



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Area Planning: Orangefield High
School/Knock Dual Carriageway Area

9 October 2013

The Chairperson: Yes; that is OK.

Mr Boyd: Thank you; I appreciate that.

In your letter, you asked for a briefing on the processes underpinning the closure of Orangefield High School. As far as I am aware, no decision has been taken on the future of Orangefield High School. The board has made proposals, but only the Minister can make decisions of this nature. The Minister can accept, reject or modify development proposals. Therefore, we are talking about proposals and not decisions. You raised a number of issues in your letter, and I want to go through them in sequence. I am happy to take questions after that.

First, I would like to address the suggestion that there is a conflict of interest in my roles as a civil servant and as interim chief executive of the Belfast Board. Following the unanticipated departure of the previous chief executive, an initial attempt to recruit a replacement proved unsuccessful. To ensure appropriate governance and accountability arrangements, the board requested assistance from the Department of Education, and I was subsequently seconded. My role was to discharge the responsibilities of the chief executive on behalf of the board and reporting to the board.

It is common practice for civil servants to be seconded to arm's-length bodies. Indeed, I was seconded to several organisations in the past and am currently seconded to yet another one. Under the terms of a Civil Service secondment, an employee remains a member of the Civil Service, but the Civil Service no longer directs their duties.

"The secondee is required to carry out diligently all instructions given by the host organisation and reports directly to that organisation."

I have no advisory or decision-making role in the Department of Education with regard to development proposals, and I am not a member of the Department of Education's management board. While working for the Belfast board, I discharged my responsibilities solely under the direction of the board. There was no conflict of interest.

Turning to the proposal itself, I will set out the context in which the decision was taken to begin consultation on the future of Orangefield High School. I will then provide an overview of the rationale behind the proposal. The area-planning process and the viability audit brought into sharp focus concerns surrounding the quality of education provision and the sustainability of Orangefield High School.

In April 2011, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) concluded that provision at the school was inadequate in almost all areas inspected. The outcomes in public examinations were consistently below the Northern Ireland non-grammar average and those of schools with similar numbers of pupils entitled to free school meals. Moreover, the report highlighted poor pupil attendance, inadequate curricular choice at both key stage 4 and post 16, and inadequate leadership and management.

Despite the considerable efforts of staff and of the board of governors and the support provided through the formal intervention process, the school did not improve significantly. A 2012 follow-up inspection concluded that provision at the school remained inadequate in a number of important areas. Enrolment at the school was also significantly below the minimum numbers outlined in the Department's sustainable schools policy. In September 2012, enrolment in years 8 to 12 had fallen to 198, and the school had received only 15 first-preference applications for year 8. The school had already lost the confidence of the community that it was in place to serve. At this point, officials initiated discussions with the school representatives. The board of governors made it clear that it wanted to avoid the prolonged decline that has happened elsewhere in the Belfast area. A working group that included the chair of the board of governors was formed to look at options for the future of the school. At their meeting in October 2012, the governors unanimously agreed the development proposal, which stated that from September 2013, or as soon as possible thereafter, post-primary education would cease on the Orangefield site and would be provided for the children of Orangefield High School on the Ashfield Girls' High School and Ashfield Boys' High School sites. That proposal was approved by the Belfast Board on 6 December. On 11 December, it was published for consultation in the local press and sent to the Department of Education in line with standard development proposal processes.

In early January, the Department wrote to the board requesting clarity on the wording as well as separate proposals for each of the schools involved. In light of the Department's concerns, the board approved three separate proposals on 7 February: one to close Orangefield High School and the

other two to increase enrolment at Ashfield Boys' High School and Ashfield Girls' High School. The revised proposals were published and subjected to the usual two-month consultation period. The revision did not alter the board's intention that Orangefield pupils should be accommodated at the Ashfield schools. That was clearly set out in an explanatory note that was published at the same time as the revised proposals.

The original wording of the proposal clearly set out the board's intention that Orangefield pupils would transfer to the Ashfield schools and that provision would no longer be made on the Orangefield site. It was never viewed or worded as a formal amalgamation; however, it was always intended to be more than a straightforward closure. An amalgamation requires the creation of a new leadership team and board of governors; it also requires the creation of a new staffing structure and the appointment of appropriate staff. The Ashfield schools were well on their way to being successful schools with effective school leadership and management already in place. There were no grounds for altering existing arrangements at the Ashfield schools; that was never proposed. Rather, the board adopted the wording that was used in the recent development proposal that closed Grove Primary School and transferred the pupils to Seaview Primary School.

In the case of Orangefield, the board believed that it was in interests of staff and pupils to manage their transfer to the Ashfield schools rather than treat it as a conventional closure whereby pupils and staff may be dispersed across a number of schools. Why? Above all, it was to ensure high-quality education for the Orangefield pupils. Although places were available in other, nearby, post-primary schools, there were significant concerns about the quality of provision at both Knockbreda High School and Newtownbreda High School. By contrast, the ETI had concluded that provision at Ashfield Boys' High School was very good and had highlighted the significant strengths of provision at Ashfield Girls' High School. GSCE outcomes at both schools were significantly higher than at other non-selective schools in the area. The proposals were also driven by the board's desire to improve the quality of controlled provision in east Belfast. We wanted to build on the strengths of the Ashfield schools and thereby ensure strong, successful and sustainable controlled provision in east Belfast.

Therefore the dual intention of the development proposals was, first, to deliver high-quality education for pupils, and, secondly, to ensure that the Ashfield schools were of sufficient size to deliver a broad curriculum and appropriate personal development opportunities, particularly at sixth form. The board was also aware that significant reorganisation proposals were coming forward from the South Eastern Board. Transferring the Orangefield pupils to the Ashfield schools would ensure that they could complete their education without further reorganisation or disruption. I agree with your comments from a previous session, Chair, that you do not solve the problem by closing a school and scattering the children like confetti. In this case, the board's clear intention was to transfer the pupils to the Ashfield schools.

The Committee also asked about the timing of the proposal. September 2013, or as soon as possible thereafter, was proposed because the education being provided was inadequate and we wanted to move the young people as soon as possible to a school where they would receive a quality education. The proposed timing was not out of the ordinary. Between January and March 2013, seven other proposals for closures or amalgamations from September 2013 were published.

The implementation date for development proposals is always provisional. There are many reasons for that. In particular, the exact time taken for a ministerial decision is unknown, as is the time required for the procurement and carrying out of any capital works. The Minister's decision cannot be pre-empted, and capital works should only be initiated following that decision. That is why the Department's guidance recommends that development proposals always be published with the proposed implementation date and the accompanying qualification or as soon as possible thereafter.

Development proposals are regularly implemented later than the original date proposed. For example, in the Belfast area, the creation of St Patrick's Primary School and John Paul II Primary School were originally proposed for September 2012 but were implemented one year later in September 2013.

To conclude, I would like to restate the board's overriding intention: to ensure high-quality education in the controlled sector in east Belfast. The board believed that the best way to do that was by expanding the Ashfield schools and accommodating Orangefield pupils and staff there. It is important to note that the outcome of any development proposal process is always contingent on the Minister's decision; no board or official can promise a particular outcome or pre-empt the Minister's decision. The board sets out the preferred approach and submits it for the Minister's deliberation. I understand that, in this case, these proposals are still under consideration.

Chair, I hope that I have covered the points that you set out in your letter. I am happy to take questions.

The Chairperson: It is like wading through treacle, to be honest. The bottom line for the parents, pupils and teachers and all those associated with Orangefield is that a process was initiated, then altered and then processed. While all that was going on, other elements of the process were not even in place. There are so many things that need to be teased out, and the reason why we have taken an interest in it is because of its policy implications. If this is how a board and the Department arrange themselves to deal with closures, amalgamations or whatever they call them, we need to be sure that those processes are clear and concise and that everybody knows what is going on. The Department wrote to the board and advocated — in fact, I have just noticed that the Department said that there needed to be clarity around what was being proposed, as that was not the case. At any time in the discussions in the Belfast board, was the issue of the numbers of girls and boys at Ashfield and the relocation of C2K ever discussed prior to a development proposal being put on the table that was going to radically change the nature and the numbers in the two Ashfield schools?

Mr Boyd: Yes, there were discussions in the Belfast board about those issues. The context for those discussions was the development of the area plan, particularly in relation to provision in the non-selective controlled sector in east Belfast. There was a realisation that we had two schools in the sector that were shaping up very well and which had the absolute confidence of the community. They were oversubscribed, but, in looking towards the future, we could see that there was a need to increase sixth-form provision at the Ashfield schools. That was articulated in a series of meetings with community and political representatives. We wanted to see from a board perspective sixth-form role models for young people in east Belfast. At the same time, the ETI identified poor provision in Orangefield High School and poor physical accommodation, so there was an absolute focus on trying to ensure that we developed post-primary provision in east Belfast, and the hubs for that were going to be the Ashfield schools.

The Chairperson: What steps were taken to relocate the C2K out of Ashfield so that accommodation would be in place for the pupils who, it was envisaged, would move from Orangefield to Ashfield in the new educational term? At present, that process has not even concluded.

Mr Boyd: Chair, I have to keep reminding myself, and you in this instance, that the Minister has not yet taken a decision on the Orangefield schools. The proposal was that education would cease at Orangefield and the young people would be moved and accommodated at the Ashfield schools. However, we could not, for example, undertake capital development and spend capital moneys in advance of the Minister's decision. It is at least conceivable that the Minister could come back and say, "No; I have decided that I am not accepting the proposal."

The Chairperson: It is equally conceivable that a decision could be taken for changes to be made and that you would not have the place or space to accommodate the pupils who transfer from Orangefield to Ashfield. If the Minister's ultimate decision on the development proposal is to close Orangefield at the end of the academic year, there is no way that, between June and 1 September, Ashfield would be able to clear out C2k, do all the capital work that would be needed to relocate the C2k provision, and have adequate provision in place to accommodate the children. It is not physically possible.

Pupils have been left in limbo. I do not believe that there is such a thing as an intermediate state. We have the classic educational limbo whereby young people are being asked to locate in a place that does not exist. How is that good for the well-being of the young people and the educational opportunities that they deserve?

Mr Boyd: There are two elements to the development proposal. The first is the strategic educational approach. The board believed absolutely that the best thing for the children who are attending Orangefield High School is for them be relocated to Ashfield. That is the key educational decision.

The second element is the timing, which is a separate issue. The timing is contained in the development proposal. It refers to the original date, which was by September 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter. This means that, once the proposal is agreed, you can move to do all the things that might be necessary.

On capital expenditure, it is a matter of time and money, and getting the approval. However, capital can be delivered quickly in the right circumstances. On C2k, you will be aware that by relocating some

of their staff, but not the most sensitive elements, they released a number of classrooms to Ashfield Boys' School in September without actually having relocated. There are also a number of other options available in the short term. I do not know all the details. However, having read the papers recently, I have seen evidence of provision of an entire new sixth-form centre in an incredibly short space of time. I know that there were issues with that, but there is a number of options available.

The Chairperson: There are a couple of things I want to progress a wee bit further. Before I do so, I welcome the pupils and staff of Lurgan College who are in the Public Gallery. I have had the opportunity to visit your school on a number of occasions. You will be interested to know that the person sitting at the end of the table is key to ensuring the survival of the Dickson plan. We will not put any pressure on him. He is now the interim chief executive of the Southern Education and Library Board. I am not telling any tales out of school, but I know that he is going to a very important meeting after this one. We will go very easy on him to make sure that he does not replicate in the Dickson plan any of the difficulties that we have with Orangefield. You are very welcome, and we wish you well in your future studies.

Gavin, there is an issue that I still cannot get my head around: of course, there are probably thousands of those. In your opening comments, you referred to what I said in the letter about a conflict of interest between your position as a senior official in the Department of Education and your secondment to an arm's-length body such as an education and library board. Maybe you will clarify something. The letter that came back from the Department stated that within the Department the processing of development proposals is discharged by the area planning policy team. You have said that you do not sit on the Department's senior management team. Do you sit on the area planning team? I assume that that is different from the area planning policy team. Do you sit on the area planning team or the steering group that was established by the Minister?

Mr Boyd: I sit on the area planning steering group. I sit on that group to ensure that I can discharge my responsibilities effectively in planning for the future. That group does not make decisions; it considers strategic policy issues.

The Chairperson: The other issue is in relation to capital. We will go to members after this and then come back to a number of things. I visited Knockbreda and Newtownbreda, I have had discussions with Orangefield, and the First Minister has been to Dundonald. There is clearly a huge need for capital investment. I noted your comment that, in certain circumstances, it is easy to get capital. I think that you would have great difficulty convincing Devenish College in Fermanagh that it is easy to get capital given that, 10 years after it was promised a new school, it is still sitting in 23 mobile classrooms.

If this were all to be approved — if we were working with good will and everybody was saying that this is the way that we should go and that we should do all these things according to the development proposals — what is your understanding of the guarantee that there would be a capital injection to ensure that needs are met, not only educationally but structurally, given that some of the buildings are clearly not fit for purpose?

Mr Boyd: That is part of the strategic development of controlled education in east Belfast. There was an overwhelming argument in favour of investing in Ashfield Boys' High School. One of the great successes of the previous chief executive of the BELB was the huge investment made in the controlled post-primary sector in particular. One of the schools that was not a beneficiary of that programme was Ashfield Boys' High School. It has a chronic need for further investment, along with the girls' school. The girls' school has wonderful facilities, but, because it is oversubscribed, its accommodation is under pressure.

In developing strategically for the future increased sixth-form provision, which the board saw as particularly important for the young people of east Belfast, there were opportunities to develop on the Ashfield site a joint sixth form of the boys' and girls' schools. So, there are no guarantees, but there is an absolutely compelling case to present to the Minister and say, "This is a must-do for this community."

Mr Kinahan: I find all this extremely difficult to understand. Throughout the process, we do not seem to be putting pupils first. At the same time, we do not seem to have a critical path analysis. You are waiting for a decision to, possibly, close a school, and you have come up with the date of 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter. However, no one seems to be saying, "Right. For that to happen, we have to make the decisions on the sixth form, C2k classrooms, the finance, the accommodation and

the transfer systems." If you put a critical path analysis together, that will give you your timing. At the same time, we should consult all the way through with parents so that they know where it is happening. I am amazed. It comes back to the pupil. We should know where every single pupil is going and how they fit into that critical path analysis. There does not seem to have been a professional approach. You said that timing is separate; but it is all part of the same thing. If you are building a hotel, you build it to the architect's designs, but you put in a critical path analysis. It just does not seem to happen. Are we not missing something vital?

Mr Boyd: I understand your analysis exactly. However, I have to take you back to the point that the board was making proposals. It cannot make decisions of this nature. There were two elements to the proposal. One was the educational element, which was very much driven by the best interests of the children. It was absolutely the best thing to do to get them into the Ashfield schools, which are doing very well and will do better in the future. However, we could not pre-empt a ministerial decision. I know that there are other proposals around for things that might be done in east Belfast or on the Knock dual carriageway. So, we could not pre-empt the Minister's decision.

A lot of work was done on the ground to identify, for example, the courses that individual pupils were taking and to compare the courses being taken at GCSE in the Ashfield schools with Orangefield. We identified that different examination authorities were being used to provide examinations. So, we needed to draw together curricula. We also had to identify the sizes of year groups and the subjects that they were following. A very considerable amount of work was done to map the educational requirement of those children.

We also had initial discussions about the "what ifs". What if you got a quick decision from the Minister? What would you do if you tried to accommodate those children? Clearly, they could not all be accommodated in a short period of time. One possibility was that there would be a phased movement of children from Orangefield to Ashfield. To make that work, you had to establish something to ensure that the children would follow the same courses at the same pace in both schools. All of that work was going on in parallel with this.

Mr Kinahan: I understand that. However, surely, you advise the Minister. Are you telling me that the Minister is not listening? If you are not getting his decision, your critical path cannot start. You have all of your variables still sitting out there. You have all of your pupils still waiting. Surely, you tell the Minister that you need a decision by x and if do not have it by then, that will shift the entire thing from, say, 2013 to 2014. You keep parents and teachers informed all of the way through so that everyone stays in line. We just seem to be coming at it from different angles the whole time.

Mr Boyd: With regard to informing parents, young people and staff, a series of meetings was held with parents and teachers. There was ongoing engagement with staff in the three schools to try to identify issues and the solutions to those issues. Unfortunately, with regard to that exercise, I left the board at the beginning of February. So, we were in only the relatively early stages of development. I understand your analysis exactly. It is the sort of work that would have had to be developed over time.

Mr Kinahan: Is the Minister totally aware of key dates and times by which decisions have to be made?

Mr Boyd: The development proposals have been published. They have been sent to the Minister. The Department oversees the statutory consultation process. The Minister works through whatever he works through. When I was working in the BELB, we constantly made representations and had regular involvement with politicians and community representatives about the vital importance of improving education outcomes, particularly in parts of north and east Belfast. So, that agenda has been well and truly set out in front of all the key decision-makers.

The Chairperson: On that point, Gavin; documentation that we have states that, in October 2012, when you were still interim chief executive, staff at the BELB told Orangefield that it was not a closure. Obviously, you must have authorised that information to be conveyed to Orangefield. Then, we had the ludicrous situation in which the Department interfered. I would like to know what correspondence there was between the board and the Department that alerted the Department to the fact that this was the process that was being used. The Department then said that you needed to change what you were doing because it was not going to approve what you were doing unless you brought it to the Department in a different format. It begs the question: who is in control of the process? Is it the board, the arm's-length body or the Department?

Mr Boyd: The development proposal process is set out in the 1986 Order. It is overseen by the Department and decisions are made by the Minister. The board makes proposals, and it engages in initial consultations to support those proposals. I referred to whether it was an amalgamation or a closure in my opening remarks. We are absolutely clear that this was not a formal amalgamation that would have required the setting aside or creation of a new interim board of governors, which would have required putting in place new senior management teams and staffing structures. We were also absolutely clear, and the board's position was that this is not a typical closure. The clear intention was to ensure that the pupils transferred to the Ashfield schools. The clear expectation, which was articulated, was that the majority of the staff would also transfer with the pupils. When I left the board at the beginning of February, my understanding was that we had already identified that seven staff were likely to go to Ashfield Boys' school and seven were likely to go to Ashfield Girls' school.

Mr Kinahan: We need to find a joined-up way of doing this in the future. Is anyone looking at reviewing the linkage between the Department and the boards so that we get that?

Mr Boyd: I understand that the Department has launched, or is about to launch, a review of the development proposal process, because, historically, it has led to a deal of confusion. That confusion has not been helped by the fact that previously there were different guarantees in place for staff depending on whether they were part of an amalgamation or a closure. You will know that, under the reorganisation agreement which is now in effect, all staff in those circumstances are treated in exactly the same way.

Mrs Dobson: This seems to be a much wider issue about area planning not meeting the needs of pupils and parents. Area planning seems to have thrown up development proposals that are not supported by the community. How do you plan to address those concerns in the future in Orangefield? You will know where I am going with this, and the Chair touched on it earlier, but it would be remiss of me not to ask, considering that pupils of Lurgan College have just left the Public Gallery, how you are going to approach the issue of ensuring community support for area planning in your new role as chief executive of the SELB, particularly with the overwhelming support for the Dickson plan. You have received numerous correspondence, emails, letters and calls from me, but how are you going to ensure that when you take up your new role?

Mr Boyd: Thank you for the question. In relation to the Belfast proposal, the BELB was very sensitive to the fact that there is no political representation on the board. Board members needed reasonable assurance that there was political and community buy-in to any proposals that the board was bringing forward. I and other board officials had a series of engagements with political representatives and wider community groups in the areas involved. Out of the area planning process, a number of issues were identified and a number of potential solutions were identified, but the BELB did not bring forward any development proposals in my time that did not have clear community and political support. So, the development proposal that we are talking about here was Orangefield. That was as a result of significant discussions with a number of interested parties. There was a general understanding of the proposition that we would seek to improve the provision of education in east Belfast by building on the Ashfield schools. There was an understanding that that would inevitably lead to the closure of Orangefield, but I do not recall any responses to consultation saying that we should not go ahead with the Orangefield proposal as set out in the development proposals.

As to the second part of your question, I hope that you give me a little bit of time around that, because I will be attending my first board meeting this afternoon. It did not take very long in the job for me to appreciate that there are significant sensitivities and concerns about —

Mrs Dobson: That is putting it mildly, Gavin.

Mr Boyd: Yes, I am trying to do my diplomatic bit here, but, clearly, this is a really important issue, and I think that the board will be committed to listening to any contributions that come forward to try to help with this issue.

Mrs Dobson: What about the overwhelming support for the Dickson plan? Will you listen to those concerns and take them on board?

Mr Boyd: Jo-Anne, forgive me, because I am struggling. I should be in a position to give you detailed answers and proper answers to your questions, and I am just not there yet.

The Chairperson: In fairness to Gavin, that is not an issue that we are discussing.

Mrs Dobson: I look forward to hearing your answers on that.

Mr Newton: Thank you for coming to the meeting, Mr Boyd. If I were to describe the Orangefield situation in the way reflected to me by parents, I would sum it up with the words "disaster" and "shambles". That is the only way that it can be described, Gavin. I was fortunate, I suppose, in that you and two of your colleagues came to see me after the board of governors. I think that you are guilty of using semantics in saying that the Minister makes the final decision. However, the chairman of the board of governors, Mr McKeown, indicated in a letter to the Chair that they had reluctantly taken the decision to propose the closure and that, at the time, they were advised by officers of the BELB that they should aim to close the school by August, within a year. The reason given by the BELB was that all staff and pupils would be moved to Ashfield schools.

I remember raising the cap situation with you, and that it was done in the context that I had made representation through the years for the cap to be removed and for additional pupils to be admitted. I was always told by the principals at that time that that was not going to happen and that permission would not be given. Here we had a school that was proposed for closure, and there were two schools that you wanted to transfer them to, but the cap had not been removed at that stage and there was an assurance that that would be the case. Let me ask you first; why would that information have been given to me? Why was that the information given to the board of governors and therefore to the parents of pupils in the school when that was not the case?

Mr Boyd: I am sorry, but that was the case. The board's position was that the children who were attending Orangefield school should be transferred to the Ashfield schools, and that is set out —

Mr Newton: They should be.

Mr Boyd: It is set out in the explanatory note that covers the development proposals. For the avoidance of all possible doubt, that was the board's position, and I am not aware that it has changed: the best thing that we could do for those children was transfer them to the Ashfield schools. I also confirm that it was the board's clear view that the vast majority of the staff — if not necessarily all the staff, because people might have found themselves in different circumstances — would transfer with the pupils.

Mr Newton: Where have the pupils ended up?

Mr Boyd: I actually do not know the answer to that. I am no longer chief executive of the board, and I do not know.

Mr Newton: They have not ended up in Ashfield Boys' and Ashfield Girls'.

Mr Boyd: I have to repeat to you, Robin, that the clear position of the BELB, in the time that I was there, was that those children should transfer to the Ashfield schools.

Mr Newton: Many of the boys and girls of Orangefield, certainly the girls, have not ended up in Ashfield and have had to go elsewhere.

Mr Boyd: That is not in line with the position of the board, as stated in the development proposals and the explanatory note.

Mr Newton: The boys and girls, certainly the girls, were greatly affected by not getting into Ashfield and having to go elsewhere.

I remember asking you what space there would be for C2k. I remember raising with you the specific issue of a joint sixth-form facility for the boys' and girls' schools. I remember telling you that I had had conversations, particularly with the principal of the girls' school, and that that school would be making an application for a sixth-form facility under the social investment fund. It had done some work on that. You assured me that that sixth-form facility would be provided by the BELB.

Mr Boyd: I do not think that I could have given you those assurances, because it is the Minister who makes decisions on capital. However, I do assure you that it was absolutely in line and consistent with the BELB area plan that additional sixth-form facilities would be developed on that site. Indeed, there had been discussions between the managements of the two schools about the possibility of the joint management of a joint sixth form.

Mr Newton: During the conversations that we had, I had no doubt in my mind that it was a case of, "Do not worry about the social investment fund, because we will be addressing the sixth-form facility issue." Those were the words, Gavin, I understand that the social investment fund application never went ahead. So, I can only assume that others were convinced that they did not need to make the application.

Mr Boyd: As far as I am concerned, there is an overwhelming case for investment in sixth-form provision in the Ashfield schools. However, that, of course, is contingent on the Minister's decision on Orangefield.

Mr Newton: Gavin, think about what was in the minds of parents and what they were told. I have no doubt that, as the Chairman indicated, those parents voted for closure of the school on the basis not of promises — that is probably the wrong word — but of strong indicators that everything was going to be all right. That was to the extent that parents were invited to bring their children to the schools to sit entrance examinations or some sort of assessment and have a tour of the two schools and be told that school uniform support and transport would be provided. The whole package was sold to the parents on the basis of "Here is our guidance to you if the Minister takes that ultimate decision". It was in the context of that whole package being sold to parents that Mr McKeown and his board of governors voted for the closure of the school.

Mr Boyd: I agree with that assessment.

Mr Newton: That package has not been delivered for them.

Mr Boyd: The proposition has not been dealt with. The proposal has gone. That was the proposal. It was not necessarily a question of selling it to people. It was an honest setting-out of the proposal. Because I am no longer chief executive of the board, I simply do not know the detail of what has happened in the interim. However, we have an unusual situation in which a Minister has not taken a decision about the future of a school, but young people seem to have been dispersed in different directions.

Mr Newton: And "dispersed" is the right word. Gavin, you refer to the Minister's not having taken the decision. However, Danny Kinahan has talked about a professional approach that has timelines built in. What was the phrase that you used, Danny?

Mr Kinahan: Critical path.

Mr Newton: The critical path analysis had not been done. The critical path had not been laid out. Parents were sold a package that this was all to the advantage of their children's education. Children had to — I will not use the word "subject" — undertake an assessment to determine the class that they would go into in Ashfield Girls' or Ashfield Boys'; this test would give them guidance. Parents were spoken to about school uniforms, but then the door was closed on those children and their parents had to go around.

I understand that when parents contacted the two closest schools, Newtownbreda and Priory, and said that they had been advised to contact them, the message that came back was, "No one has told us." So, a parent rings up Newtownbreda High School or Priory Integrated College and asks, "Can I come along and talk to you about my daughter coming in?" The response was, "We know nothing about it."

There is all that dissatisfaction and frustration among parents, all that bad publicity and all that setting back and scattering of students when they were promised that they would move as a unit and that some of their teachers would come with them. It goes back to Danny Kinahan's point that it has been handled in a very, very unprofessional manner.

Mr Boyd: The board's position, at the point that I left the board, was absolutely as you have outlined. The proposal was that the children would transfer to the Ashfield schools. That was the development proposal that went to the Minister. I understand that the board subsequently wrote to the Department at the end of May setting out a different approach. However, I am not the chief executive of the board, and I was not the chief executive of the board at that time. I do not know all the rationale and thinking behind that, but the proposition was exactly as you have outlined. That was the proposition that was put in front of people.

The Chairperson: Gavin, I will conclude because I am aware that you have another meeting to go to. This is clearly a classic case of how not to do it. My worry is that we now have a school that is decimated. We have two other schools in the area — in fact, we have four schools if you take it in its entirety — that are not sure, as we are still waiting on the Minister to make a decision.

As Robin mentioned, back in November 2012, an assurance was conveyed to the board of governors of Orangefield that:

"Mr Lawther had told the principal that Mr Boyd Chief Executive BELB had stated he thought the cost of transport would be facilitated with the issue of bus passes to Orangefield pupils."

Those children have now been scattered. They have been dispersed to wherever it is that they have gone and been left to their own devices.

The issue of the cost of uniforms was raised at that board meeting. The issue of transport was raised. As Robin pointed out, neither Priory nor Knockbreda knew anything of this. It seems as though the board took a decision that they would just ignore Knockbreda because, on the basis of a previous inspection report, it was not suitable for pupils in Orangefield to go to Knockbreda.

What comfort can we take out of this, as an example, that lessons have been learned? I note what you said about a review of the development proposal. That will not be the first review carried out by the Department, and I am sure that there will be a myriad more on a whole raft of issues. What guarantee can we have that lessons were learned and that any further development proposals will not be handled in exactly the same way? This is just not how to do it.

Mr Boyd: The outcomes that seem to have arisen over the last few months — the detail of which I am not familiar with, for reasons that you will understand — are very far removed from the proposals that are still under consideration by the Minister. You have indicated issues around transport and uniforms. Board staff worked incredibly hard to ensure that all the issues that parents identified as troubling them could be dealt with. They worked incredibly hard to ensure that the educational issues would be looked after.

I personally am very disappointed that I was not able to see this proposition through to completion. I do not fully understand how some fundamental changes have taken place for those pupils without a ministerial decision or a new development proposal. We will all benefit from a review of the development proposal process, because, over the years, there has been a huge amount of confusion, with different development proposals in different places. In part, that issue is helped by the reorganisation agreement, which starts to deal with staffing issues. However, I am conscious of the fact that, while it deals with teaching staff, it does not deal with non-teaching staff and support staff.

This case is rather sad, but, from my perspective, the challenge will always be to do the best that we can for children and their parents.

The Chairperson: Gavin, thank you for your attendance. I mean that: I appreciate the fact that you were prepared to come back and have this discussion with us today. I look forward to working with you in your new role. We will come to see you very shortly.

Mr Boyd: Thank you, Chair and members.