. What does the Department consider to be a reasonable distance for a child travelling to preschool provision? Does it have any thoughts about what might be a reasonable distance?

Mr McGrath: I do not have that at my fingertips, Sean. However, we had this issue last year. When people did not get what they wanted and were notified of other available provision, it was not being said to them, "That should suit you." It was simply our saying, "In a distinctive geographic area, here are other places." That did not come with, "and you ought to take it" or "it is an acceptable distance".

I do not have the detail of what we regard, or what might be regarded, as acceptable.

Mr Rogers: Preschool provision will be limited to part time.

Mr McGrath: It did not say that. The Minister has looked at the issue in the strategy for the way ahead. There are issues about having such a mixed bag. On the education level, it does not suggest that, for example, full-time places give any more educational benefit than part-time places.

Mr Rogers: I have one final question on STEM subjects. The document refers to status pending but says that the 2011-12 data are not yet available. Do you have any update on that?

Mr McGrath: I will ask David to speak on that, because he may want to say something about your points on literacy and numeracy. I think that we would be in agreement with the general points.

Dr Hughes: You are absolutely right about literacy and numeracy that, ultimately, measuring the outcomes at school leaving will make sense only if the entire system is working towards the right outcome at school leaving.

We should see over time that the input, in primary school in particular, is carried through into post-primary school and into school leaving. In particular, the cohort of young people that came into primary school into the foundation stage of the revised curriculum, and who will then come through, should be demonstrated in improved outcomes at school leaving. That is the cohort, I think that I am right in saying, that entered P1 in the first year of the revised curriculum and sat the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and demonstrated the strength of the literacy and numeracy skills that they had at that stage. The system is also keen to ensure that nothing is lost as those young people go through and that the momentum is not lost. That is firmly in our sights as well.

You made a point about additional teachers under the delivering social change programme. Actually, a lot of those teachers are in primary schools; there are over 100 full-time equivalent teachers in primary schools.

Mr Rogers: Just for information, are they mainly at Key Stage 2, or are they throughout the primary school?

Dr Hughes: I think that I am right in saying that they are focused on Key Stage 2, but there is a good deal of flexibility in the way in which the schools use them.

Mr Rogers: So the school could have as much flexibility as necessary?

Dr Hughes: It is focused on Key Stage 2.

Mr Rogers: What about STEM?

Mrs Godfrey: I can pick that one up. As I said, there is a bit of a time lag. I think that we might just have the new data in. I am pretty confident that they show a further increase, but I will get that

confirmed and write to the Clerk. I am pretty sure that they came in in recent days and that they show an increase. At this point, however, because we have set the target around examination entries at A level, we expect that progress to be incremental. As David said about the curriculum, a lot of it is about building the interest in, love for and excitement about science right through, as you say, from Key Stage 1 into Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3. So, the full benefits of the STEM strategy will take some time to come through. That is because if you have not had that interest in and application of science at GSCE, you will immediately not be able to carry it through to A level. So, a lot of the focus has been on primary and Key Stage 3. Those children should start to have that very positive attitude towards science, discovery and innovation and all the things that are embedded in the curriculum.

The Chairperson: I will follow on from that by saying that I think that the Department is overlooking the fact that, with TIMSS and PIRLS, a cohort of children will still be subjected to the problems that we highlighted earlier with, for example, the teacher workforce statistics. Those show an increase in the pupil:teacher ratio, particularly in primary schools, apparently owing to an increase in pupil numbers, a decrease in the number of teachers by around 565 — that has fallen by 2,000 in the past 10 years — an increase in the median age of teachers to 40.9 years and a £3 million increase in teacher substitution costs. Those will all have an adverse effect on the ability of the system to deliver. Sean is absolutely right: it is not about the parts of the jigsaw; those elements are the picture that the jigsaw is built on. I think that we need to make sure that those key elements are there. It goes back to the workforce issue and to the targets that the Department has set for our teachers. I do not think that that correlation is being made accurately enough to give us a consistent outcome on the basis of all the objectives that we are setting ourselves.

Mrs Godfrey: I think that what you are saying about the workforce is right, Chair. You mentioned specifically pupil:teacher ratios. The research is absolutely clear locally, nationally and internationally that, apart from the very early years, there is no statistically significant relationship between class size and pupil outcomes. The relationship is always absolutely predicated on the quality of the teaching.

The Chairperson: Katrina, to be very blunt, I do not believe one word of that, for the simple reason that nobody will tell me that a teacher will not be put under huge pressure in a class with 30 to 35 pupils where the special educational needs register sits at 25%, 30% or 40%. That will have an adverse impact on those children's educational outcomes. If there are no data, it is time that the Department of Education got them, because that is why the figures in the post-primary sector are not adding up. That is why children are leaving primary school without having reached certain levels of attainment. Those are the problems that we face, and I do not accept that analysis, because I think that we have a time bomb waiting in our classrooms with teacher:pupil ratio. The special educational needs register is increasing year on year, and that is placing huge demands on our schools.

Mr McGrath: There is no dispute about this. Katrina covered research evidence, etc, that is at a global level. Your points are well made. However, those issues are as much to do with changes in the characteristics of the pupil population and increased numbers. That is clearly something that you have to factor in. You helpfully pointed out the dynamics surrounding it, and you have to deal with those. The average age of teachers is going up. What does that reflect? In many cases, it reflects the fact that teachers are staying on for longer. In previous years, teachers could get out of teaching earlier, regardless of whether that was appropriate. In future, changes to pensions will mean that teachers will work for longer. We probably cannot avoid that happening, but the issue is how we deal with it. I have said it before and I will say it again: teachers' career paths and the stresses that they now face are significantly different to those of 20 or 30 years ago. You talked about the nature of classrooms. In many cases, the ethnic mix in classes is now totally different. The problems that come from that nature mean that teachers will have to work for longer, and, therefore, professional development will have to be more sophisticated in the future to enable teachers to cope with those challenges. Professional development and leadership will have to cope with them. We cannot make the workforce younger unless we just pay everybody off when they are 50.

The Chairperson: That is an interesting one. That would mean that, as Chair of the Committee, I would go next year.

Mr McGrath: I would like to see how the business case for that would stack up. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: So would I.

Mr McGrath: We are very clear in all these things: we need a motivated, committed workforce.

The Chairperson: I said that, because I think that those are the issues that are going to be more and more prevalent.

Mr Hazzard: Thank you for the information that you have given so far. Most of my points were covered in the previous exchanges. To go back to the issue of results and the school-leaver situation, do we have figures for the percentage of pupils who go on and pass in years 13 and 14, even though they had failed at year 12 in their GCSEs? Are those figures available?

Mrs Godfrey: I am not sure of the extent to which those figures are available at that level of aggregation, Chris, but I can certainly check it out, because —

Mr Hazzard: On the back of your responses, I presume that that is the reason why people are given that opportunity. I agree; if you go on to achieve in years 13 and 14, your achievement should be in the system because the system has worked. I was just wondering what the actual figures are.

Mrs Godfrey: I will check to see whether we can aggregate that out to that sort of level. However, you are absolutely right. The key reason for using the school leavers figure is that it counts every child. However, if a child is capable of achieving to the level of a grade C or equivalent at GCSE in English and maths, there is absolutely every reason, if they do not quite make it the first time, for them to have a second chance. We have all accepted that literacy and numeracy at that level is very important to progression. So, that makes perfect sense. That is something that we would certainly encourage.

Mr Hazzard: It is very positive that not only is there an increase in the uptake of STEM subjects but there are early indications that pupils enjoy success once they have taken them up. When will all those data be revealed so that we will be able to look at them more closely?

Mrs Godfrey: I think that we should be able to get those to the Committee very shortly. We had an issue with a particular data provider who gives us this information on a contractual basis. Until we were satisfied, we could not sign the contract and get the data. However, that has been done, and I think that the data are now in, so we should be able to send them to the Committee pretty soon. You will know, even from some of the very preliminary information about things such as GCSE and A-level results, that we are seeing maths, biology and the sciences holding up incredibly well. David, am I right that they are in the top five most popular subjects?

Dr Hughes: Yes. Maths and biology are both very strong.

Mrs Godfrey: The others are coming up.

Dr Hughes: The message that we are getting, particularly about the importance of maths, is being reflected in the number of pupils taking that subject. That is very positive.

The Chairperson: Jonathan, you can ask your question, and we will then try to wrap this up. As I told other members, do try to keep to time. *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Craig: I almost thought that I was getting the last word there.

John, the internet is a wonderful thing. I am looking at something on the internet that tells me that there are 77 schools where less than 35% of pupils achieve five or more GCSE grades A to C. That is the end of our post-primary school market that we need to concentrate on. What has the Department done in the past year about that? That situation has not really changed from last year. There is very little change in there. What are we doing to turn that around? What has the Department done? Sean highlighted what is probably the biggest problem that we have in the post-primary sector: poor leadership. What has the Department done on that and what assistance has it given to these schools to help them to improve the situation?

Dr Hughes: If I can come back on a number of specific strands of work that are addressing the educational underachievement, in particular in areas where disadvantage in individuals is measured by free school meal entitlement —

Mr Craig: Let me stop you there. I was scrolling through that list, and I saw that an awful lot of those schools do not fall into that category. What are we doing for the ones that do not fall into that category?

Mr McGrath: You are quite right; that is an issue that —

Mr Craig: Over half of them do not fall into that category.

Mr McGrath: That is an issue that we need to tackle, but some of the issues are strategic. Of the 77 schools, in some cases the trends will be going down rather than up. The first question is: what does the school do? Does it recognise the degree of the issue?

Mr Craig: Does it need to?

Mr McGrath: What is the managing authority doing? The issue is whether there are some schools that just do not correlate. The size of some of these schools may well have an impact on the numbers, but some schools are not sustainable in the delivery of quality education. It is as much of a planning issue, but some of this is about schools themselves. Do they recognise the issues, or, in some cases, can they provide 99 reasons why?

Mr Craig: So, is it the case that we blame area planning, we blame low school numbers, we blame deprivation and we blame poor management in the schools? I will ask again, John: what is the Department doing to assist those schools to get out of this situation?

Mr McGrath: There are several tools, Jonathan. Inspection is the first one.

Mr Craig: So, we beat them with a stick? Right.

Mr McGrath: No, I said inspection. If any of the schools had a formal intervention, the system will roll in with action plans. The boards spend a lot of time identifying schools that are "at risk", and they try to produce preventative measures for a number of schools that are not performing. We would like to be able to move more quickly in many cases. I never forget the fact that, although we work at turning schools around, there are children in the school now who, by the time that some schools are turned around, may have had their life chances impaired.

I will be very clear. At times, we might be quicker in saying that some schools should perhaps be closed or that we should move because children are going in. Our system is not the quickest to respond, and I do not mean just at the level of the Department. When we or boards bring forward proposals to deal with schools that have a consistent issue — in many cases, that is nothing to do with the staff, it is just the dynamics and the scale — you sense, and rightly so, concern among communities about schools and jobs going. That is very hard to deal with. I can think of a number of cases in recent years where the system eventually dealt with issues in schools that perhaps had their future behind them. With hindsight, most of us agree that we should have acted sooner, because more children had some impairment to their education, because the system did not intervene quickly enough. Perhaps our tools are not as sharp as we need —

Mr Craig: John, let me cut across you there, because I have had a good look through this list, and it seems that the issues are not always about numbers. They are not always about areas of deprivation. I am looking through this. In some cases, I can spot a very definite trend. If you were to close all of those schools, in some areas, you actually would not have a school at all in that particular area in that sector — in a couple of sectors in fact. That highlights a major issue in a geographical area. All the statistics are here. They are there in front of us. You know where you need to target your efforts to improve things. So, why can the Department not give additional assistance to those areas that need it? Why do we keep faffing about with figures and free school meals when that is actually sitting in front of you? Free school meals does not actually target half of those schools. That is an interesting fact.

Mr McGrath: I am not disagreeing with you. I am not offering the factors just as reasons. In many cases, there will be schools that have sufficient catchment and are of sufficient scale and should be doing better for the children they have. There, you are, probably, getting into school leadership and management. That is the issue. I agree entirely, and it is an issue that we have to face up to, that there may be areas where schools are not performing, but the area needs a good school. The answer

to that is that we need tools which are really about changing leadership and management in a very quick process.

The Chairperson: John, if that is the Department's mentality, God help our children. We now have a Department that tests to fail. From a Department that has a moral, obnoxious view about testing at age 11 — I will not get into that debate — what the system now says is that children will be tested on the basis of having five GCSEs in grades A* to C and that if they do not meet that, both they and the school are a failure. If the school does not meet it, what they will do — and I know a school in my constituency where this has happened — is send in the inspector; put the school into intervention; and say, under area planning, that the school will close. In that very same school this year, one child got six A*s. That is not a failing school as far as I am concerned. The fact is that 45% of young people come into that school on the special educational needs register. They have real difficulty. However, when the school wants the psychology service, it cannot get it. When the school wants intervention, it cannot get it. When the school wants help and assistance, it cannot get them. That is the problem. Until we address that, we will faff around area planning. We will talk about figures and statistics and young people will leave schools and, because they have not got those particular grades, they will be seen as failures. I have a son — I know that he is tired of my using him as an example — and, if he had stayed at school until he was 20 years old — he is coming 19 — he would not have got 5 GCSEs in grades A* to C. However, I will tell you, he is a worker. He is doing well to get out there and ensure that he makes a living. I do not see him as a failure, but the system does.

Mr McGrath: Sorry, Chair. I do not accept that.

The Chairperson: It does, because that is what he is judged against.

Mr Craig: That is what they are measured on.

The Chairperson: That is what they are measured on.

Mr McGrath: I want to say a couple of things. Jonathan has rightly raised the point by suggesting that there are schools that are not doing as well as they should be for their children. That is the premise. Whether it is failing or not, Jonathan is asking what we are doing to tackle that, which suggests that it is something that needs a remedy and, therefore, there is some sort of problem. We are not in direct drive on all of those issues, Chair. We have managing authorities. In recent years, we have done sterling work, particularly to press it upon those authorities that they have a role with regard to standards, a role to intervene and a role in the schools that they identify. Significant progress has been made. Frankly, five or six years ago, that was not the culture in the system at all. We have done a huge amount of work. We continue to do that. We have a number of initiatives. We use the inspectors. We do risk management where they intervene. At the end of the day, we have a system that is, rightly or wrongly, a bottom-up system. We have 1,100 individual institutions with their own board of governors. We have done a huge amount of work in recent years — again, a tribute to Katrina — to supply more information to boards of governors about how their school performs compared with its peers, to the extent of telling them what issues they needed to raise with their school leadership team. We did all those things to raise that issue.

We produced all the data for schools, whether in a socio-economically deprived area or not. We did a huge amount of work on that and continue to do that. The first challenge in the system that we have about school performance is the board of governors. The next is the managing authority. You then have inspections and then the Department. We did a huge amount of work.

The Chairperson: John, is not the first port of call the pupils, to be honest?

Mr McGrath: Yes.

The Chairperson: If we identify the need of the pupil and then start to work from that, as opposed —

Mr McGrath: Chair, all I said was that that was the first part of the focus and challenge. As far as we are concerned, it is all about pupils. Everything is about pupils, and if the performance of a number of schools, for good reasons or bad, is not what it might be, that is a serious issue for us.

Mr Craig: Right, John, let me come back to the root of all this. There are some really good boards of governors out there who have identified the issues in the school, and nine times out of 10 they were

management issues. There are underperforming teachers. They go back to the board and the Department and ask for help, and what do they get? I can tell you what they get because I know what they get: they get very little.

Mr McGrath: I do not know the detail of what you are talking about, Jonathan. We have been very active, and we want better procedures to deal with such issues. I suspect that we are in agreement that —

Mr Craig: But, John, what is frustrating me is that we have been discussing this very issue for two years now. I know that things are slow when you negotiate with unions and all the rest, but something has to give here. At the end of the day, there are two years when pupils have been failed. Let us be honest about it.

The Chairperson: Can you answer, John, and then we will move on? I want to bring this to an end.

Mr McGrath: You raised the issue of the workforce yourself, Chair. The issues of leadership and management are pivotal. That is the next big one to crack. You can plan the estate right and get everything else in place, but, if you do not have the right teachers and management in schools, you will not achieve it. That is the next big one to crack.

We have a trade union that, rightly, will defend its members, but we do not have the speed of response to deal with issues such as this that we need to have in the interest of children. We will continue to work on that. There is a strong view from the Committee on that. I know that the Committee is doing its inquiry into the inspection process, and I will not comment on that. You need challenge out there, but at times you will hear people say that inspection is there to beat people up and it is negative. You occasionally get the sense that some people would prefer just to be left alone: close the classroom door and leave me alone in here. That is not appropriate at all. At the end of the day, it is about children.

The Chairperson: The speed of change is a two-way process because the Department indicated that it was going to set up a regional model for the provision of professional development for teachers and school leaders and it was to be operational in September. I have this simple question: is it operational?

Mr McGrath: No, it has been delayed with the work —

The Chairperson: So, there. You talk about the system as though the schools want to turn everything up to slow it down.

Mr McGrath: No, I —

The Chairperson: Here was something that was said by the Department. It said that it would set up regional provision for development of teachers and school leaders to address the problems that you spoke about. That was to be operational in September, and it is not operational. It is no wonder that you have difficulty when you negotiate with teachers. I am a public representative, and I say wonderful things about what should be done. When I knock on Mrs Smith's door, what does she say to me? "Did you do that?", and I say, "Well, no". Do you know what she says to me? "You're useless. I won't be voting for you", and she moves on. That is the bottom line, and that is where the Department needs to realise that it is a two-way process with teachers and the system.

Mr McGrath: First, we recognise the delay in the school development service. I know that it is an issue that the Minister is deeply unhappy about. It is marked up as a red issue in any of our documents. Katrina and I continue to excavate around it. You are right to point that up. It is an element that we will need in the future. It is necessary but, in itself, will not be sufficient. We need changes —

The Chairperson: I am going to say this tongue-in-cheek: if that is a red issue and that is the way that the Department highlights issues, Rathgael must be aglow at night. You could put the lights out in Bangor and Rathgael would probably run but that is a tongue-in-cheek remark.

Mr McGrath: Anyone is welcome to come to Rathgael.

The Chairperson: I have been asking to go to Rathgael since I got on to the Committee. I do not know whether they do not like the look of me, which I could well understand, but I have not been through the door of Rathgael. Maybe that could be facilitated. Under the previous Minister, I tried to get to Rathgael, and I was not successful. Maybe the barriers could come down and the lights could go on, and we might even get a cup of tea or coffee in Rathgael.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you, Chair, and apologies for not being here at the beginning. There was a small device at the police station in Ballyclare. I will not discuss that.

A mass of issues have come through, but, before I go into them, there are two other things. We were discussing leadership, management and teachers. One of the major messages that I was getting in the summer when talking to people was that all the cuts and restrictions were making it harder and harder for teachers to do their teaching. In one case, they were telling me that, if they could just have that little bit more funding and a little bit more flexibility, they could do everything better. That is what every school needs, particularly in the Shankill area and others, rather than the endless squeezing. If you look at the funding review that is being consulted on at the moment, you will see that the effect on most schools that replied to me is that they will lose a teacher or a classroom, so they will have fewer people. Again, fewer resources and bigger class: pupil ratios. Everything is getting so tight. I do not think that it is merely a leadership matter; it is resources, it is having time, it is having to do it. I wanted to make that comment.

I really wanted to ask about commitments 71, 72 and 73 on shared education. We have virtually no details on this, but we had the 'Advancing Shared Education' document, which was good in most parts except for the final recommendations. Yet, we have no detail to work on. When will we see the baseline statistics that, we are told, have been established and the high-level objectives and actually see where we are going? We know if you talk to CCMS, they will say that they share, but we also all know that there is no sharing going on. When are we actually going to see detail on how we achieve those commitments?

Mr McGrath: The Programme for Government makes clear the milestones in those shared education objectives. Part of that is to get your baseline right in the first place. That is also about defining what shared education is and working out what we have got at the minute. Without the slightest denigration, if you asked two people for the definition of shared education, you would probably get three versions of it. I do not mean that badly. That is the point of it. It is turning high-level, strategic intent into something that you can measure and set targets for. We are doing work on trying to get a baseline; that is ongoing. That is why the stuff in the Programme for Government is, frankly, softer than what we ideally want. We need to quantify what it is, in the first place.

Mr Kinahan: Do you have an idea of when we will have those baselines?

Mrs Godfrey: Danny, I know that some of the baseline evidence came from the first school omnibus survey that we carried out recently. I do not have a precise timescale, but I know that NISRA will publish that survey before the end of this calendar year. So, it should not be too much longer in coming. As John says, this is also taken in the context of the recommendations that came from the Minister's advisory group on shared education. I know that the Minister is going through those at the moment to set out his position on the recommendations and the steps that will then be taken. That will provide the context within which the next pieces of the jigsaw should slot into place. There is a lot of work going on behind the scenes. There has been a survey, which allowed us to ask questions around the extent to which schools are already sharing. It should be available in the coming months.

Mr Kinahan: You could spend ages trying to establish a baseline, because there are so many different forms coming through it.

Mrs Godfrey: That is it, and, as John said, there are so many possible definitions, depending on how you look at what you are doing.

Mr Kinahan: It is almost a case of get up and get going or else we will never get there.

Mr McGrath: The monitoring and delivery of the Programme for Government it is a much more rigorous system now than it was previously, which is quite right. Getting that sort of metric applied to an area gets us in that predicament. We have got to work out what it is and how we measure it. Previously, government might have just sailed on and said, "Let a thousand flowers bloom". The

rigour of the system means that we cannot go into this and say, "Well, we are just going to wander about, and we will get some campuses or something". We have to get information. I know that you did not make the comment, but the points earlier about funding have just come to me. It is a characteristic: everybody would like more funding. If they said that they did not, you would worry about it. We have done our best to maximise the money going into the classroom, given the budget that the Department has. That has meant that we have had to take money out of other areas like CASS, which we referred to earlier. However, it is important to recognise that we have a system that has significant surpluses across the piece — in lots of schools. Latterly, in some of the accountability meetings that we hold with boards and CCMS, we have looked at the correlation between schools with a surplus and poor results and asked why schools are running surpluses — I mean significant surpluses; I do not mean people with modest ones — of £200,000 or £300,000 and have bad results. That raises this question: why is that school not putting some of that money into the theoretical teacher that you were talking to? There are significant issues about that. It is an issue that the Minister is quite robust about. We need to keep surpluses in moderation. The taxpayer is not giving money to schools — even under LMS — for it to be put away for a rainy day when, in fact, most people are saying that it is a rainy day. There are serious issues for lots of boards of governors on that and, indeed, boards. We found that surpluses have gone up in some schools, and it is not clear why. Yes, everybody would like more money, but you must make sure that the money that you have is properly deployed. With £1.2 billion-odd —

Mr Kinahan: The key word is "flexibility". Rather than being absolutely tight with your spending, you should make sure that it is used for —

Mr McGrath: LMS gives every school total freedom to decide how it spends its money. However, if a school decides that it will run up a surplus at difficult times, that is a choice. You cannot complain then that you would like more money if you are putting some of it in the back pocket for a rainy day. There is prudence, and there is overconservatism. However, the message that you and others would be giving is that this is the rainy day.

It is not as pat or as easy, and, to be honest, there would be schools with significant free school meal numbers that are running up surpluses at the same time. That is one of the issues for the Minister in the changes that he will be making to the common funding scheme. Where schools get extra money because of disadvantage, they need to be very clear how they spend it.

Mr Kinahan: The last item that I wanted to touch on was the governance support service. Did you touch on that before?

The Chairperson: No.

Mr Kinahan: When will we see details of likely new regulations? How is that all coming?

Mr McGrath: That, in a sense, is the twin of the school development service. They are both not being taken forward with the rigour that they should have been. Again, that is a red hot issue for us, particularly as we are running over up into reconstitution when there will be a prime need to have it. That is another area where the Minister is unhappy with the lack of progress.

The Chairperson: There is enough light in that one in Rathgael to light up Groomsport.

John, I want to ask you a serious question and to conclude this. I understand that the Department will publish the 2013-14 shortly.

Mr McGrath: Hopefully.

The Chairperson: A whole raft of things is coming out of this today. I assume that the Committee will be happy to set a day aside when there is no other business and go through it. That would give everybody a fair chance, because we are constrained by time today. We will come back to you.

Mr McGrath: We would be happy to do that. As we said, we are conscious that there is so much in this.

The Chairperson: Because of commitments that we have made to other organisations to come today, we felt that we had to try to keep our programme as it was.

Yesterday, we had a decision in the High Court on an appeal that was carried out with regard to an education and library board. I think that it might be the "L" case and the child with dyslexia. The board has won the case. My understanding is that that is one of the reasons why there has been a delay in the special educational needs process and policy. Could the Committee get an update on how that will now colour the way that the Department will progress the special educational needs policy? We are in a serious situation.

Mr McGrath: I am happy to come back to you about the impacts. The more we have a sense of what the Committee wants to talk about, the more we will not turn up here and say that we do not have the information. Given the ambit of it, if we have a session on the corporate plan, Peter could give us a heads-up on the areas, and that would help us to drill down. Otherwise, we have to come with a ton of paper or 20 people, neither of which is possible.

The Chairperson: You could bring your tablet. You see how sophisticated we are. We do not always use them in the way that we should. You will notice that we have a reserve and that I have about 42 folders below my desk.

Following on from today's session, we will try to work through the key issues and have a plan, as a Committee, for who will ask questions on certain elements. That would be helpful because there is so much in it, and it is only fair to the Department and to members.

Mr McGrath: We want to be as open and comprehensive as possible. It does not leave us in a good way to say that we do not have that detail and will come back to you, notwithstanding communication with the Clerk. I am not saying that you should tell us in advance exactly what you want to ask, but the areas would be useful.

The Chairperson: Thank you, John, Katrina and David.