



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Business Plan 2013-14:
Department of Education Briefing

4 December 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)
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Trevor Lunn
Ms Maeve McLaughlin
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Mrs Katrina Godfrey	Department of Education
Ms Fiona Hepper	Department of Education
Mr John McGrath	Department of Education

The Chairperson: I welcome to the Committee John McGrath, the deputy secretary, and Katrina Godfrey and Fiona Hepper, newly appointed deputy secretaries. Thank you for your patience this morning. You are very welcome. We look forward to working with the new deputy secretaries.

John, it is only right to say that we are disappointed that we will now have nothing on the common funding formula until January. We had hoped to have something so that we could make progress on it today. However, we are told that that is not the case, so we have decided that we will deal with the business plan.

Mr John McGrath (Department of Education): Chair, there seems to have been some confusion on our part about the Committee's expectations today. However, given the weight of response to the consultation, we would not have been in a position to say much today even if there had not been some element of confusion. We are happy to come back on a date in January to be arranged with the Clerk to deal with the common funding scheme. However, I am not speaking in a personal capacity on that, because I will not be here.

The Chairperson: Just on that, John, this may be the last opportunity that we will have to say a word of appreciation and thanks, because I understand that you will be moving in the new year. I will just say on a personal level and on behalf of the Committee that word of appreciation and thanks. We have always had frank exchanges, and we did not always agree. Irrespective of what Department you go to, we will probably not agree. However, that is not a personal issue. John, I have always found you to be someone for whom I have great respect. I thank you for the time that you took and the effort

that you made to come to the Committee. I want to place that on record. I wish you well in your new Department, whatever it may be.

Mr McGrath: Thank you for the kind remarks, Chair. We have always endeavoured to work with the Committee even if we or the Minister have not always agreed with it. I am absolutely confident that you will get no less a service from my two colleagues in future than I and, indeed, Katrina have been able to provide in the past. Thank you.

I will make a couple of remarks to start the session. We are glad of the opportunity to talk about the corporate business plan. As you know, the Minister gave a commitment last year that the three-year corporate plan for the education sector would be reviewed annually to ensure the strategic direction of the Department and that the bodies for which it is accountable would remain valid. That review confirmed that the vision for the education system — and the original focus around the Department's twin goals of raising standards for all and closing the performance gap to increase access and equality — remains valid. However, some of the key success indicators and associated milestones have now been updated to take account of slippage in the delivery or changes in context since 2012-13.

The business plan for 2013-14 is therefore set in the context of the review of the corporate plan and is included in annex A of the document. Once again, a challenging work programme is contained in the Department's business plan. You are already aware, from the end-year progress report in last year's plan, that, although significant progress was made across a wide range of priority areas, some areas of work in which we had hoped to make greater progress slipped and have been carried forward into this year's plan. The Minister has made very clear to us the importance that he attaches to the delivery plan. He keeps a very close eye on progress with it and the need for early monitoring and early action to address any slippage.

We have to acknowledge that although the Department will endeavour to deliver the plans successfully, they are, as I said, challenging and subject to a range of developments and pressures that may impact on full delivery as anticipated. It is quite likely that, in any given year, there will be priorities that were not evident at the start of the year but which have to be dealt with as the year progresses. I am conscious that the last time we talked about the business plan, we discussed setting a whole day aside to discuss it. We will endeavour to deal with whatever issues the Committee wishes to raise this morning, but I suspect that we will not run the whole gamut.

The Chairperson: Thanks, John. What we want to do this morning is allow members the opportunity to ask questions. You will not be surprised to know that I do not agree with the Department's corporate view that selection should be brought to an end; that is a personal view. That was in the previous corporate plan and it is in this corporate plan as well, and it is something that we do not agree with the Department on. However, I do not want to concentrate on that.

What I want to ask you is this: can you clarify how the Department sees moving forward on computer-based assessment (CBA)? Has the Department decided what will replace it, the timescale for that, and how it will ensure that the lessons from the previous unsuccessful roll-out are learned? The Minister made reference to procurement issues. We are almost at the end of the second, if not into the third, year of the procurement process. You can remind me whether it was a three- or five-year procurement cycle. It seems as though, at some stage, the Department will have to revisit that issue and go back out to procurement with the likelihood that we will not have any consistency. Could you give us an update on that element of the plan?

Mr McGrath: I will ask Katrina to take that.

Mrs Katrina Godfrey (Department of Education): The Minister explained to the Assembly previously that one of the key things that would inform his decisions on the way forward was not just the outcomes of a series of workshops that were held with schools before the summer, and which he touched on in his statement of 21 May, but optional use of the CBA tool in 2013-14. He explained that how the schools involved were making use of the tool in 2013-14 would be key in informing the next steps.

One hundred and eighty-five primary schools volunteered to take part, and only a few have assessments left to complete. As of last week, about 14,000 pupils had completed the literacy assessment and the same number had completed the numeracy assessment. The critical thing will be their experience and the additional learning from their participation in the system during a period where it has not been specified as a statutory requirement.

The Committee will be aware that, in his statement in May, the Minister also asked for a second independent review to be conducted into the circumstances around the procurement and rolling out of the new provider. That is very near completion, and I imagine that the Minister will want to update the Committee, the Assembly and other relevant parties very shortly on its outcomes. It is important that those outcomes inform the way forward.

The Chairperson: Thanks for that, Katrina. Where are we with the procurement of the contract?

Mrs Godfrey: We are into the second year, essentially, of the current contract. You are absolutely right: one of the key tensions to emerge is that between the requirements of procurement policy and the requirements and expectations of schools for stability and, as you say, continuity of the platform that is available. The reports on the work that is under way will help us to inform and, perhaps, to challenge aspects of procurement requirements to make sure that they can be adapted to best meet the needs of schools.

One of the clear messages that you and other Committee members will have heard is that uncertainty in the potential of different providers responding to tenders is unsettling for schools and that it affects continuity. That will have to be looked at.

The Chairperson: Is it possible that, as a result of the sample of the 185 schools and the lessons that, I trust, have been learned from the way in which it was handled, the Department would say that it will not let this go out to tender and that it will encourage schools to use that which they currently use for assessment? If they standardise those in a way that would result in a saving for the public purse and a more acceptable approach in schools, then, clearly, the inspectorate would be happy with that because it does not pay any great regard to what goes on in computer-based assessment.

Mrs Godfrey: No. In fact, a key decision was taken at the outset that, because of their diagnostic nature, the computer-based assessment outcomes would be kept in a school and would be used to inform decisions in it. That is an absolutely key point.

Those are the points that schools have been making. You will have heard very clearly that one of the key messages that has come out is that schools make a lot of use of diagnostic assessment and indeed, increasingly, of computer-based diagnostic assessment. Many schools have asked us whether we could not just ask everyone to use what they use, but, of course, that too could raise procurement issues. If the Department said that everyone has to use X, does that give one provider a particular advantage? Those are the sorts of things that have to be worked through.

I was in a school last Friday in which the staff talked eloquently about the full range of diagnostic assessment tools that they use. They expressed their views on how using the tools that they valued might represent a way forward. That is the sort of feedback that I will be keen to listen to in my new role in order to make sure that when we are providing advice to the Minister, it is the best possible advice.

The Chairperson: Following on from that — the two points are related — where does the plan envisage us going in relation to the timescale for the levels of progression? It has caused considerable concern. What mechanism, if any, will be used to replace the levels of progression? What is the timescale? What have we learned as a result of the way in which that process played out over the past number of months?

Mrs Godfrey: Talking to school leaders and educationalists and looking at the feedback from international best practice, there is less of an issue with the levels of progression than there is with the mechanisms by which pupils are assessed. There is a body of evidence locally, nationally and internationally that setting out a range of knowledge and skills that pupils might reasonably be expected to have acquired through good-quality teaching and learning at certain key stages in their education is a valid approach and a valid way forward. The issue, of course, is this: who determines how pupils have reached that level, and how is that gathered and reported? That has been the subject of considerable discussions and conversations between teachers, their representatives and the Department.

The Committee will be aware that after the first year of implementation — remember that we are only now moving into year two after the first year of implementation — changes were made in response to feedback. For example, the portfolio size for moderation was reduced and, for the first year, primary-

school participation in formal moderation was voluntary. Moreover, CCEA is engaging with schools. The key thing here is about continuing to learn from the experience and feedback from schools.

There is a critical point here in relation to who decides how children have achieved. All the evidence tells us, as do teachers themselves, that the best possible people to make that judgement are teachers. Deploying your own professionals, as opposed to putting in place a test, for example, that requires someone else to determine it, is a real strength. The other thing that teachers have told us consistently is that they want the benefit of moderation because that provides them with the assurance that they are being consistent and that everyone else is being consistent. The trick has been to make sure that moderation can be sufficiently robust in the manageability context for teacher workloads.

That work continues, and the Minister has made it clear that he will continue to listen to feedback and make adjustments that keep within that sense of having an opportunity at three key points in a child's education to take stock of what they have achieved, and of keeping the professionals — the teachers in the classroom or the subject teachers — involved rather than having it as something that is done to them. That remains the challenge.

Mr Lunn: John, apart from Mervyn, I think that I am the only survivor from 2007, so I associate myself with the Chairperson's remarks. We have not always agreed, but it has always been a pleasure to deal with you.

Mr McGrath: Thank you.

Mr Lunn: Now that I have said that, I will stop being nice. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: I did not say that; I missed out there.

Mr Lunn: I am curious; perhaps you could direct me. Is there a reference anywhere in the plan to the words "integrated education"?

Mr McGrath: I think that we have had this conversation before. *[Laughter.]* The answer may well be the same as it was last time, which is in the negative.

Mr Lunn: Is Katrina looking for it? *[Laughter.]* I can help you out here; it does not say it. We had a conversation last year about the commitment to Irish-medium education and to the promotion of shared education, but there was no reference to integrated education. I was hoping that that might have been rectified in this update, but it has not. The only reference to integrated education is in annex D, where it lists the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) as an arm's-length body. I am surprised that you do not have a section for very arm's-length bodies, frankly, and you could have put it in there. There is not a mention of it. There are pages on shared education, which I do not object to; that is fine. What sort of message are we sending to the integrated movement that it is not even mentioned in the Department's business plan and corporate plan, given the obligation that you have? I have talked about encouraging facilitation, but there is not a mention in here.

Mr McGrath: I think that the focus on "shared" reflects the fact that shared education was one of the Programme for Government commitments; therefore, you would expect it to migrate in. The question is whether there are any targets or milestones specific to the integrated sector. Perhaps at the minute there are not. The Minister is conscious of his duty towards the integrated sector and the Irish-medium sector and is giving thought to what that represents through policy making and target setting for education in the future.

Mrs Godfrey: If I can add to that, Trevor, a critical thing is that almost all the targets and commitments and the strategic objectives apply to children educated in the integrated sector in exactly the same way as to other sectors. For the same reason, you will not see specific mention of the Catholic maintained or the controlled sector. There are a couple of specific issues recognising the position on the Irish-medium sector, but the focus on standards, attainment, attendance and on the learning environment all apply. One of the key things is making sure that the focus is on the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom whatever sector a child may be in.

Mr Lunn: I would call that a good try, Katrina. There is no need for a commitment to promote the maintained sector or the controlled sector; it is a given that the Department runs that. There is a

commitment in legislation, and you have said that the Minister recognises his responsibility to encourage and facilitate integrated education. It astonishes me that there is no mention of it here: there are no targets or success indicators and there is no commitment whatsoever. The movement is being sidelined, frankly, by this rush towards shared education. That is a good excuse. I do not object to the shared education movement at all. It has its place and is working well, but it is being used as a means of sidelining the integrated sector and turning it into a Cinderella movement to which the Department gives a nod, although not to the extent of putting it in its business plan. It makes no attempt to fulfil its obligation.

Mr McGrath: The obligation is to encourage and facilitate: it is not to promote. The difficulty has always been in striking a balance. I do not think that it is a matter of setting a target for the number of integrated places or something like that. We are reflecting a movement that is fairly mature and stable.

Mr Lunn: Stable means not increasing, so, yes.

Mr McGrath: It is stable and there will be debates, which we have constantly with colleagues in the integrated sector, to the extent to which there is latent demand that needs to be addressed. We are looking at such issues, and we have a number of development proposals with us at the moment for consideration under that very issue. As I said, the Minister is cogitating on the judgement on the two duties, which are similar but not the same. The integrated duty specifies that it is not the integrated sector; it is the education of Protestant and Catholic children together. It is not actually a duty to promote the integrated education sector.

Mr Lunn: I am glad that the Minister is cogitating; I will look up what that means. It means prevaricating in my opinion, and I do not think that the Department is demonstrating any will even to attempt to encourage and facilitate. The Assembly passed a motion including the word "promote" a couple of years ago. I know that it is not in legislation, but at least it demonstrated the will of the Assembly. The Minister and the Department have paid no attention to that either. To encourage and facilitate, to me, should translate at least into a mention and some sort of indication as to where the Department would like to see the integrated movement going and the number of children being educated together increasing, but, as usual, there is nothing there.

Mr McGrath: The duty is to encourage and facilitate by responding to the wishes of parents for integrated education. I am not sure that the Department setting a target is the correct approach to that any less than setting a target for Irish-medium education.

Mr Lunn: What is the Department's obligation to Irish-medium education?

Mr McGrath: To facilitate Irish-medium education.

Mr Lunn: Irish-medium education is at least mentioned here. There is mention of trying to promote the post-primary Irish-medium sector in the business plan.

Mr McGrath: Yes, there is a mention of a specific exercise to deal with the fact that there is no real road map at present for Irish-medium post-primary education. We need a road map for what it will look like beyond the current main provision in Belfast and several units outside it. As I said, there is a difference between the maturity and stability of the two sectors.

Mr Lunn: Is that the final document? It is not a draft that we are looking at.

Mr McGrath: Yes.

Mr Lunn: I am just looking at the section on shared education. Here is a good line:

"ensure that all children have the opportunity to participate in shared education programmes by 2015 ... Increase substantially the number of schools sharing facilities by 2015".

There is no encouragement there for the sector that I am talking about. That is not a question; it is a fact. There is no encouragement. I am finished, Chairman.

Mrs Dobson: How do you follow that? I thank you for your briefing and wish you all the best, John. I will try to be nice today. It will be no surprise that I want to focus on the preschool education target on page 199. You say in it that you have achieved the business plan commitment. Will you explain exactly what you mean by that?

Mr McGrath: The business plan commitment is to ensure that all parents have access to preschool education. We have largely achieved that with the figure of 99.7%.

Mrs Dobson: What additional work have you done to identify why parents do not continue in the process to achieve a place for their children? This year I think that you know who the 466 families are. Do you agree — I am sure you will not — with some of the parents who have contacted me to say that the system is fatally flawed? They seem to fall off or give up in the attempt. Those are the parents who have been affected when they have not got places for their children. Have you contacted them or done anything to ask their views when you are looking to meet the Programme for Government target?

Mr McGrath: The Department is not following up with individual parents, because it operates through the five education and library boards. We are, however, as we have done in recent years, reviewing what happened in the previous year and looking to see how we can make improvements for the coming year. We operate very closely with the five boards on that, and we will not sit on our laurels because of the achievement in the past year or so but try as far as possible, within the very close margins that we are at, to see whether we can do better.

Parents can make their choice and may have expectations of full- or part-time nursery provision, even though we may never be able to meet everybody's number-one requirements fully, nor is that what the Programme for Government says. We think that we have done significantly well in the past couple of years to refine the process and to make it operate more smoothly. There is still an issue of being clear to parents about what the state says it will and will not provide; it is not saying that it will provide full-time nursery care to everyone who wants it. It is clear that there are misunderstandings about what people can expect.

Mrs Dobson: People expect a place close to their home. You know who the 466 families are this year. Surely they are best placed to help the Department fix the problem by working with them. You have their details: are there any plans to take that forward?

Mrs Godfrey: We have looked at the information, not for this year but over the past three years. One of the commitments that we had was to complete an analysis of the reasons why parents do not stick with the admissions process all the way through. The key point is that 99.8% — not 99.7% — target-age children got a place that their parents were happy with. That is an amazing achievement by the folk who work in our early years providers and those in the boards who coordinate all of that provision. I want to acknowledge that.

We have completed — and I think that it is published on the Department's website, but I will check — an analysis of the reasons that parents have provided for not availing of places over the past three years. We are using that information to determine how best to encourage parents who choose not to participate fully in the process to stick with it through to the end. That is a piece of work that has been done. What does it tell us? As you alluded to, it comes down to the fact that a lot of decisions made are based on very individual circumstances that relate to wanting a place in a very specific and individual provider; perhaps because it works for wider childcare

At no point in the education system in any country is there an ability to match every parent and child with the specific institution they want. That is why we always encourage parents to give a range of choices. As I said, where parents give a range of choices and see the process through to the end, 99.8% get sorted. By anybody's standard, that is an amazing achievement by the people who work in the preschool sector. The analysis has been done, and it is now being used to inform what further engagement and reshaping of the process there can be to encourage more parents to see it through to the end so that their child gets the preschool place in their immediate preschool year to which they are entitled.

Mrs Dobson: Could you furnish the Committee with the analysis or point us in its direction?

Mrs Godfrey: Yes.

Mr Dobson: So, you are listening, you are concerned, and you have the details and information for the 466 families that have fallen off. I raised this with you many times when you have been before the Committee. It would be very useful. For a while, it appeared that they were simply disappearing off the radar, and there was no willingness to bring them along or find out why they did not continue with the process.

Mrs Godfrey: You are right that it was raised before, and that is why we undertook the analysis. I am pretty sure that it is widely available, but we will follow up with the Committee Clerk and make sure that the Committee is directed to the right information.

Mr Craig: John, I wish you all the best in your new future.

Mr McGrath: This is beginning to feel like a wake. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Craig: I was going to pay you the compliment that you are the embodiment of a civil servant; and you know what my opinions of civil servants are based on.

Mr Lunn: Sir Humphrey; is it?

The Chairperson: Is it Sir Humphrey?

Mr Craig: Yes; Sir Humphrey and 'Yes Minister' is all that I base my thoughts on civil servants on. It is a roundabout compliment to you, John.

Mr McGrath: Thank you.

Mr Lunn: Back-handed, he means. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Craig: John, I listened to what you said about computer-based assessment. The bigger issue, which I do not really see picked up in the plans, is the C2k programme in schools. A number of schools piloted the advanced version of C2k and the whole computerisation of classroom work. John, where do you intend taking this? Have you had any feedback from the schools that did the pilot schemes? Did they raise any issues?

Mr McGrath: I will not talk specifically. However, I do know — because we get the same sort of anecdotal responses when we are out and about — that a number of schools are not necessarily that happy with what has materialised with the advances in C2k. Indeed, one of the areas of work that the Department is going to commission shortly will look at the extent to which the full capacity of C2k is being used, not just the modernisation now, and whether we are fully using what we are paying for. There are a number of modules and capabilities in the system that we do not appear to be using, collectively, or even individually, at school level. We are going to commission a bit of work on that in general. I will ask Katrina to talk on the specific issue that you mentioned.

Mrs Godfrey: Are you referring to the transformation programme; essentially the upgrade of the new system?

Mr Craig: Yes.

Mrs Godfrey: I have heard from a number of schools. It is interesting because the feedback tends to reflect the extent to which schools are pushing, or not pushing, at the furthest boundaries of the system's capacity. The schools that are very advanced in using technology are frustrated, in some respects, because they know what can be done at this stage and that they could be doing more with more. However, John's point is also valid. We have a huge number of schools that are not making use of the full capacity of the system in, I suspect, the same way as most of us do not make use of the full capacity of all of the technological kit that we own. As John said, we need to look more deeply into how we make sure that schools are getting the full benefit out of what is a very significant investment in technology that is available to all schools in quite an equitable manner.

One of the things that we have to look at is how the technology is used to differentiate between teaching and learning and, for example, how you can use the technology to encourage and motivate pupils to learn. There are also aspects of the system that are incredibly powerful. You will probably

know them from your school. Some of the power in the assessment manager-end of C2k is for tracking pupil progress and intervening when you spot slight dips in order to provide the support and the differentiated teaching and learning and additional help to make sure that a dip is only a dip and is not a sustained downward trajectory. I know that there are issues with the confidence with which schools feel able to use that end of the system.

There has been a huge stride, particularly in our primary schools, over the past number of years. A few years ago, there would have been much less history of using the capacity of the system to interrogate the data. There is now more evidence, from the inspectorate, for example, that schools are using the system more intelligently. Equally, an issue that we recognise is the need to further develop teachers' capacity. The pupils' thirst for using technology may well be more evident because they are so comfortable with using so many devices and getting the best out of them.

The schools that are pushing at the boundaries would like to have more than they have. However, there are many others that could make more use of what is being provided.

Mr Craig: Katrina and John, this is all well and good. Trust me that I am not talking about my school in this regard, because we are not one of the advanced ones. I have seen the advantages of using the system as it stands, and with all the modules etc that are in it. It is an incredibly useful tool for the senior management and board of governors of a school. That said, the schools that are at the advanced stage are having severe difficulties with all of this. Some of it is totally predictable in that people are sitting with laptops and computers that cannot log on to the new system because, quite frankly, they are outdated and at the end of their shelf life.

You are here with the Department's plans for where it is trying to take things. Should it not be taking the strategic direction to put the financial commitment into this to make it work? At the end of the day, the big cry out there is, "We cannot get IT professionals." Well, my goodness: how are we ever going to do that if we cannot even get our act together on IT in the schools themselves?

Mr McGrath: Some of your points are well made, Jonathan. In recent years, we have looked at upgrading the kit a number of times. In a number of schools, the hardware is dated. At the same time, we are getting a number of issues on the advance of iPads and stuff such as that. Events are moving fast on this, and people are asking us why we are not buying iPads for every child. It sounds good, but some schools would not be on the curve to make best use of them, although some wonderful examples of learning are going on at the moment. We are trying to work out the best way to put in some more investment while making sure that it is strategic and appropriate. It is on the list of things to do.

Mr Craig: I will offer a word of caution, John. There is the idea that you should give every child a computer or an iPad, no matter what it is. There are massive capacity issues internally, even in the school's network structure. The biggest issue, whether it is BT, Virgin or whoever carries the internet, is that the capacity is just miserable. I speak from experience as a parent whose child has an iPad and goes to a school that uses the facility.

Mr McGrath: You have highlighted what we are talking about. Some things sound attractive initially, but you do not have the infrastructure to deal with it. At the end of the day, you still need the appropriate input from teachers and the rest to utilise things so that they are not toys. We are looking at that and we are conscious of the speed and pace of development, but we are also aware that some of the C2k kit is dated and probably needs to be brought up to standard. Otherwise, in a sense, we have a software/hardware imbalance.

Mr Craig: A lot of these issues are beyond the capacity of the schools to deal with. They need the boards, the Department, and, ultimately, the Minister to have real drive and direction on this stuff.

Mr McGrath: We are aware of it. We have looked at it a few times. We have talked to principals who say that their kit is so slow that by the time it warms up they have lost 10 minutes of a lesson. I am sure that you have heard the same thing. It is as basic as that. We are looking at it. The issue is about the best thing to do when it comes to investment, particularly at strategic level. At the same time, we have to cope with the fact that we have 1,100 schools, a lot of which are ploughing their own furrow — a good furrow, in some cases. They do not want to be held back; so, it is about balance. Your points are well made and we will take them away.

Mr Kinahan: I have not been on the Committee for very long, but I wish you all the best. I was going to be naughty and wonder whether you had the same book beside your bed as Tony Blair and others, if you were watching the programme last night. It was about Machiavelli.

Mrs Godfrey: The dark prince.

Mr Kinahan: It was very interesting.

Mr McGrath: I do use some of the quotes, though.

Mr Kinahan: I wish you the best of luck in the future.

Mr McGrath: I am teaching tomorrow. We do a session with senior civil servants, and my opening slide is a quote from Machiavelli about the danger of change; you know the one I mean. It is not irrelevant to the education sector, shall we say.

Mr Kinahan: Absolutely. Anyway, I wish you the best of luck in the future.

Mr McGrath: Thank you, Danny.

Mr Kinahan: The brief talks about 82 commitments in the Programme for Government, and that the Department of Education is the leading Department for eight of them. Do you ever look at the commitments in which the Department is involved, at the tail end, with the Department for Employment and Learning and others, so that the Committee gets briefed on where you are on those?

Mr McGrath: Certainly, we recognise that we are contributors to other Departments that lead on certain commitments in the Programme for Government, particularly in areas such as STEM and so forth. We regularly monitor and review progress, as all Departments do with us where we contribute to their commitments. In reporting for the Department, and in our own business plan, we highlight those for which we are the lead Department.

The Department, along with the Minister, actively sees itself as contributing to the wider economic goals of the Executive and has positioned itself, or recognised itself, as being an economic Department as much as a social Department. Indeed, the Minister sits on the Executive subcommittee on the economy. We, at least, pride ourselves on taking a much broader look at the contribution of education to the Executive as a whole.

Mr Kinahan: I just wonder whether it is something that we should be pushing for at the tail-end of this document in future.

Mr McGrath: It is a useful point that, perhaps, we should reflect on, particularly where it involves time, resources and effort in the Department. It is a helpful point.

Mrs Godfrey: We can pick up on that, Danny, because John is right: particularly with colleagues in DEL, whether it is directly or indirectly, a lot of what we do will help them achieve their Programme for Government targets further down the pipeline. To a certain extent, the same is true with colleagues in the Department of Health, through the contribution of schools. For example, the Minister recently launched a strategy on healthy food in schools, which clearly contributes to things such as obesity and public health targets for the Department of Health. That joint working happens. If it is helpful, we can do a briefing paper for the Committee on the Department's contribution to other Departments' Programme for Government targets.

Mr Kinahan: I want to move on to the point that Trevor Lunn made about shared education and on the dreaded ESA. On shared education, are we any further forward with the campuses, the summer schools, and indeed maybe even looking at Atlantic Philanthropies (AP), and I think it was the primary integrating/enriching education (PIEE) project document, and adopting what is there? I know that we are sort of halfway into the system.

Mr McGrath: We are doing a considerable amount of work on shared education, as are the Executive as a whole. Clearly, the immediate big hit item is Lisanelly, where we are trying to steam ahead. Most of the components at Lisanelly are in the right place, and we will be appointing a professional design

team next year with a contract for that, which will be for around £10 million or £12 million. We are working with schools locally on how that will work; so, that is the big engine. We are also working on the wider target for more shared campuses and expect to define the criteria and seek expressions of interest after Christmas.

As you know, a number of initiatives are reasonably worked up and some are simply thoughts in people's heads. We are quite likely to be willing to make funding available for people to work up their concepts, because we are quite keen on that, as is the Minister. The criteria will make it clear that it is not about sharing for sharing's sake. There need to be educational benefits and it needs to be consistent with area planning. We do not want there to be any token campuses; there have to be real ones.

Mr Kinahan: That was going to be my next question, because area planning is going ahead in certain areas in such a way that it stops sharing.

Mr McGrath: No one wants any of this to undermine the strategic path for education. Therefore, if a school's future is under threat from area planning, coming forward with a proposition on a shared campus is not necessarily going to be the escape route. We are looking for innovative proposals and are reasonably flexible. We are not going to define a campus until somebody brings along an idea, because we are not all going to be looking at 100-acre sites such as Lisanelly. It could be two schools together. It will be reasonably fluid to allow ideas to come forward, and a number are on the go at the minute.

Mr Kinahan: You will be keeping it fluid and reasonably flexible. However, there are a lot of other ideas going around that area planning has advanced to a certain scale and is stopping them happening. Is there flexibility for area planning to slip into pause mode while we get the sharing aspect?

Mr McGrath: I would like to think so. Area planning is about looking, primarily, at the schools we want for the future; brigading them in a way. It could offer possible solutions. I would not see it as an obstacle. However, we do not want shared campuses to be used to circumvent area planning; that people would use it to argue that a school might be sustainable when it is not. Thinking is quite well advanced and will be taken forward in the overall approach to Together: Building a United Community at the overall ministerial panel that has been set up involving Executive Ministers, which I think is due to meet before Christmas. We work very closely on the campuses and with colleagues in OFMDFM and we are quite well advanced with the thinking on that.

Obviously, other work is going on. The Minister will be working out what he wants to do. There will be a statement after the report on the ministerial advisory group. We are doing work on the proposition from AP, which is that it puts in £10 million, the centre puts in £10 million and we put in £5 million. So, discussions are going on about what that will look like, because we need to move from knowing that it is £25 million over three years to knowing exactly what it looks like in spend. Discussions are going on between us, OFMDFM and AP. So, there is quite a lot going on at the moment. One of our challenges at the minute is to keep all the strands together. A thousand flowers are possibly blooming, but they are all over the place. We are looking at mechanisms in the Department to make sure that we keep these things going and that we connect with the other Departments on this. I am not as well sighted on the other five or six areas highlighted and on which we are not the lead. Those include summer schools and youth.

Mrs Godfrey: We are involved in discussions, and, as John mentioned, we have a couple of meetings next week and the week after, led by OFMDFM, that will allow us to contribute a bit more.

The other point, Danny, that I was going to mention is that one of the Programme for Government commitments is to establish the baseline for the level of sharing that takes place. We are at the point of shortly publishing the outcomes of a school omnibus survey. It looked at a number of things, and shared education was one of the particular areas surveyed. That provides us with indications from schools reporting themselves on the extent to which they have been involved in sharing, whether it is lessons, resources or out-of-school activities, with other schools. The results will be available very shortly, and, after Christmas, the Committee might like to have a briefing on that. The early results suggest that participation in shared education was, perhaps not surprisingly, higher in post-primary and in special education than it was in primary. Interestingly, it was higher in the west and lowest in the south-east. Again, it is all from a relatively high base. It is a topic on its own, and the Committee might find a briefing useful at some point.

Mr Kinahan: I look forward to that. My final question this time is on ESA. In the past two days, we have had hints in the papers that ESA is on the brink. Is there a plan B? Is the Department looking at any alternative for a new version of ESA or funding for the boards?

Mr McGrath: The Minister was on record this week that, if it does not materialise, he will have to see how he can beef up the existing structure.

Mr Kinahan: No plan B has yet been worked on.

Mr McGrath: That is plan B.

Mr Lunn: Chair, I want to come in on the back of Danny's question and your comments on the shared education campuses. Frankly, I have no objection to them whatsoever. You might have thought, from previous comments, that I did have an objection, but I do not. I think that they are progressive, but I am wondering about the financial side. Some schemes rumoured, or mooted, are fairly grandiose, and Lisanelly will take a lot of money. Is the commitment for 10 shared campuses in the next 10 years realistic? Is it possible to achieve? I know that some of them will be small and some will be bigger. I think that £500 million was mentioned in the announcement, which covered a lot of Departments and a lot of projects. Given the tightness of the Department's budget generally, where is the money coming from to do these things?

Mr McGrath: Thankfully, it is not my job to find money at the centre. Clearly, we will need to see what emerges and the extent to which these are investments that we might be making anyway but in a different shape. If we get to the point where some schools need to be replaced, then instead of replacing them separately, we might put them on some campus. That is not extra spend, and it is why we are very clear that we do not want to generate proposals that we would not have been doing something with anyway. However, as with anything on capital spend in education, given the size of our estate, the backlog of maintenance and a number of demands, there will have to be some degree of prioritising. It will be an issue for the Executive to determine whether it identifies separate funds for initiatives under the wider T:BUC label or the extent to which some of those can come from mainstream funding. I expect it to be a balance between the two. Equally, we do not want to go out with the suggestion that there is a pot of gold here. In the same way, schools will have to work out their funding under the common funding formula, and that is what they will have to manage with. Some of these initiatives will not give schools any greater resource basis than they have at the minute, or can expect to have.

Mr Hazzard: I welcome the new strategic objective on work, North and South, to enhance the outcomes of young people. To what extent will that include work towards improving the portability of A-level results for students who want to go to Southern universities? I recognise that this is outside the Minister's gift, and it is the universities that need to do it, but I wonder what sort of work can be done to enhance that.

Secondly, I am not sure whether we get modern languages spot on here. I think that we need to improve how we do modern languages to equip our young people. To what extent are we looking at modern languages and skills for the global world today?

Finally, I have some sympathy with Trevor's point on integrated education. We need to see it being mentioned in corporate and business plans that the Department has a duty. I was also disappointed when Irish-medium education was not mentioned in the chief inspector's report last year. I think that it ducks a duty, and I think that it should be mentioned. It is 15 years since the Good Friday Agreement, and we need to look at where we sit with Irish-medium education and integrated education, and what else needs to be done to help, if not promote, facilitate and encourage two very important sectors of education.

Mrs Godfrey: I will pick up on that. You are right that there are a number of focuses on North/South cooperation, particularly in raising attainment and in addressing educational underachievement. Chris, you are right, in the sense that the final decision on admissions to universities in the South rests with them. They are autonomous bodies. My Minister and Minister Farry have made the point to the Minister in the South about the particular approach taken, since the introduction of the A* grade for our A levels, as to how they are counted. I am very aware that the tariff presents particular challenges for our young people, including those performing at the highest levels, because of the way the tariff is calculated; and, in many cases, for high-demand courses, there is an expectation that you would simply have to carry four subjects through to A2. Our A levels are in quite a bit of depth compared to

the leaving cert in the South. So, it is an issue where pressure continues to be brought to bear, where possible, given that these are decisions for autonomous and individual organisations in the South; but I know that the Minister has not lost sight of that. I recall, in the past few days, Minister Farry saying something in the House along similar lines.

We would like to look at modern languages in more detail, for the reasons you suggest. Interestingly, I suspect that a modern languages strategy now would look very different from one 10, 15 or 20 years ago. If you were linking your modern languages strategy to your economic strategy, you would be looking much more at the growth of languages that would not be traditionally taught in schools here. You would not be talking necessarily about French or German; you might be talking about Mandarin, Arabic or Portuguese. Those are the issues that we continue to work on.

One of the difficulties is that you need young people to study their proficiency in those languages, develop their teaching competence and then come back to be the teachers of more young people. That presents its own challenges, but I know that my Minister, the First Minister, Minister Farry and junior Minister Bell were with the Confucius Institute on Friday. One of the things that my Minister is keen on is looking at those relationships and building on the First Minister and deputy First Minister's visits to China. Of course, there is another dimension, and the Committee will have seen the PISA outcomes in yesterday's publication. Some of the key things for us are who we learn from, what we learn from them and what learning is transferable. Shanghai and Hong Kong in China are exceptionally high-performing regions. So, it is about more than simply languages; there may be other reasons why we want to develop links.

Mr Hazzard: I was talking to a linguist from Queen's recently who told me that two of the fastest growing languages at Queen's are Mandarin and Arabic. You wonder whether we could start to address that earlier in the education cycle.

Mrs Godfrey: That is one of the things that the Minister is looking at and concerned about from the economic perspective and from the perspective that there is a lot of evidence that learning a second language — any language — develops a child's literacy and other skills in many ways that are not directly linked to proficiency in the language itself. That is why, for example, the primary languages programme has been a critical part of what we do and the support that we provide for primary schools. Exposure to another language has a huge impact on children. It also ties very well into the focus in the curriculum on global citizenship and the tolerance and understanding of other cultures that is built through a programme like that.

Mr McGrath: We discussed Irish-medium and integrated education. It is important to understand that a huge amount of time and effort in the Department is devoted to issues in those sectors on a daily basis.

Three of us were in Harvard some years ago, and a lecturer summarised work in the public service as a balance between the pursuit of goodness and the prevention of bad things. Frequently, it is something like 20:80. We spend a lot of time dealing with problems, inheritances and issues, particularly, if I am honest, in Irish-medium education and in integrated education. We spend a huge amount of time on those two sectors, and the amount of time and effort spent is probably disproportionate to their scale.

I do not want to go into the issues, but we have spent God knows how much time and effort trying to get solutions to issues like the one with Drumlins Integrated Primary School in Ballynahinch, involving 17 or 18 properties. Although the business plan reflects the good things that we wish to pursue, it is important to recognise the huge amount of time and effort that is expended under the radar trying to resolve issues, helping people and going out to schools to deal with problems. We have a lot of governance issues, issues with boards of governors, which perhaps do not have full support under the system, and HR issues. Katrina has spent considerable time on those issues in the past few years, and others will do so in the future.

It is not as if those are Cinderella sectors. That is shown by the amount of departmental time and effort that is expended on them. Of course, we are investing in integrated schools, we are looking at others and we will invest in new Irish-medium schools. They are not Cinderella sectors. That does not take away from any of the points that you and Trevor made.

Mr Hazzard: I accept that entirely, but I think that we could reflect that in documents so that people at home do not ask where they are or feel that they do not exist or are not important. If we could reflect the great work we do in those sectors, it would go a long way.

Sorry, Chair. I have one last point. Katrina, you mentioned getting a document looking at the work that DE is doing to help other Departments. Could that include what other Departments are doing to help DE?

Mrs Godfrey: I will have a look at how we might do that, Chris.

Mr Hazzard: I often feel that we end up pumping money in to tackle the effects of social deprivation in education when other Departments could be helping us along the way.

Mrs Godfrey: We have very good working relationships with DSD, for example. It has been very concerned to make sure that the sort of interventions that it might propose also have a sound educational evidence base.

The Chairperson: Trevor, will you wait until —

Mr Lunn: It is just on the back of John's comment. It is not specifically about Drumlins Integrated Primary School.

Mr McGrath: No, that was just an exemplar of the intractable issues that we sometimes have to cope with.

Mr Lunn: I entirely take the point that there must be time spent in the Department talking about or dealing with issues that relate to Irish-medium or integrated schools. Is anybody in the Department, even on a part-time basis, charged with trying to encourage either system? One is in the Programme for Government and the other is in legislation. Is there a liaison officer for either of those sectors?

Mr McGrath: We have a team that deals with Irish-medium and integrated education at a high policy level. When we did the Irish-medium review five or six years ago, one of the main messages was that, in promoting Irish-medium education, having a little team who are the only ones who deal with it is not the right way to promote the sector. It is the same for integrated education. As Katrina said, the whole issue at that time for Irish-medium education was the need to mainstream it, and it was the same for integrated education. Everyone then has a responsibility. The standards people have an issue about driving standards and all the rest, but a team takes forward the high policy element.

As I said, the Minister is looking at the implications for him of the Treacy judgement — technically it is about Coláiste Feirste, but it would apply to both duties — and he is trying to work out what he sees as the way ahead. I expect that there will be some implications within and without the Department as a result of that.

Mr Lunn: When was the last review of the integrated movement? You said that there was one for the Irish-medium sector six or seven years ago.

Mr McGrath: One might be timely, because, although there are good things, there are also bad things. In a number of integrated schools, the balance could not be remotely defended as near the terms that the legislation specifies. If you have 95:5, it is very difficult to argue. I suspect that some of that is the Department's fault for not policing that sort of thing in the past.

Mr Lunn: That was not quite where I wanted you to go on this.

Mr McGrath: I know. It is timely, and that is our fault —

The Chairperson: Be careful what you ask for.

Mr Lunn: Write down that it is timely.

Mr McGrath: In reviewing what has happened, the approach around transformation has, in some cases, turned into a last gasp for schools to try to duck the issues about standards and falling rolls. Some decisions were taken for good reasons but were perhaps not as well founded.

Mr Lunn: Parental choice.

Mr McGrath: Absolutely, but it is fair to say that there are a number of tricky issues about standards and governance in both sectors. They are not restricted to those sectors, and some of that is because they are grant-maintained integrated (GMI) schools or because those who made the move to set up a school do not necessarily have the skill sets to run a school in governance terms. We have had a number of problems that one would not want to have — I was not even thinking of that one, Danny — that members will be familiar with. Some stocktake of the integrated education sector may well be an idea. We will take that back.

Mr Rogers: John, I, too, wish you all the best in your new role. I also wish Katrina and Fiona all the best.

I want to follow on from Chris's point about cross-border education. What discussions have you had with the Department of Education and Skills (DES) on cross-border education? I am thinking particularly about area-based planning and, specifically, about a school like St Mary's High School, Brollagh, on the border. Have there been any discussions with DES on that or on the cross-border survey?

Mrs Godfrey: I will pick up on the survey, and John can talk about area planning.

The survey took place about this time last year, and its outcomes are due to be discussed at a future NSMC meeting. As your question implicitly recognises, Sean, there are challenges and opportunities. Some of the challenges relate to the legislation, which requires schools here to give priority in their admissions to residents of the North before anybody else. The Minister is on record as saying that he is committed to doing whatever he possibly can to remove those barriers and to allow more of a flow in response to parental preference. That presents wider curriculum challenges as there are different systems with different transfer points and different approaches to qualifications and things like that. However, as yesterday's outcomes show, the 15-year-olds in the South are outperforming our 15-year-olds and, after a dip in 2009, the education system in the South is back among the high-performing countries of the world.

It is a key starting point for wider lessons for learning in policy and implementation, and perhaps even in teaching and learning that can be transferred. So, under that North/South agenda, there are a whole lot of strands that are being taken forward, with a particular focus on what is in the best interests of improving outcomes for children and young people.

John may want to add something from an area planning perspective.

Mr McGrath: Clearly, there are issues that need to be picked up, including cross-border issues. It is already the case that many children go across the border to the nearest school, and that is certainly an issue that managing authorities will want to look at. I know that the Brollagh people are perhaps trying to explore whether there is some potential there. It does not automatically provide a solution to the Brollagh issue that is different from that put forward by CCMS. Certainly, a number of children from down South come here for their education. On balance, more come North than go South at the moment. With respect to Irish-medium and post-primary education in the south-west area, it may well be that one solution is for children to go to Monaghan or wherever. That might be picked up by the team looking at Irish-medium post-primary education.

It is something that we would explore and that managing authorities constantly keep under review, but it does not necessarily provide a solution that avoids issues about the viability and credibility of existing schools. It is not a magic bullet. An element of it might be useful to Brollagh. It certainly has implications for areas where the nearest school is across the border, and children go to the nearest education establishment where it is better to do so. I forget the figures, but a number of people are already doing that. This came out last year when figures were published about the flows.

Mr Rogers: There just seem to be more roadblocks now than there used to be.

Mr McGrath: Do you mean roadblocks literally?

Mr Rogers: My feeling is that this should have come to the North/South Ministerial Council earlier.

Mr McGrath: Sean, if parents live in those areas, they can just decide that they will send their children to schools if they can be admitted. In a sense, this is more a bottom-up issue than a top-down one. It does not need ministerial promulgation to say, "I am going to send my child across the border to a post-primary Irish-medium school in Monaghan". You just do it.

Mr Rogers: Yes, but it needs support from education North and South, from DE and DES.

Mr McGrath: Yes.

Mr Rogers: Katrina, in an answer to a question from the Chairman, you talked about levels of progression and computer-based assessment. I see frightening parallels between the two. Both are good ideas but, in your words, the mechanisms are the issue. We all know about the mechanisms associated with computer-based assessment. The pilot study was carried out and then there was a report. When we finally got hold of the report, there were a lot of issues with it. However, it went to schools and all hell broke loose. My concern here is that teachers, those who know best, should be listened to with respect to the levels of progression. What teachers want is a good assessment tool. Very few teachers of year 8 in a secondary school go on a mad dash to see what pupils got at the end of level 2, because they want to know where they are in reading, writing, numeracy skills and whatever else. Frankly, teachers were not listened to with respect to computer-based assessment. How can you assure me that they will be listened to as we get a good assessment-for-learning tool, if it is to be levels of progression?

Mrs Godfrey: It is a key point, and the Minister is absolutely clear that there has to be an opportunity for the voice of teachers to be heard. That is why, for example, there are fairly regular discussions on this issue between the folk working in the Department, those in CCEA, teachers and, in particular, their representatives.

A number of adjustments have already been made. I mentioned the reduction in the portfolio size. A key point that came back from schools last year was that it worked better for CCEA to have assessments returned for moderation around March or April, but that did not work particularly well for schools because they prefer to do the assessment as close as possible to the end of the year. That has been accommodated, and schools can now carry out the assessment in the summer term. That is an example of a clear response to direct feedback from schools. That is happening all the time. One of the tricks will be, as you say, to get a set of outcomes that post-primary principals will look at.

You are right: one of the difficulties that we had, and one of the reasons why we had to change the process was that, under the old system, outcomes were being reported but not valued by the profession, and the outcomes from primary were not valued by the professionals in post-primary schools. However, one of the observations of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) experts who looked at it was that there was relatively little scope for conversations of that challenging nature between post-primary schools and primary schools, and there was very little evidence that post-primary principals and schools were able to feedback their view on the veracity of the assessment data that they received from primary schools.

That, of course, raises a much wider issue about the particular challenges of transition, which you will be very familiar with, Sean. What happens when a child moves from year 7 into year 8? What understanding is there in, for example, the post-primary sector about how teaching and learning has happened in the primary school and how subjects and areas of learning have been addressed? The chief inspector's report highlighted for us that transition should be an area or point in a child's educational life that needs more policy and practice attention. Interestingly, that transfers through to the Delivering Social Change programme, where transitions at all points of life have been identified, whether it is between schools or at other key points, such as retirement. Transitions in citizens' lives are critical points where policy needs to join up more effectively than has been the case.

Mr Rogers: You talk about there being value. They will be valued once they become fit for purpose, but at the moment they are not.

I see the plan mentions a revision or a review of the revised curriculum. Can you tell us a bit more about that, please?

Mrs Godfrey: One of the things that we were conscious of is that the revised curriculum has been phased in essentially from 2007 to 2012. That was the phasing in period because there was a three-year roll-out and the expectation was that any teacher would really want around three years of teaching the revised curriculum to become familiar with it. So, that suggests to us that we are at the point now where we should be looking at how the revised curriculum is embedding in primary and post-primary schools.

We have some early evidence. The trends in international mathematics and science study (TIMSS) and progress in international reading literacy study (PIRLS) outcomes of last year gave us one set of results of indications. The PISA gave us a very different set. However, that reads across to some of the inspection evidence, which points to the fact that the joined-up nature of the revised curriculum, the cross-curricularity, has become effectively embedded in primary schools but is a greater challenge in post-primary schools, where there tends to be a comfort around a subject focus rather than a cross-curricular focus. So, we think that now would be a good time to start thinking about an initial evaluation of how the revised curriculum has bedded in. It is good practice from a policy perspective anyway. After around five years, you should always start to look at a policy to see whether there is evidence that it is starting to deliver the intended outcomes. So, we have started some initial work to scope a review. We need to take it a bit further, but that is why it is in the plan.

Mr Rogers: Flexibility is certainly an advantage if you can take advantage of it. Some people talk about the whole place of STEM, and science is very much buried in The World Around Us. If we are to address the needs of our economy with respect to science, we need to satisfy that enquiring mind early in school. All those things would be looked at as part of that.

Mrs Godfrey: That is a good example, because one of the things that we have been keen to look at was how our primary science curriculum was sitting within The World Around Us. One of the things that the TIMSS did last year was map the things that our children were required to be taught through the revised curriculum against the questions that the survey asked of children. Actually, from recollection, there was a very good mapping, so the things that, internationally, you would expect children to be covering in science were addressed through The World Around Us curriculum in primary schools.

Whether we need to build on that more and could be doing more is a key point. You may have heard the Minister making some comment on that yesterday in the context of PISA and, particularly, whether we have the balance right in relation to not just the inquiry and inquisition — which, all of the evidence suggests, is critical for growing the scientists of the future — but the discipline of the focus on the mathematical skills, which are the underpinning skills for so much of science as you move up the school system.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Specifically in relation to the issue of looked-after children — we are hearing more and more of that coming out of the debate on common funding, which is welcome — the indicators have changed. Why is that?

Mrs Godfrey: The indicators changed for a couple of reasons. Primarily, we wanted to make sure that the focus was not on process but on results and improving the outcomes. You will see in the revisions to the corporate plan that they now focus much more clearly on the outcomes. We think that the performance of free-school-meal kids at GCSE level radically needs to be improved, but, if you look at looked-after children, you can see that the base is even lower — quite shockingly lower — yet those are children who are in the care of the state. You could logically say that, actually, you would expect the state to want to make sure that those children got the best possible education, and that is where the focus is going now. You have, rightly, mentioned the common funding formula. For the first time, the proposal is that the educational barriers for looked-after children will be recognised with additional funding for their schools.

We know a lot about the risk factors associated with being a looked-after child, and we also know that education and doing well at school can help break most of those, so that is why it has become an increasingly particular focus for us. It is a small group of children, but it is a group of children for whom educational outcomes are, frankly, nowhere near where they ought to be. Those kids should be getting the very best out of the school system. That is why we want to make sure that the focus is not on paperwork, plans and things like that but is actually on whether their outcomes are improving so that they achieve to their full potential.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I accept that, but surely a personal educational plan for each child would give you outcomes, and that is removed.

Mrs Godfrey: It will give you the things that are being done for that child. The real test will be whether it delivered the goods. That is the critical test. Was enough done to support that particular child to achieve to his or her full potential, bearing in mind the barriers that he or she may have faced, not just now, but perhaps going further back into childhood? It is a subject in its own right, and it could be useful for the Committee to receive a paper or an update on it.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Where I am taking this is to the current inquiry into child sexual exploitation and the 22 cases that we are aware of that are all connected with care institutions. Given the fact that the inquiry has been announced, is there enough interface with the Department, given that, we hope, those youngsters are through the education system? Is there enough interface with the Health Department in relation to that?

Mrs Godfrey: There is, and the Minister met the Health Minister in the past two or three weeks. You may be aware that the Department, through its chief inspector, is represented on the inquiry and is contributing very directly to making sure that the inquiry team is supported. That is evidence of the joint working. When the Minister met Minister Poots recently, that was a topic of conversation for them. We continue to work on that. It goes back to Danny's point about our contribution to other Departments' Programme for Government targets and their contributions to our targets. This is another example of where that close working with colleagues on the social services side of the Health Department is absolutely critical.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: The key piece of that is the accountability. If there are perceived or real failings across any sector, it is important to have some mechanism to redress that. That is not clear yet. Specifically, in relation to the attainment target for looked-after children, which was 14.4% achieving five good GCSEs, including maths and English, how did the Department reach that target? How was that target developed?

Mrs Godfrey: That is the baseline at the moment. That is the level at which children in care are achieving at GCSE. That is why I made the point that, if we think that the level of attainment of children receiving free school meals, which is sitting at around 30% to 34%, is, frankly, unacceptable, then how much less acceptable is a figure of 14.4%?

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: So that is open to change?

Mrs Godfrey: That is the starting point. We are working to make sure that it increases, because it is very clearly unacceptable. Both Ministers are on record as saying that it is very clearly not a tenable position for that particularly vulnerable group of children.

The Chairperson: I have a couple of things that I want to conclude with. I do not want to expand on the conversation, but I want to ask about the cross-border survey. It was launched in December 2011. If the Department is still considering the results of the survey, there must have been about 90,000 responses, because we have had a consultation that had 14,000 responses, and we are due to have a response to it in January. We are now sitting in 2013. Is it not the case that the survey clearly indicated what we know as the reality, which is that, since 2008, there has been an increase of 42% in the number of pupils who come from the Irish Republic into our system in Northern Ireland? That is the reality. You are absolutely right, John. The flow is coming from the Republic into Northern Ireland.

Mr McGrath: There are more who come up than go down; it is a two-way thing.

The Chairperson: There are more pupils from the Republic in Holy Cross College than the entire number of pupils who go from Northern Ireland into the Irish Republic. That is a fact. It is a parental choice, and it is based on the practical needs of families rather than on some grandiose plan for where we should go in relation to cross-border education.

Mr McGrath: That was the point that I was making to Sean. Parents will make their choices locally, based on what they want for their children. If it involves going across the border either way, they will do that if they can get access to the school.

The Chairperson: Just on that point, when will the Department be able to tell us what the cost is and how that cost is reimbursed? It is a substantial number of pupils — there are 497.

Mr McGrath: I cannot remember the figures; you have an advantage over me. We can supply you with the estimated costs both ways.

The Chairperson: Thank you. The document refers to "sectoral support partners". Who would they be? We have had mention of sectoral support bodies, and we know roughly who they would be.

Mr McGrath: I suspect that it means that, as things sit at the moment, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) could be termed as sectoral support partners.

The Chairperson: There are a couple of other issues. It seems that, in relation to the entitlement framework, 92% of post-primary schools have achieved the requirement at key stage 4. Is that in regards to 18 to 21 subjects or in regards to 24 to 27 subjects? Repeated mention is made of 18 to 21 subjects, but is the target for 2015 to be based on 24 to 27, the number of subjects at 16 or post-16, or have we now dropped down and accepted that 24 to 27 was a wee bit like going out to count the stars and see how many subjects we think we can determine? Where are we in relation to the number of subjects, because it says that 92% of post-primary schools have achieved the September 2013 requirement for Key Stage 4?

Mrs Godfrey: That reflects the legislative decision that the Minister made in commencing the Order that governs the provision of the entitlement framework, which was that, rather than going to the 24 to 27 from September 2013, he would go for a phased approach. The target for the September 2013 academic year is 18 to 21, then it goes up to 21 to 24 from September 2014, and only after that will it go up to the full 24 to 27. That was a decision communicated by the Minister at the time when the legislation was being commenced.

The Chairperson: On the basis of where we have come from and where we currently are, do you think that 24 to 27 will be achieved by 2015? Or are we just playing around with figures that do not mean a lot, and would we do better to concentrate on quality rather than quantity? Is that not really the issue?

Mrs Godfrey: The aim, certainly, is 24 to 27, and that is not unrelated to the work that is advancing, for example, in post-primary area planning. The evidence clearly shows that, if young people have access to a broad range of courses, they are much more likely to be able to study courses that interest and motivate them. When they are interested and motivated, they are more likely to have good attendance, and they are more likely to achieve qualifications at the end of it. So, that is the very clear school improvement rationale for having that breadth of courses. One of the key mechanisms, although there are a number of key mechanisms for ensuring that schools are able to deliver, is the area planning work. The area learning communities, for example, allow schools increasingly to pool their resources and work together so that, where there are qualifications that suit a smaller number of children, and where it would not be viable for all three or four schools to offer them, schools could work in partnership.

I do not know whether you would like to add anything from an area planning perspective, John.

Mr McGrath: I will just make the point that there is no reversal of the decisions that the Minister took about where we want to get to. Technically, all we are doing is saying that, whatever the target is in this transition period of the next few years, we will measure achievement against that, but the 24 to 27 is the destination. To go to that will clearly prove challenging for some schools in terms of their future viability, but the underlying point in all of this is that it is not just numbers. Those 24 to 27 courses have to be of quality and coherence for the reasons that Katrina has just articulated. I suspect that it will take some going the extra mile for the full challenge, but that is the objective that the Minister has set, and that is where the rubber will hit the road with a lot of collaborative arrangements.

The Chairperson: There is just one other issue, and that is the home-to-school transport review that the Minister announced. There seems to be some conflict between what is in the plan and what we were told a couple of weeks ago. We were told that the Minister had reviewed how best to move forward in these circumstances. He concluded that publishing detailed action plans at this stage was no longer the most appropriate case of action, however, when we look at the business case, we are

basically being told that a considerable amount of work has been done and the action plans are there. I am wondering why we are not seeing the action plans. What is the correlation between PEDU, the review and moving this all forward?

Mrs Godfrey: I will kick off on that, Chair. One of the key points of the initial PEDU report on home-to-school transport was specifically that it was not looking at policy and, therefore, not looking at entitlement, but, in its view, there was a need for a wider review. The Minister shared that view with the Assembly, and I think that the Assembly debated a motion not that long ago on the same thing. The review of home-to-school transport was launched yesterday, and that is now in hand.

As I said, the PEDU exercise had quite a different focus. It very specifically did not focus on policy but on the operation of transport services by the five education and library boards. A lot of work has gone into taking account of those recommendations in the context of preparing for ESA, and the Minister has taken the view that, until he has further certainty on where we are with ESA, he does not see it being as useful as publishing those action plans at this point. I think that that has been communicated to the Committee.

The Chairperson: We were told in June that we were going to see the action plans. We were then told in November that we are not going to see them, and we are told in this document:

"There has, however, been a delay in finalising the plan for publication because of the need to respond to comments of trade unions and to adjust the latter start date for ESA."

Let us set ESA aside. Now we are not publishing the action plans not only because of ESA but because of some issues raised by the trade unions.

Mrs Godfrey: No, I think that you are mixing up a number of strands, Chair.

The Chairperson: It says:

"There has, however, been a delay in finalising the plan for publication because of the need to respond to comments of trade unions".

Mrs Godfrey: That piece of work was under way. I think that we said to the Committee on a number of occasions that we were engaging with trade unions that wished to bring their perspective to the table, and the Minister was very keen to listen to that. The letter that was sent to the Committee very recently will post-date the entry in the business plan, the update from last year and a range of other things and reflects the Department's latest and current position.

The Chairperson: Finally, John, I would not want to let you away without asking you this question, which I made reference to the previous time that you were here. You said that a number of red lights were burning in Rathgael. Have the lights gone out in Rathgael on those issues? Where are we at? If you were to look at the corporate plan now to see where we were and where we are, would you find that the people in Bangor are any less illuminated by the number of lights that have been either switched off or switched on?

Mr McGrath: I think that there is no dimming of the lights, Chair. *[Laughter.]* It may just be a recycling of some. Suffice to say, we do not have to seek our troubles, and I mean that in the broadest sense. Each week brings something new in education, and you will be as familiar with that as we are. Therefore, we are in a state of constant turbulence. Issues arise, particularly, on the point that I made earlier, from the problems that come from leftfield that need sorted or are fires that burn out. They are quite remarkable in my experience in the public sector, and it probably comes down to having 1,100 individual institutions with governance, budgets, buildings and staff.

The Chairperson: I hope that it is still 1,200, John, or else we will have lost 100 schools somewhere along the line.

Mr McGrath: I do not think that we are at 1,200.

Mrs Godfrey: It is 1,148 perhaps. I will take a guess, Chair.

Mr McGrath: It is constant. I suspect that my future role will not be quite as hectic on a daily basis. I do not think that DRD has to cope with quite the same degree of conflagrations.

The Chairperson: When will we have the validated year 12 GCSE results? We normally get those in November, but we are now into December. Why is there a delay?

Mrs Godfrey: The publication date is 12 December, which is next week.

The Chairperson: That might be along with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report.

Mrs Godfrey: Obviously, it is the OECD's report, and it is publishing it. At the moment, it is telling us that the publication date is likely to be 10 December. Obviously, we will make sure that the Committee has sight of the final report on that morning. We will be in touch to discuss that.

We expect the year-12 and year-14 examination performance data to be published next week as well. I think that it is due for publication next Thursday. There is also a statistical reason, which is that school enrolment is due, coincidentally, on Tuesday. You are right to say that it normally gets published in November. This year is the first year where we have been able to collect data at the level that will include whether students are entitled to free school meals. That allows us to provide an extra set of analysis, which clearly takes a bit longer. That is why it is being published in December instead of November. We have only previously had that data at school-leavers' level, and this now allows us to have an extra set of information around year-12 and year-14 performance. That will be useful in informing the Programme for Government target.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. Fiona, I assure you that you will not get off as easily after John goes.

Mr McGrath: Equally, Fiona wants to make it clear that she can speak. *[Laughter.]* The nature of today was that of showjumping, where you sometimes get a practice fence to jump before you start the proper round. That is a very welcome warning, Chair.

Ms Fiona Hepper (Department of Education): I think they thought that it was safer, on day three, not to let me speak. I know that I will not get away with it again, but I did enjoy it.

The Chairperson: John, I wish you well in your new post. Katrina and Fiona, thanks again. I wish you a very happy Christmas and a peaceful and prosperous 2014.

Mrs Godfrey: Thank you, Chair, and the same to you and the Committee.