Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Area-based Planning: Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster

15 January 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Education

Area-based Planning: Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster

15 January 2014

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Trevor Lunn
Ms Maeve McLaughlin
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr Robin Newton
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Mr Mark Baker	Queen's University Belfast
Mr Alistair Stewart	Queen's University Belfast
Professor Colin Knox	University of Ulster

The Chairperson: We welcome to the Committee Professor Colin Knox, professor of comparative public policy at the institute for research in social sciences at the University of Ulster; Mr Mark Baker, programme manager for the centre for shared education at Queen's University Belfast; and Mr Alistair Stewart, secretary of the shared education programme at Queen's University Belfast. Gentlemen, you are very welcome. Thank you for taking the time to come to speak to us today. I also thank Professor Knox for the paper that he has provided for us. Colin, we will ask you to speak to that paper. We will take any contributions that Mark or Alistair wants to make, and then Members will undoubtedly have questions for you.

Professor Colin Knox (University of Ulster): Thanks for the invitation to share with you our views around area planning. Although the paper is specifically about the consultation process, we would like to open up the discussion by giving a little bit of background to that.

Just yesterday, the Minister made a statement that is highly relevant to the discussions that we have been having around area planning. He stated:

> "It is clear that area planning is complex, multifaceted, and requires coordination, discussion and pragmatism." — [Official Report, Vol 90, No 6, Part 1, p11, col 2].

One of the points that the Minister referred to specifically is planning authorities' difficulty in bringing forward interrelated and linked development proposals. Our experience is that that is absolutely true. We have a multiplicity of managing authorities that come together to provide composite plans for specific areas. Another point that the Minister made, which is also part of our experience, is that every

1

school tells its own story. We do not want area planning to get to the point of every school having to tell its own story. Otherwise, I do not think that we would progress at any particular speed.

I will give you a little bit of the context of the area-planning process and our specific interest in it. The process has been ongoing for over a couple of years and is rooted in the 'Putting Pupils First: Shaping Our Future' document of September 2011. The whole basis for that was the Minister and Department's argument that they had inherited a pattern of provision that is unsustainable, both educationally and financially. They quoted the figures of 85,000 spare places and 150 excess schools in a system that has just over 320,000 pupils.

Importantly — we want to stress this point — the overriding objective of area planning was to raise education standards. Part of the rationale for area planning was to create a network of strong and sustainable schools. As you all know, they went about that through the audit system. They looked at schools that were experiencing stress under the three criteria of quality of education experience, enrolment trends and financial standing of schools. The result of those viability audits then forms the basis of the area plans themselves.

We have a few questions, but one of the initial questions that we would ask is whether, in fact, area planning is really an institutional response to raising standards and whether, in effect, that is a good mechanism to raise standards. While we might move towards a network of sustainable schools, offering a broader curriculum choice may not, in itself, be the totality of what area planning is about. As you know, it was supposed to be based on the six principles that drew on the sustainable schools policy. There are the three that I have already mentioned. However, the other three — strength of links to local communities, accessibility, and school leadership and management — did not seem to feature in area planning and seem to have been essentially ruled out of the overall area-planning process. Those are important components. In fact, the Belfast Education and Library Board specifically said that it based its audit on quantifiable and robust data, and did not include anything else that it regarded as subjective. The Belfast Education and Library Board focused specifically on those three criteria.

From reading some previous Hansard reports, I know that you have questioned officials about whether any weighting was ascribed to those three criteria. Were they all considered equally? Officials' standard response was that they did not attach any particular weighting and that area planning is "an iterative process". One of our questions is this: to what extent can it be iterative if some of the decisions involve capital investment, for example? If you have spent that kind of money, there is no opportunity to revisit decisions. We are just not sure about the standing of area planning as an ongoing process.

A second observation that we make about the process of area planning is that it is fairly clear that schools that were, to use the terminology, red-flagged, could become part of a self-fulfilling prophecy. If parents who are making school choices see that kind of data in the public domain — of course, the media made a lot of it — that could significantly influence their choice. They may ask, "Why should we send our children to a school that is potentially at risk?"

A third observation that we make — again, MLAs have picked up on this — is that the whole area-based planning process was based on a needs model that was intra-sectoral. That meant that, essentially, the boards based their conclusions on controlled schools, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) on the Commission for Catholic Education proposals, and the integrated movement on its projections. Therefore, in a way, area planning actually compounds the status quo. In a sense, all cajolements from the Department to come up with innovative, creative solutions were doomed to fail because the institutional frameworks were embedded in the area-planning process itself. It seems to us that, while it is tremendously useful in putting data into the public domain, the trends in area planning seem to be towards the creation of large intra-sectoral schools. The parallel schools system that we have will undoubtedly be compounded by a continuation of that trend and a needs-based model that creates projections until 2025 based on sectoral assessment of those needs.

The paper that we circulated is about the consultation process itself. As the paper suggests, we have concerns about the whole process of engagement on the draft plans. First, the consultation has been hugely variable across the boards. Boards have done it very differently. Some have been very active, and some have been very reactive. Secondly, the opportunities for people to respond and feed into that process were very formulaic. It was closed down into a series of questions. Admittedly, there were opportunities for open responses, but most people went down the other route. That was a very narrow way to undertake the consultation process.

We do not know the outcome of the primary plans as yet. However, on the post-primary plans, it has been interesting to see the extent to which some of the consultees' ideas appeared in the draft area plans. We know from experience with individual schools, which we will not name, that, in some cases, managing authorities acted as gatekeepers for those proposals. We would encourage the Minister's idea that a lot of this should be bottom-up. However, it seems to us that a lot of that has not happened in practice, because individual managing authorities have felt that it is a job for them at a strategic level rather than at an individual level. That seems to us to be a slight contradiction. Was it a top-down process driven by managing authorities or was it truly an exercise in which schools could feed into a consultation process and their views taken on board? Although the draft area plans for the post-primary sector are available, we are slightly apprehensive that the same pattern will have been repeated at the level of primary schools.

To conclude, it seems to us that the core objective of raising education standards here seems to have been reduced to looking at those three criteria. However, we are not convinced that there is a direct causal link to raising education standards from those three criteria, in and of themselves. We very much saw the hand of managing authorities in those plans. In fact, the paper states that the draft area plans became a cut-and-paste exercise. You had plans from the boards, plans from CCMS and some input from the integrated movement. Essentially, they were stuck together and presented to the Department as composite plans. I think that we need to be convinced that the area-planning process will address some of the major failures in respect of raising education standards and having parallel systems of education.

We have a few questions about the process, but, of course, we are not expecting you to answer them, since we are here as witnesses. There is a great uncertainty among the school population. Where do the area plans go from here? The primary school plans have been with the Department. I think the consultation ended at the end of June. They have been with the boards, and I think that they are now in the process of going to the Department. That was six or seven months ago. Schools are uncertain about their future. With the passage of time, I think the post-primary plans have become quite dated. Some of the data that was used for those plans is now significantly out of date and, if the Department were to take action on some of those, I think that schools would, rightly, challenge the validity of the data upon which those decisions were based.

We have other questions. Maybe this is an observation more than a question, but it seems to us that there is a very crowded policy space in education at the moment. We have the review of the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), area planning, the Education and Skills Authority (ESA), the common funding formula, school closures, shared education and the 'Together: Building a United Community' document. To us, there does not seem to be any real alignment between some of those areas. They almost seem to be undertaken as separate processes, yet there is an interrelationship between some of them. For instance, I do not think that you can look at the 'Together: Building a United Community' document without looking at area planning. Whilst statements are made that those policies need to be aligned, it is always very difficult to do that in practice.

Another observation we have is around what is commonly called the super-committee on area planning. It is very difficult to get information about what that super-committee is doing and the extent to which it is informing decisions. We certainly impress on the Committee the need for transparency and openness around that super-committee on area planning and the extent to which it is incorporating the multiplicity of other policies that are in the ether. Obviously, primary schools are anxious about their fate under the primary plans.

Our final observation is that it is our experience in dealing with schools that, in many ways, some schools are well ahead of the thinking of the managing authorities. I will leave it at that, unless colleagues want to add something.

The Chairperson: Mark, do you want to comment?

Mr Mark Baker (Queen's University Belfast): Professor Knox has probably covered most of the areas. The only comment that I have is on the whole idea that, ultimately, we have a very crowded policy area at the moment. Ultimately, in the process of area-based planning, you have policy supporting a process, rather than the process supporting policy. An example of that might be last Friday's announcement by the Minister on shared campuses, which many people will welcome. Shared campuses do not come out of the area-based process. Our suspicion might be that, in effect, shared campuses will be wedged onto the area-based planning process. The suggestion will be that you need to have a look at the potential of shared campuses or shared facilities and how that might create a true overlapping map of area-based planning, not two or three differently coloured maps. It is

that whole question of what is taking the lead. Do we have a process that is leading the policy, or a policy that is leading the process? That is our concern and that is what we see on the ground.

The Chairperson: Alistair?

Mr Alistair Stewart (Queen's University Belfast): That was quite comprehensive. I am happy enough for now.

The Chairperson: Like all of these issues, it is a question of where to start, because it is a crowded space. I will keep the focus on what the paper is based on, namely the process of area planning. Colin, you referred to the super-committee. We have asked questions about the super-committee, this mist-shrouded strategic body. I have a particular concern that there is a disproportionate allocation of people who sit on the body. Despite the Minister's assurance, the controlled sector body, for which he has withdrawn funding — it ceased to have any funding as of 31 December 2013 — has no place. Yet, CCMS and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) have two places. The answers that we have received during the meetings that have been held clearly indicate that that is the case. I think that is unfortunate and does not help to build confidence in trying to bring everybody together.

I go back to the issue of the needs base. The most prevalent issue follows yesterday's announcement in relation to east and south Belfast. Without getting into the individual minutiae of each of those schools, the general concept was that you had an announcement based on development proposals. How relevant, though, were those development proposals to the very points that you made about area planning, sustainable schools, shared education etc? Even one simple element was that the closure of one school was proposed; yet, in the Belfast Board area, there will be surplus places in post-primary provision even though one school, namely Orangefield, will be closed. I think that we are all beginning to struggle with the connectivity of those decisions. I think that the handling of the whole process involving Orangefield is certainly a case study, from the board's point of view, in how not to do it. The outcome was good for some and less so for others, but a raft of other schools are on the periphery of all that. They are even in other sectors in the same area, and they really pulled down the tent, sat with their arms folded and said, "Well, as long as they are not coming to look behind my door, I am happy". That is not area planning.

Professor Knox: Chair, I can only agree with what you say. Our experience is that we increasingly see that misalignment. Has area planning changed because other policies have come on board here or was it a process that was sufficiently flexible to take account of changing scenarios? One would imagine that the Department could not put in the huge amount of effort that it did on the east Belfast proposals for every proposal that comes to it for other schools in similar circumstances, where area planning proposed they close but they could make a good case for keeping their school open.

If area planning was to have meant anything, it was to have been a composite, strategic look at the provision of schools across Northern Ireland. Again, I do not wish to comment on the details of those schools but, as a process, it seems to be something that is almost being left behind as departmental officials moved into that space and said, "We need to knock two boards' heads together to make sure that this is seen as an overall plan for that area. We need to do additional work around the requirements of schools there". If that does not supersede the area planning process, I am not sure what does.

Mr Baker: Colin talked earlier about this idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy, and you, Chair, mentioned, just then, the idea of pulling down the shutters if you are a safe school, as such. We see that reflected in a number of places where people are looking at solutions that involve two or three local schools working together, be they intra-sectoral or between sectors. If one of those local schools is safe and the other two are challenged, it is, in effect, difficult for the two challenged schools to ask the school that is safe to work with them in some kind of federation or confederation model. Be that a shared model or not, it is an area-based solution. It is the idea of not wanting to put your head above the parapet, as has been mentioned a couple of times. It is a case of, "Let's be quiet and this will go away". Of course, the suggestion is that it will not go away, because area-based planning is an ongoing process.

Ultimately, we see a struggle in the plans announced yesterday. The document states clearly that there was an issue between the two boards. This is a challenging process but, if there has been an issue between the boards, you can see how that is compounded when you include the boards and CCMS in the discussions. I think that is the process that is missing. Ultimately, you have decisions

almost on an individual school basis — that one is a yes, and that one a no — rather than a true area-based planning process.

The Chairperson: Yes. In a sense, it is worse than what Colin described in the paper as:

> "paternalism on the part of school managing authorities; a 'we know best attitude'".

It is really worse than that because, in some cases, as we saw yesterday, even within sectors it comes down to an unwillingness to be pragmatic, or whatever word you use to describe it. It is about believing, "As long as we fit the criteria in Every School a Good School, we are secure and safe, so we do not really have to do anything other than what it says in that document, even though it may not relate to all the other things going on around shared education, area planning and so on."

The Western Board was the one that you were particularly critical of, because of the way in which it had simply decided to go ahead and do whatever it was it doing. Is that an example of a board that is listening to the schools' lobby more than it is trying to implement what is set out in the Department's policies?

Professor Knox: The examples that we give in the document name specific schools that were aggrieved because they had gone to their individual managing authority — whether it was the CCMS or, in this case, the Western Education and Library Board — with what they thought was a response to the Minister's call for creative, imaginative solutions.

Paraphrased rather than stated precisely, the response of the board and CCMS was, "Look, this is a bigger issue than your two or three schools. We think you should leave this to us." There was almost a denial that schools would have a voice in this document because they were given the idea that solutions that they would come up with would be much too parochial and they needed to be looked at in the totality of the board, or the parish in the case of CCMS. Although their views might be useful at that very local level, particularly in the Western Board area, with its many rural schools, in the totality they did not have that bigger picture, so they should leave it to the managing authorities. I think that many of them were disappointed that ideas that they put forward did not feature in the post-primary plans, and they are concerned that ideas that they put forward for the primary schools may not feature in the draft area plans that will be coming from the boards.

The Chairperson: Does that compound the issue of the current blockages? Despite what I think is a lot of rhetoric on shared education, there are examples in that board area where progress could be made and discussions are still ongoing. However, my fear is that, very soon, there is going to be a crisis in that board area with the flagship that is given as the example of how shared education will work. That will come about because there will be a retrenchment into an attitude of, "This is what we own. This is what we govern. If we own this and govern this, you really can't have a say." That will become a problem. How do we avoid what I see as the coming train wreck in that process?

Professor Knox: I think that is a very good example of the misalignment of policies. You have these schools, which seem to have brokered very good relations at a local level through the shared education programme, for example, and there is trust and confidence that they can move this forward. However, when that has been overlaid with the area-planning process, it has not been helpful for those schools in taking those ideas forward. That is where I am saying you get a misalignment, whether in shared education or elsewhere. I think that the common funding formula will also present problems for those schools and perhaps stymie their efforts to become confederated or federated schools. Maybe my colleagues can say more.

Mr Baker: On 22 October last year, the Minister made the statement that shared education should be part of the DNA of education, moving forward. Unfortunately, the area-based planning process has not caught up with that. The area-based planning process is ongoing. You could quite properly say that shared education was not on the policy agenda when area-based planning started. The focus is not on shared education today but when you have key policy initiatives, such as shared education, and you have a process almost running against it, entrenching single-identity schools, of which there are, potentially, 1,000-plus in the post-primary sector, you are losing the opportunity of all the benefits that come from collaboration between schools and, in rural communities, the benefits that come from keeping those schools alive, as such. Again, it comes down to the basic point, which is that we believe, ultimately, that the area-based planning process is completely and totally out of line with the policy agenda.

Maybe the big question to ask, which we have asked ourselves, is this: what do we want education to be like in 20 years' time? Is the area-based planning process supporting our journey towards that? That is a big question, although it is not the question for today. We have pushed ourselves on where shared education should be. Is area-based planning supporting that? I suggest that, in Fermanagh, potentially, it is not.

Mr Rogers: Thank you very much for your presentation. The phrase that comes to mind is "silo mentality". I think that we have got it wrong with regard to area-based planning. We have to accept that and start again. With regard to the silo mentality, we have a maintained plan, a controlled plan, integrated and Irish medium. At policy level, we have a shared education document, we have Together: Building a United Community, and we have an area-planning document. Do you not think that we have to learn from our mistakes, start again, and really put pupils first? It would not be starting from a blank page, because we should have learned quite a bit from the area-planning process. Is that not the case?

Does it not amaze you that learning partnerships and our further education colleges did not seem to be part of area-based planning? Many of our students at GCSE level go to their local college, where there is shared education.

Professor Knox: Your proposal to start again, to use your words, is probably radical, but I understand the point that you are making. We have seen an incremental push towards more policies, some of which might have outlived their usefulness, and some of which have superseded area planning. There has been a lot of learning around some of the information and data that has been published, and that should not be lost, but it is probably timely to ask this: how does all this work together? For example — my colleagues will be able to speak to this better than I can — it is not even clear to schools, which want some advice, about how they would work together and collaborate to sustain a federation, a confederation or shared communities of learning. There is nowhere for them to go for advice in the boards or in CCMS if that is the case. Our point is that, if this was all about putting pupils first and focusing on learners, you have schools that are willing to do that, but there is nowhere for them to go. So, they end up coming to Queen's and going to other projects and saying, "Please help us".

Mr Stewart: Even where the post-primary area-based plans have suggested that x number of schools should work together in a certain town for the betterment of education outcomes for all the pupils, when the schools accept those plans and go to the board and CCMS and say, "Look, this is not black and white now, and we would quite like to get on with it", there is no real assistance or support for them to do that, be it actual resource or even just advice and guidance about how they would grow that particular partnership.

There is a bit of frustration in school communities that we work with because, for good or for ill, these plans were written on their behalf; they want and are willing to take them forward; they have done a lot of background work with governors, parents and pupils; and they recognise the benefits in some cases of taking them forward for the pupils in order to offer an enhanced and wider breadth of provision, but when they go to their managing authority, they cannot get any support, be it actual resource support or even advice and guidance.

There was an element of the process that asked about FE, but it was very badly responded to in general. In our experience, some schools would have difficulties with FE provision and some schools really value it. That is another area where, again, schools and principals are not really consulted on regarding what they feel about it. Our experience is certainly that some principals — maybe the majority — would have difficulties with elements of that, but it should have been part of the process from the centre a wee bit more.

Mr Baker: Alistair made a point about groups of schools that now have a document about area-based planning that says that they should work together. When they then approach their education and library board and say, "Under the current budget structure, we need a small amount of extra funding for transport", in effect, the answer is no, so you are sending mixed messages. Again, we have a complex process, and we are in a process of changing our education system. We all know that, but you cannot give mixed messages to schools. You cannot say to schools, "Yes, what you are doing is good. You are feeding into policy change, but there is no budget support for you in doing that". That is the case even when it fits into area-based planning proposals. Mixed messages are being sent to the schools.

The Chairperson: Is it not even worse than that? I ask because, when it comes to area planning — I just checked, because I referred earlier to the number of meetings that have been held of the strategic area planning board — I see it was only on 6 November of last year when we had at the meeting the Department for Employment and Learning. That was the first time. There was a meeting on 6 November, and I think that the first meeting that we recorded was way back on 8 April of last year. Despite a commitment being given that DEL will be involved in the area-planning process, it was not until November of last year that it went to the meetings. What is happening?

I will not name the schools or the area, but I will give you an example of area planning. One school made an application to the Department to enhance a facility within the school. I will not outline the facility because the school could be identified. As a result of that being done, it has now been able to withdraw itself completely from the entitlement framework, which included three other schools in the area learning community. Basically, what that school is now saying is, "We're all right, Jack. We are fine. We can do the entitlement framework, whether it is 18, 21, 24 or 27. And, do you see our dependence upon the further and higher education college? You can close it; we don't need it. You see the two other post-primary schools? We don't really need to be involved". That is not area planning. We now have a situation where DEL has an amount of capital to spend, and it is telling me, "We have to spend this money". I have asked how that fits in with area planning, and it replies, "Oh, but we have to —". So, DEL is going to reorganise its facilities, pull together its colleges and get its house in order. As far as anybody else is concerned, they will have to travel to colleges. Costs will then come into play and pupils will be disadvantaged. That is not area planning.

Coupled with your comments, Colin, Sean made a valid point that the information and data that we are using is so out of date that there is now a real crisis in implementing any feasible area plan, particularly in the post-primary sector. As I have always said, God help us when we come to primary schools. If we have seen a dogfight around post-primary schools, it will be nothing compared with what we will see with the primary schools. I think that that is why the Department is being very slow in giving us any indication of what that process is in the primary school area plans.

Mr Baker: It is useful to remember, and I am sure that the Department will point out very clearly, that the entitlement framework is about provision. In fact, the document states clearly that it is not about collaboration. In recent months, of course, there has been a slight flip in the entitlement framework, and area learning communities are being talked about as vehicles for shared education. However, when schools are judged individually regarding their viability audit data on their provision of 24 and 27, the incentive is for a school to deliver those on its own. The moment that they can do so, they do not need to collaborate. So, if you flip that and talk about area provision and collaboration being the vehicle for doing that, you would have true area-based planning and the potential for provision. The message from the Department, again, in the entitlement framework document, is that this is about your school providing 24 and 27; it is not about providing an area-based solution. So, that is another example of where policy needs to be amended in light of wider policy decisions that have recently been made or that are in the process of being made.

Mr Hazzard: Thanks for that, guys. What more do you think can be done to empower communities that seek change to break through the gatekeepers?

Secondly, I will refer specifically to the example in your paper of Ballynahinch. That is where I am from and was born and reared, so I have a fair idea of the dynamics of the town. I agree with you on the point that, when the principal sat down and decided that it was preferable to have something other than an intra-sectoral solution, to me and to many people on the ground, it seemed that they decided to tackle the religious division but to walk away from the socio-economic division, in that the grammar school does not have to get down and dirty with the high schools, but the high schools have to work together. There was some annoyance locally because they want to see the socio-economic division tackled as much as the religious divisions. Will you give me some of your thoughts on that?

Mr Stewart: We should declare an interest because we work closely with St Colman's and the High School Ballynahinch. The two principals, when we deal with them, focus purely on what they can offer between their two schools. In the last academic year, they have put on quite an impressive range of accredited activity that they could not have offered on a single-identity basis. The argument that they put to parents and governors is simply that they have to deal with what they have now but that they can offer more if they work with the school round the corner. They say that they can offer the kids subjects that they want to do and that are useful.

Regarding our role with those two schools and Assumption Grammar, we are very keen to see that issue addressed, simply because doing so would further widen the provision, and we feel that it would probably work both ways. However, I think that the two principals in the non-selective schools are firmly focused at the minute on provision within their own schools and what more they can do between them to offer the broadest range of subjects and activities that are of use to their pupils. I know that a small number of pupils go from St Colman's High School up to Assumption Grammar for certain lessons, but it is piecemeal and ad hoc.

With regard to what else can be done, in Ballynahinch, the board and CCMS have got an example whereby it is written in black and white in the area-based plans that, as you mentioned, there needs to be a Ballynahinch solution. The two non-selective schools have really led the way there without a huge amount of support, we feel, from the board and CCMS, for whatever reason. You are really reliant on strong principals who can engage with governors and parents and say, "This is why we are doing this. It might be difficult, but the bottom line is that it is for the education outcomes of pupils".

That leads on to empowering communities. As we have seen at primary and post-primary level, it has fallen to principals and governors to lead the process. Certainly, in the partnerships that we have been involved in, that has been key. As we saw yesterday, when a community is involved, is active and has bought in, you can leverage significant change. Again, we would say that we are not terribly sure that there is a huge amount of support from the system to do that. You rely on individuals in school communities to take that forward.

Professor Knox: Sometimes, there is reluctance for individual principals to put their heads above the parapet here, as they would see it. In some ways, they might feel that that could have career implications for them with their managing authority, whether it be an education and library board or CCMS. I think that the principals and teachers who have done that have been very courageous in saying that they feel that they have a local solution, do not want to be ignored, want to have their voices heard and will be very strong in doing that. Sometimes, they will appeal to their elected representatives for support in so doing.

With regard to your specific question about what more can be done, there needs to be an acknowledgement, and maybe the Department did that implicitly with the east Belfast situation — that boards and CCMS — I do not want to be overly critical here — look through the lens of their own sectoral interests. Where schools are coming up with creative solutions, they find it difficult to cope with. For so many years, they have been used to looking at schools in their own particular sectors. It challenges them to reach beyond their sectors.

Mr Baker: I will just say one thing briefly about empowering communities. Over the past couple of weeks, I have been involved in going to some small communities that have a number of primary schools. There are groups, which can be inter-sectoral, in which governors and principals are basically asking what they can do. The problem is that, if you have that kind of collaboration, discussion and attempt to look at an innovative solution in an area being led by a document that is potentially about or perceived to be about closure, it is not necessarily the right environment within which to empower communities. It will make activists work, but if you are looking at innovative solutions, what you want is an equal playing field in communities. As I mentioned earlier, you will have a situation in which one school believes that it is safe, but it should be part of an innovative solution with two or three other schools. The principals and governors are saying that they have to be very careful because they have a responsibility to their school. If they lift themselves up, they, too, could potentially be under threat. A lot of organisations — the Rural Community Network being one — are involved with a lot of school groups and are talking to them at the moment, but that gap is being filled by NGOs.

Mr Hazzard: So, is there an issue around incentivising collaboration?

Mr Baker: I think that there is an issue. Well, incentivising is one of the issues. There has always been that issue, and it involves collaboration between schools in the same sector as well as inter-sectoral collaboration. However, schools are also being given mixed messages on policy. The Minister's statement on 22 October about cross-community, socio-economic sharing and collaboration being in the DNA of education is a huge step forward. However, there now needs to be policy and the system to drive it. Area-based planning is not working in that direction. It is working in a different direction.

Mr Stewart: As Mark says, when two post-primary schools, be they from the same sector or different sectors, collaborate at an accredited curricular level, the inspectorate does not really recognise that. To get to that point, schools have to decide, if pupils are sent to a school to avail themselves of a subject that that school offers, who gets the credit or the blame for the grade and whether the school to which the child is sent takes an element of the other school's age-weighted pupil unit (AWPU) because it has had that child for a certain number of hours per week. The schools have worked all this out on a local basis and dealt with those issues, but it is not being recognised by the system. School A and school B cannot say, "Together, we actually offer 27 or 30 subjects". That is not recognised.

Incentivisation can be a lot of things. It can be some sort of cash or resource incentivisation, but the fact that two schools have managed to work this out themselves needs to be recognised. The system recognising when schools are dynamic and innovative is incredibly important and is, in itself, incentivisation. Maybe that does not happen quite enough.

Mr Lunn: Thanks, gentlemen. Within the bounds of tact and diplomacy, you guys have been pretty forthright. I am glad to listen to you and see that. Things are being stated and coming into the open now that, for a long time, have been obvious but unstated. You might think that, in a system in which 67,000 places of 320,000 are empty — that is about one in five — everybody involved, sectoral or otherwise, would recognise the necessity and benefits of doing something fairly radical.

I go back to when the Minister first announced a serious intention to deal with area-based planning. It has been downhill ever since; has it not? He told the CCMS and the boards to work together on the viability audits when, plainly, they were never going to and have not.

Surely area-based planning must lead to cross-sectoral mergers. Look at the geography of Northern Ireland and, in particular, its rural geography. If people had a bit of wit, they would see that cross-sectoral mergers are the only sensible solution. We commissioned all this area-based planning stuff, but, ever since, we seem to have gone down the road of anything but area-based planning. So, now we are coming up with Together: Building a United Community leading to area-learning communities leading to shared campuses and local solutions. It is anything but the obvious solution, which is to reduce the number of schools and not allow the sectors to be so protective of their own positions. Find a question there. *[Laughter.]* I just get so depressed by all this. I told you to find a question, and now I am going to go on again. *[Laughter.]* The sectors have been allowed to dictate this process. There has not been an overarching authority — dare I mention ESA? — to give it some legs and some impetus.

I have no problem with faith schools or controlled schools, but they cannot be allowed to continually defy logic. The way that we are going, in 10 or 20 years, we will still have 1,200 schools and 60,000 empty desks, and the only thing that will change that will be the birth rate. I do not know what to ask.

Mr Baker: I will be presumptuous and suggest that your question is this: why is area-based planning not leading to a reduction of schools and an increase in the number of schools that are open, and seen to be open, to everybody? That is ultimately your question; yes?

Mr Lunn: Yes.

Mr Baker: I would say a number of things. I do not want to comment on individual boards, but there is a staffing issue in education and library boards. They have been given a complex task at a time when they believed that they were in a transition to ESA. That is an excuse; I am being very positive about the education and library boards. A lot of hard work is being done in the boards by a lot of officials, and that needs to be recognised.

As regards the direction of travel, we might disagree on whether the end of a potential shared education route is to have one school. Chris mentioned Ballynahinch, where two schools are working very closely together. We see a huge outcome of the area-based planning process being more and more of those intersectoral partnerships. Of course, it is then up to local communities to decide what the endgame will be for those schools in 10, 15 or 20 years. That is not for us to direct at the moment.

We have a clear policy direction. We hope that area-based planning will stop looking at a map that has maintained schools on it and a map that has controlled schools on it rather than looking at where the maps overlap. The maps overlap. The cross-sectoral partnerships are mentioned in two cases. They are mentioned in cases where they are so obvious that you cannot miss them. There are a

number of partnerships around the country that everybody knows about, and you have to mention them because the two schools have worked together for so long, or they are mentioned in a situation where one of the managing authorities could not come up with another and it was the last case.

Cross-sectoral partnerships are not mentioned as a matter of course. The first thing that people should have done in area-based planning was sit down, look at a solution that might be cross-sectoral and include a situation where you were bringing the communities together, but that was not done. It is very easy to say what we would do if we could go back and change. However, given the policies that we have, if we were starting this process now, we would be putting shared education through cross-community and socio-economic collaboration further up the list rather than it being almost an add-on or bolt-on like you get with your mobile phone.

Mr Lunn: People sometimes think that I am some sort of opponent of shared education. I am absolutely not, but it has its place. If two or four viable schools in an area are having difficulties in delivering the full curriculum, there is a place for shared education arrangements. However, I did say "viable". If they are not viable, shared education should not be an excuse for not taking the radical decisions that should be taken.

If we had no sectors, area-based planning would be solved quite easily. Take the maintained sector for a start. The bishops told us when they sat at this Committee that they are not schools for Catholics but Catholic schools. The controlled sector said the same thing: their schools are open to everybody. So, what is the problem? If they are both prepared to accommodate all faiths or none, what, theoretically at least, should be the problem with trying to work together? The problem is that they are being allowed to get away with it. They have been for donkey's years; frankly, since the formation of this state. I see no indication of a change at the moment. It is like everything else about this place, "Push it down the pipe and forget about it. Come up with area-based planning but do not go too hard at it".

Sorry. I keep going on these rants and not asking a question. To me, this process is going nowhere. The valuable contribution that you are making is to highlight that fact. Mark, you said that you do not like to be critical of particular boards. I have no problem with being critical of the Western Education and Library Board. The solutions proposed in your report are cross-sectoral, and they do not even appear in the area plan. You then discover that, behind the scenes, the Western Board is working on some other solution that is intra-sectoral. What does that say about its genuine desire to bring about a proper area-based solution? I know what it says, but I would probably get disciplined if I said what that is.

Professor Knox: I will not try to find a question, but I will first make some observations on your comments. At the time, the area-planning process seemed to be a very logical, well-intentioned route to take. The people who were involved in that process were doing it for all the right reasons. Clearly, it would have been helpful if ESA had been involved. That is not to make any political statements about ESA. However, simply, ESA, as a composite body, would have been a much easier route for that to have been delivered through.

I do not think that we should lose focus from the fact that all this was about raising education standards. Whilst collaboration and our experience of that is a route to achieve that, I do not think the original goal was about collaborative provision, addressing parallel education systems and so on, however much that might be a good thing to do. The end product of all those kinds of potential collaborations and shared solutions should be about raising education standards. Anything that is done under area planning should have that end goal in sight.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Thank you. It is worth making a point about the number of responses: there were over 49,000. I suppose that that highlights the strength of opinion that is there. It is right, and it has been commented on, that your report is what I call critical in the language used around there not being a bottom-up approach to consultation, that it is tokenistic and that some responses were not taken on board. That is particularly the case for the Western Board area. One of the examples given was in and around Limavady, where only 16% of respondents favoured the original proposals, and none of that seemed to have been taken on board. It seems to suggest, as you rightly mentioned, Colin, that ESA being in place would have been a better delivery vehicle for the process.

I move now to the strategic context. I am hearing two messages. First, there is an issue about the objective, which was about raising education standards, and that that reduced as a result of the three criteria. Secondly, I hear from what you said, Mark, that there is a very clear policy change. Colin, on

your point, what needs to happen with regard to the criteria being enforced around raising education standards? Mark, if there is a clear policy change, is it not being implemented? If so, who is responsible for not implementing it?

Professor Knox: Those are very searching questions. Let me try to at least make a stab at answering them. With regard to raising education standards, our work around collaboration provides early evidence that, where schools are collaborating, they are more likely to give a wider curriculum choice. As a consequence of that, kids are more likely to be able to pick subjects that they feel they can excel in. As a result of that, you are more likely to raise education standards.

Part of what we are doing is still embryonic, in the sense that these collaborative partnerships have not being working for very long. They have been funded from external sources; there has not been any DE funding and so on. So, we would like to continue with that kind of model. However, we think that, if you have cross-community collaborative provision, there is a potential in addressing the two most difficult, probably intractable, problems to crack in education at this stage. One is about raising education standards and reducing that performance gap. The other is about addressing two parallel systems. Our "solution" is that, based on the work that we have done so far and the practicalities of working with schools, we think there is real potential through collaboration and shared education to not only raise education standards but to address the issue that Trevor raised. My colleagues will be able to speak to that more than I can.

Mr Stewart: I will comment on raising standards. There is a great example in your constituency. A post-primary school, which was working in collaboration with another post-primary school, had a particular issue that was identified by the inspectorate. The post-primary school that it was working in collaboration with happened to have some expertise in the area. There was no real contact between pupils. It was not about that; it was professionals engaging in the sharing of what they do and the devising of new strategies. It was cost-neutral for the Department, as the Department and ETI were not involved. It was principals and heads of departments doing this off their own bat and being honest and vulnerable by saying, "Listen, we have an issue. We think you can help us. Please come and help". It was also about staff buying into that. In a very short period, provision that was "inadequate" was changed to "outstanding", and that is cost-neutral; but again, as I said earlier, I am not terribly sure that the system is set up to recognise that, despite the fact that it brings huge value. At the end of the day, the pupils are now accessing provision that is outstanding as opposed to inadequate. We need to find a mechanism whereby principals and school-leaders are encouraged to be open and honest and seek help from colleagues and peers, in effect.

Mr Baker: Ultimately, what Alistair is talking about, and what we are talking about, is living communities of practice, where you have teachers having relationships together, transferring knowledge and experience, and then developing the next practice together. That is a key area where you lead to improving educational outcomes. Yes, it is about wider provision, but it is also about linking teachers together. We all know and have all heard comments from teachers saying that they have walked past a school for the last 20 minutes on their way to work but have never been in it, and then all of a sudden, they are working together, and they realise that they have common needs. Any professional knows that you can be quite isolated, even within your own organisation, and sometimes, when you are linked with another, you can open up in a different way.

That leads into your second question about policy change, which Alistair has alluded to. What we need in many policies, but certainly in the one that we are talking about now, which is shared education, is for it to feed into all areas of the Department. In the past, it may have sat in the community relations, equality and diversity (CRED) area of the Department, but it now needs to feed into ETI. Since the Minister's statement on 22 October, there have been clear moves from the Department. You cannot ask the Department to apply a policy that it has now to two years ago, so there is no criticism there, but I think that we are now in a position where something needs to happen.

Sean, you asked whether we should stop. "Stop" is a very brave word in any situation, certainly when you have invested a lot of time, but I think that we should refocus and look at where we are and what the key objectives that we want out of this process are, because I think that we may have lost our way somewhat.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: By way of follow-up to that, I noted that you referred to the need to ascertain support for alternative area plans from the area planning group through the Department. I think that that is something that we should look at. I am conscious that the Minister has indicated that this is a

process and that alternative proposals and solutions are welcome. Will you be making a formal submission to the Department? Maybe that is happening; I am not sure.

Mr Baker: We are unsure at the moment of what the process is for engaging with what Colin has called the super-committee, so there is not a process where that can happen. Because the plans for post-primary are there now and are being looked at, I think that is the issue that we have there. There is an opportunity, given the Minister's steer on shared education and the 'Together: Building a United Community' document, for that to be opened up, because I think that a lot of schools would like to talk about those.

The Chairperson: Maybe we should put the reference to the super-committee into context: it is the strategic area planning steering group. Correspondence in our packs today refers to when we wrote to the Minister about a development proposal. Comments were made about that, and the Department also replied in relation to the work of that steering group. It will not make you any wiser, but at least it gives you the factual position as to where it is at.

Mr Lunn: It does not have a super-injunction.

The Chairperson: No, it does not.

I will conclude. I know that we have strayed slightly on one point on the issue of shared education, but it is clear that there is a crowded and confused policy context in which all this is taking place. In our pack today, there is a classic example of how the issue of shared education plays out, whether it is in the context of area planning or not. There is a comment from Bishop McKeown in relation to an issue that we raised with him about shared education provision in two schools in particular, but he then makes comment about Lisanelly. This is how he describes it:

> *"We are all aware of the proposed collocation of separate schools on the Lisanelly site. However, since we have never had to reflect on the issue of a shared building, NICCE [Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education] has currently no views on the design of such shared education arrangements."*

Here we are on the cusp of what is a major financial investment with huge hype around it. That is what I was referring to earlier, and I believe that there is a train wreck coming. Here is a key contributor. A managing authority for a large section of schools going onto that site describes it as the "proposed collocation of separate schools". That is not shared education. That is only an example, and there are many others, probably from other sectors. To conclude, are you are really contending that the policy context of area planning has now got so diluted that the whole process of area planning needs to be revisited?

Professor Knox: I think that that is a fair summary. The education policy space is a crowded one at the moment, and I think that there needs to be much more alignment between these policies, which were brought in at a time when people felt that they were well intentioned and for good reasons. At the moment, I think that there is an opportunity, in Mark's words, to stand back and see how we can take this forward in a way that ultimately ends up raising school standards and addressing the issue of parallel school systems.

The Chairperson: Mark, Colin and Alistair, thank you very much. I have no doubt that your paper will be extremely useful to us, as it has been to date. Thank you for your contributions thus far, and I look forward to working with you in the new year.