Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Education

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Area-based Planning:
Briefing by Professor Tony Gallagher

22 January 2014

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
Ms Maeve McLaughlin
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr Robin Newton
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:
Professor Tony Gallagher   Queen's University Belfast

The Chairperson: We welcome to the Committee, for the first time in 2014, Professor Tony Gallagher. Tony, we thank you again for all your work. We appreciate the effort that you have put into this and many other elements of academia in trying to assess our educational system. We have your papers, and we are happy for you to speak to them. Members will then have questions.

Professor Tony Gallagher (Queen's University Belfast): Thank you. You will recall that, on a previous occasion, I prepared a paper that looked at the data that became available through the whole area planning process on primary schools. You asked me to do a similar analysis that looked at the post-primary data, and that is the paper being presented.

I will quickly outline some of the themes of the paper. It provides a statistical picture of the numbers of schools and pupils by sector, type and distribution across Northern Ireland, to present an image of the system. It provides some information on the impact of falling rolls by looking at unfilled places in schools. It looks at the patterns of social disadvantage as measured by entitlement to free school meals and the proportion of pupils with special needs, and it shows the way in which they link together a bit. It also looks at the information that was available through the area-planning process around performance patterns and some of the issues that have come up, including the rising pattern of performance among secondary schools and the ceiling effect, almost, on grammar schools, when we use the respective criteria of five or more GCSEs, or seven or more GCSEs.

There are a number of other issues. I highlight an issue about different ways of measuring performance to try to avoid some potentially perverse consequences of using criteria-based measures. Clearly, one of the key issues in the drive behind the area-planning process was the identification of different forms of stress or challenge that schools are facing. As with primary schools,

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there are a number of criteria for post-primary schools, based around attainment stress, enrolment stress and financial stress. I look at the data on that and the distribution of schools that are identified as being under stress by those measures — it does vary a bit.

Quite a few of the schools, 44%, are identified as being under enrolment stress for their year 8 to year 12 student group. Some 28% are identified as being under stress for post-16 enrolments. All the schools that are under enrolment stress tend to be outside the main urban areas or in rural areas. That opens up a whole series of other issues around provision in rural areas.

A little over a third of the schools are identified as being under financial stress due to the level of deficits that they are running, although the pattern varies quite widely across Northern Ireland. I present some information on that, looking at some of the characteristics and numbers of schools that are under financial stress.

A little under a third of grammar schools are identified as being under attainment stress in relation to the criterion of seven or more GCSEs. About a quarter of secondary schools are identified as being under attainment stress, using the criterion of five or more GCSEs or that of five or more good GCSEs including English and maths.

Towards the end of the paper, as in the primary sector paper, I look at the relationship between the some of the stress factors and attainment patterns. In particular, I try to see whether there is any relationship between school size and patterns of performance because, in some senses, that is one of the drivers behind the area-planning process. Although the analysis suggests that there is a very slight tendency for small schools to be a little more likely to be under stress on those measures than larger schools, there is no statistically significant relationship, which suggests, on the basis of these data, that there is relatively little evidence of a relationship between school size and problems in attainment or financial position.

The Chairperson: Thanks, Tony. The paper is very useful. You may have seen the paper that was presented to us last week by Colin Knox on some of these issues. Would the Committee be right to come to the conclusion that a new approach to the whole process of area planning is needed — one that is founded on a community audit and community wishes? Clearly, if you look at the trajectory that has been followed, the policy may be right with respect to the objectives that we want to achieve, but the vehicle that is being used, under the guise of area planning, has led to procedure and practice that have not delivered. Really, all it has done is to create more uncertainty, rather than definitive outcomes. There are a few exceptions — very few — in the overall process. Is that a fair conclusion or, if this process is continued as is, will it lead to the outcomes that were originally intended?

Professor Gallagher: Colin made this point last week: I think it is a reasonable conclusion. When the process was originally put in place, it was identified or cast as an attempt to look at area-based solutions. However, in practice, although there was a connection between the different sectors, the examination or diagnosis of the situation was carried out along parallel tracks between the sectors. That did not lead to a terribly joined-up search for solutions. Since then, the policy environment has moved on, with more attention being given to shared education, which highlights the gulf between the notion of broadly area-based solutions or the attempt to find area-based solutions and the direction of travel in policy. Therefore, I think it is not unreasonable to say that some aspects of the process perhaps need to be rethought.

The Chairperson: We do not want to stray into that area because, later on, we will specifically look at shared education. We strayed into it last week with Colin and, obviously, with your colleagues from the university. However, there is an issue that I see emerging more and more. We mentioned earlier that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) made very good comment in relation to all the policies, and stated that they seem to be the right policies that you would want to put in place to govern and inform your educational system. The difficulty seems to be that, when the Department moves to put them into practice, they are ill thought out, ill prepared, ill funded, or they are not aligned. You have shared education, signature projects, and area planning. Area planning and shared education, in most places, do not seem to come together. That is creating a real challenge and difficulty. In some cases, it creates tensions within sectors. I can go to areas in this city where there are real tensions within sectors because area planning says, "This is what we want to do", but the statistics are saying, "You have a very good school here". The worry is whether we sacrifice a very good school because of a generic area plan. The difficulty is how you marry those two things.

Professor Gallagher: I think what we are seeing is a potential clash between a top-down process and a bottom-up process. One of the things that is becoming very clear in a lot of discussions, particularly around the shared campuses notion, is discussions in different parts of Northern Ireland where people are coming up with solutions that they think will work locally, but those solutions do not necessarily fit into the top-down solutions that are coming from the sectoral leaders. I think that we are increasingly seeing a clash between those two ways of addressing the situation.

The Chairperson: How much of a deficit or difficulty did it create for us, Tony, when the Department indicated that it would revisit or update the viability audits in April? If you look at the timescale since the commencement of this process, there was a huge issue and concern raised about the legitimacy of the viability audits in the first instance because of inaccuracies and all sorts of things that were said at that stage. Then, the Department said that, by 1 April 2013, it would update the viability audits. We are now into 2014 and we have not seen the updated viability audits. This process of area planning just continues to trundle on, albeit at a snail's pace. The Department could be basing decisions on information that is not worth the paper it is written on.

Professor Gallagher: An education system is dynamic. It is constantly moving forward and changing. Inevitably, at some point, you take a snapshot to try to understand what is best to do. However, you need to be careful that you are not stuck in a particular place in decision-making. It goes back to your earlier question. A strategy is only as good as your implementation plan, and no matter how good a strategy is, if you do not have a proper implementation plan, the strategy does not really help you at all. All sorts of issues are related to that in this process.

The Chairperson: I have one other question, and then we will open the floor to members. You highlighted in the paper financial stress in the controlled voluntary grammar schools. Those schools are more likely to be facing deficits than grammar schools in the maintained sector. Why do you think that is the case?

Professor Gallagher: I am not sure; I do not know. Clearly, in secondary schools, there are issues around falling enrolments, and that creates predictive challenges and problems for schools. Secondary schools are more likely to have unfilled places and to be under pressure because they are dealing with the consequences of falling rolls. I am honestly not sure of the particular reasons for the deficits in the controlled grammar schools.

The Chairperson: There was a very high-profile case just recently where a school in one sector decided that it wanted to leave that particular management arrangement and become a controlled school. I always worry that the reason for that is sometimes that the school wants to get closer to the Paymaster General so that a bigger chequebook is available. Look at the controlled schools and the boards. They have been dishing out the money in many regards to many other areas. The concept of being on your own is all good and fine but, when you hit a crisis, it is always good to know that there is an organisation that you can run to for cover and to hide. Is that not part of the difficulty? Of course, some would say that the answer to that is to bring in the Education and Skills Authority (ESA), but I would not be just as convinced. ESA may give us the same outcome because you are still dealing with process and procedure.

Professor Gallagher: Education is an area in which we spend an awful lot of money. A long-term problem is that too much attention is focused on inputs in the system rather than outputs, so we keep spending money and, when there is a problem, the suggested solution is often more resources when we should think a lot more carefully about what we spend our money on and whether it makes any difference. That may allow us to spend money an awful lot more smartly and effectively.

The Chairperson: That is a valid point.

Mr Kinahan: Thanks, Tony. I spoke once in the Chamber about the fact that there seems to be no framework. In every area, you have schools that know they are under stress and, in some cases, are told to look for someone to work or amalgamate with, but they do not know where they are going and want to carry on primarily educating. We need the facilitators but, more importantly, we need a framework so that they know where they are all trying to go. Sometimes, the focus is on, say, Ballymena, but leaves out the schools that are just outside it, or in Antrim. No one knows where they are going.

Professor Gallagher: That goes back to the difference between a top-down and bottom-up approach. The approach to area planning seems to have been very much top-down and led by the sectors. Some boards were better than others in the level of consultation, but I am not sure whether there was an awful lot of active facilitation of creative options in local areas. The Minister made it clear in his comments that he was looking for creative and innovative solutions, but I do not get much of a sense that an awful lot of support or space was provided for those sorts of innovative or creative solutions to be explored. A variety of views were presented in the consultation process, but nothing much changed when the revised proposals came forward.

Mr Kinahan: People did not seem to understand where they were going. If you come to a consultation, when you read through the papers you see that petitions govern a mass of the responses. A whole lot of other people did not really understand where they were going.

Professor Gallagher: If we genuinely want, in local areas, people to have an opportunity to look at creative and innovative solutions, you need to create space to allow that to happen. I did not get much of a sense that any real energy was put into trying to create those spaces.

Mr Kinahan: Turning to viability, one stress measurement was exam results and value added, which, as we always raise, is not what was measured. That seems to be a central piece of the jigsaw that is not there but we should be focusing on.

Professor Gallagher: Value-added measures are used at times in England. They give some useful additional information because they focus on the extras that a school brings to pupils of different kinds. Given the grammar/secondary divide, there are problems and challenges in using value-added measures here, but they would add a layer to the information.

I make the point in the paper that there is a slightly bigger issue to look at. If we use a criterion such as either five or seven or more good GCSEs, one of the problems is that there is a perverse incentive for schools to focus on the kids who are just below that criterion level and to pull them over it. I am not saying that schools do that, but there is a risk that the kids who are seen as not having a chance of reaching those criteria are put to one side a little bit because they will not contribute to a school's league table position.

I suggest in the paper that, if you use a points system, with points for different grades, and look at the top eight GCSEs, perhaps making sure to include English and maths, and use that as a measure, that focuses attention on the performance of all pupils and the incentive is on schools to raise standards for everyone. We should think about that. The notion of using five good GCSEs as our base measure harks back to the 1960s when, in order to maintain your scholarship in a grammar school, you had to pass four or five O levels. We have continued to use that sort of criterion, more for reasons of tradition rather than because it makes any sense. If we are rethinking some of these processes, there may be an opportunity also to rethink some of the ways in which we measure performance.

Mr Kinahan: Another issue is that the use of the word "stress" all the way through was unhelpful because it immediately puts every school under threat and in fear.

Professor Gallagher: There is no doubt that one of the consequences of some of this stuff is to make a lot of schools feel quite intimidated. Language can be important in that respect and can have very negative consequences.

The Chairperson: Before we go to Sean, it may be useful to consider table 13 in your paper. You give us a very good breakdown because it goes into the attainment measures and how they apply to the grammar schools. It states:

> "On the enrolment measures over two-in-five failed to have a minimum of 500 pupils".

Will you tell us, in layman's terms, what table 13 really means for individual schools and how we look at the system?

Professor Gallagher: The attainment measures are based on a particular performance measure, but they also try to take into account performance over a number of years. Depending on whether the criterion of either five or seven GCSEs is being looked at, it can be a period of three years or two. A number of different things emerge from that. The fact that you get that sort of variation across the

different measures indicates that a high degree of variability in circumstance and outcome across schools is a feature of our system. No matter what way you look at it, we have a very diverse system in that respect. There are quite large achievement gaps. That is one element.

The fact that so many schools are identified as being under enrolment stress reflects the very significant rural dimension of Northern Ireland and the fact that so many of our schools serve rural communities and have, by tradition, always been smaller. I think that there has always been a policy bias that assumes there must be something wrong with a school because it is small. If you examine the evidence, that claim just does not stack up, by and large.

Many of the indicators are taken as points for the purpose of the area-planning process. You could shift them around or change them and you would get different results, but they highlight the variability. One particular issue that comes through is that there is quite an interesting difference for secondary schools between levels of performance of schools where pupils get five or more good GCSEs or five or more GCSEs including English and maths; there is quite a gap. That is interesting because, in the past, five good GCSEs was the target and, clearly, a lot of secondary schools did things to try to ensure that they hit those targets. The target of five GCSEs including English and maths came in more recently. The fact that there is a significant gap illustrates the consequences of setting targets. You can get people to do things to hit a target that are not necessarily sensible. It may well be that English and maths provision for some pupils in secondary schools was not as strong as it might have been, given that they had a different target to meet. With the current target in place, no doubt that will rise over time, but this is where we need to be careful about targets. Targets can cause people to do things. We want people to do good things, but targets can sometimes lead to perverse consequences. We need to guard against that.

Mr Rogers: Thanks, Tony. I am quite excited by some of the things that you have said, particularly that smaller does not necessarily mean underachieving.

Professor Gallagher: Yes.

Mr Rogers: That is very important. At the end of the day, a good school is about high-quality teaching and learning, good leadership and financial viability. If we were able to strip out and separate the stress factor created by Mr Bain and the Department in setting the post-primary enrolment level at 500 and the rural primary level at 105 — so we had 95 instead of 105, and 350 as opposed to 500 — might we see the issue of stress better? You made an interesting point about the strategy and the implementation plan. Do you believe that the way in which the strategy was organised on area-based planning inhibited thinking outside the box? What I am really talking about is that, particularly in rural areas, the CCMS was working its plan, the board was working its plan and whatever else. The way in which the strategy was organised actually inhibited an implementation plan.

Professor Gallagher: There are two issues. The first relates to the Bain report, which I think was produced in 2006. That report identified viability levels based on enrolment. I assume that when that report was being put together, advice was taken from the inspectorate about its sense of the size that a school should be to enable it to provide a certain curricular mix that would be appropriate for pupils. The Bain report identified the high level of variability and access to opportunity with curricular provision because of school size. However, that advice came forward before the entitlement framework came in. Part of the rationale for the entitlement framework was that, if schools collaborated in a local area, they could provide access to a much wider range of curriculum opportunity than a single school on its own. That was another theme of the Bain report: the importance of collaboration to ensure that, as far as possible, every pupil in every part of Northern Ireland had access to as wide a range of curricula as possible. The Bain report suggested that another collateral benefit of collaboration was a way to try to engage across sectoral divisions and give young people opportunities to work together, meet and mix. That sort of thing eventually led to the shared education idea. If the entitlement framework had been in place and the imperative of the system had been towards collaboration, it is possible that the advice on what a school needed to be able to do would have been different, and viability levels might have been lower. That would certainly change a lot of the game. We are still working on some of the assumptions about schools being able to provide something autonomously as opposed to being able to provide it in a collaborative context. That is an important issue in the recommendations in the Bain report. They were put forward in a particular context, and I think that the context has changed.

The second point is about the strategy and its implementation. My point in response to the Chair's question was that, no matter how good a strategy is, you must have an implementation plan. Part of the difficulty with the range of initiatives that has been put in place by the Department is that a whole

range of things do not seem to me to be terribly well joined up with regard to implementation. The idea of area-based planning, bringing all the sectors together, is really good. In the past, one difficulty was that, if the CCMS was looking at a map of schools in considering rationalisation, its map contained only maintained schools. If the boards were looking at a map, their map had only controlled schools. The idea of area planning opened up the promise that they would all come together and look at a map that included every school and use that map as part of the basis for their area planning. However, in practice, in the way in which it has rolled out, that is not how it appears to have occurred. Sectors appear to have met, talked about what they wanted to do, gone back to the maps of their own schools, come up with ideas and brought their plans together. Where they thought that they did not have something that worked, they started to see how they might stitch some things together. If they had taken a joined-up approach from the start, we might have had a different outcome. That would have required real encouragement and an opportunity for people to explore creative solutions. I do not think that, by and large, that was provided.

Mr Rogers: Also, the cross-border dimension was completely ignored in area planning.

Professor Gallagher: I am not sure that it was ignored because the Department did some work to try to get statistics on the issue. I know that people were exploring options in local areas. I looked at the issue for the Committee and had some conversations. There are significant challenges with trying to find cross-border solutions because the structure and curriculum of schools on each side of the border are different. My conclusion was that the simplest way to use cross-border solutions would be that if pupils from one place opted to go to school in another jurisdiction, they would follow whatever curriculum was provided there. That could operate in both directions. However, the possibility of trying to have a mix between schools on each side of the border was challenging and would be difficult to put into practice.

Mr Rogers: Can you give us more information on smaller schools? By that, I do not necessarily mean underachieving schools?

Professor Gallagher: There is a long history of claims about the problems that small schools face, not only in Northern Ireland but in other places. There is an equally long history of people researching those claims, which normally do not stack up. Even when the statutory curriculum was introduced in 1988 in England and in 1989 here, the fact that small schools could not deliver a statutory curriculum was seen as the absolute problem.

Evidence in England suggested that it was delivered better there because the school principals were teaching principals and were better tuned in to the challenges that teachers faced, and so were able to implement the statutory curriculum more effectively than larger schools. The notion that small equals poor is a long-standing policy prejudice, but there is very little evidence to support it.

Mr Rogers: That is encouraging, particularly for small schools. I declare an interest as the chair of the board of governors of a primary school that has under 105 pupils but ticks all the other boxes. However, when schools get their report from the Department, they see a red box, which needs a bit of explanation.

The Chairperson: Is the case not even more complex, Tony? The CCMS and the boards have different squares. The integrated sector seems to have a square all of its own, as do the voluntary grammar schools. With area planning, it was a case of, "We're all right, Jack. You can look at the school down the road because you do not need to look at us". That was the fundamental problem and the issue of managing authorities. It is even more complicated within sectors. The maintained sector and the Catholic grammar schools have trustees who are making plans for schools who do not even live in the jurisdiction of Northern Ireland. Some trustees could be in France, and some could be in Dublin. It is difficult to reach a point at which you can get an agreed position on the best way forward for a school.

Professor Gallagher: Yes. I do not want to get into that. There are lots of debates and issues around ESA, but part of the rationale for ESA was that, if you were moving the education system forward in a positive way, there was a need to provide strategic direction and oversight of the whole system because it is so diverse and has so many governing bodies.

Area planning seemed to open up the promise of finding more joined-up solutions. In practice, the level of joined-upness appears to have been limited. Sectors were involved that had specific claims to ownership, but there was a wider variety of interests that had a role to play. Across the boards, to a

greater or lesser extent, engagement with those other interests took place in different ways. That remains a real challenge in the system. When we have such a diverse system, how can we plan it so that the needs and interests of every young person across the entire system are front and centre of our concerns?

Mrs Dobson: Thank you for your briefing, Tony. I have been asked by so many pupils, especially in my constituency in Craigavon, about how they can get involved with the area-planning process because it is their school and their future, and they are the people affected. On Monday and Tuesday, a lovely girl from Lurgan College, Elizabeth Anderson, was shadowing me in Stormont. Today, she is in my constituency office. She was quite aggrieved that it was the pupils' future, and they would like a say on how decisions are made. How can Elizabeth and countless others get involved with the process? How can they make their voice heard?

Professor Gallagher: I guess that the Department, the boards and the sectors will be running consultation processes at various points, or through their MLAs. Those are the mechanisms that exist, and there are no others beyond those. To be honest, that question needs to be answered by someone else. A recurrent point is that we do not have good mechanisms to bring people together to look at the overarching picture and provision in a local area as a whole and how that might be best organised.

Mrs Dobson: It is frustrating because Elizabeth was so passionate about the Dickson plan, and you know my feelings on that. Are you picking up that pupils want to be more involved and are very clued-up and concerned about the future implications of area planning? I know that pupil power had a huge influence on the decision last week on Dundonald High School, so are you picking up that pupils want their say and want to be involved?

Professor Gallagher: I never had any doubt about that at any point. Whether I talk to pupils, students or parents, everyone is concerned about education. Every parent wants the best possible education for their child, because children are the future, and we all want to give our children the best possible future. Educational qualifications are vital to opening up opportunities, so everyone wants the system to be well run, structured and organised to give everyone the best possible experience.

There is some frustration that there are so many debates and such a lack of consensus around educational issues, and that has been the case for such a long time. A lot of people find that very frustrating.

Mrs Dobson: The fact that their views are not being heard is a major flaw.

The Chairperson: On the issue of community audits, how can you explain pupil power being successful for Dundonald but absolutely unsuccessful for Newtownbreda? If we place a lot of emphasis on pupil power, the result is that one school lost and one gained, so it is about balancing that power. We could stray into a really challenging area of community audit by asking: what community? Is it the community inside the controlled sector box? Is it the community comprising the pupils and parents in the maintained sector? That would create a challenge. We have to face the reality that parents make choices based on the structures as they are. If you move to change those structures, you have to be sure that you have the community buy-in to do so.

Professor Gallagher: I have two immediate thoughts. My first thought is that the outcomes of particular policy options and debates are probably all to do with the mysterious process of politics and influence. On the other hand, that is complicated by the fact that, if you look at schools in Northern Ireland, the communities that they serve are often very different, even geographically, so your point about communities is exactly right. Where pupils come from to attend particular schools can vary enormously, so when you think about a "community", it is not always locally based. Some schools draw pupils from very wide catchment areas, so I suspect that their sense of community is different from that of schools that draw pupils from an immediate vicinity. That complicates the issue of who the community is that is involved in decisions.

The Chairperson: The "mysterious" issue about politics, however, is more to do with the mysterious processes that take place behind the doors of Rathgael House. I think that, eventually, after six years of asking, I am getting through those doors. In fairness to the decision regarding the Belfast corridor, a huge amount of information was put on the website. There were graphs and a raft of information that informed the decision, but the process used to make the decision is misty. It is the same with

capital projects. I still have a deficit in my understanding of how capital allocations are made. It keeps changing, and I still cannot understand how you align and identify need in an area and decide who ends up getting the money. That is a debate that we must have soon on capital allocations, because another announcement is due shortly. There is always the risk that, the more transparent processes become, the more suspicions they arouse.

Mr Hazzard: Chair, you should have asked more nicely, and you might have got into Rathgael earlier —

Mr Kinahan: But they let you in too. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: I was as pleasant as I always am in my invitations.

Mr Hazzard: Tony, thanks for that. I missed the start of your presentation, so I apologise if you have covered my point. I want to thrash out the idea of incentives for change. Are there enough incentives for communities to buy into area planning? It is very hard for communities to buy into a process in which you are asking them to change fundamentally the way in which they view education in a town or area. Sometimes, parents simply want to send their kids to a good school. Very often, if there is a good school in the area, it is a matter of, "No change here, please. Thank you very much". There is an issue around incentives and how we deal with them. What is the incentive for the sectors and the schools? What can we do to help the process?

Professor Gallagher: One problem with the area-planning process — the point was made earlier — was the way in which it was cast, the whole language of stress factors and all the rest of it. That made people feel very defensive. Some people felt that their school was suddenly under attack. If parents send their child to a school that they think is quite good, their natural inclination is to try to defend it. It was quite predictable at the start of the process that, all over Northern Ireland, there would be a range of campaigns to try to keep particular schools open because people wanted to retain their local school. That discouraged people from having useful area-based conversations about what would be best for the area.

In a slightly different context, a contrast might be seen in some work we did quite a few years ago in Omagh using a deliberative poll. We took a sample of parents and asked them a series of questions about options for the future of education in Omagh and a range of different issues. It was very concrete; they were not abstract questions about the system in Northern Ireland or the system generally but were about schools in Omagh. We then brought the parents together to talk in facilitated groups about the options. They had an opportunity to ask questions to sectoral leaders. It was not that the sectoral leaders told them what they wanted; it came from the parents. They had the chance to put questions and then go back into the deliberative process and have their conversations. They were then polled again to see whether their views had changed. One thing that came through very strongly was exactly your point: most parents are primarily interested in their child getting a good education. In some senses, they are much less concerned about having a full range of choice or whether it is in this type of school or another type. That is less important than getting a reasonable guarantee that their child will have a good education. Parents will and can be flexible about local provision as long as they feel that it will work for their child.

There was not any real opportunity for that type of conversation or deliberation to inform this process. There was too much of "This is what we think ought to be done. Fill in this questionnaire to tell me what you think". In most cases, any dissent from the proposals was not really taken into account. There were not incentives to give people a feeling that they could play a role in helping to create or shape the future of the system. That incentive was not there.

Mr Kinahan: Given all the points that we have made today, particularly about consultation, is it your opinion that we should stop the whole area-planning process and start again and really think our way through it?

Professor Gallagher: That is a big question. We are where we are. We have to make the best of what we have. Drawing a line under everything and saying, "Nothing that has been done so far is worthwhile" is maybe too big. However, given the problems that have emerged and the challenges that are still there, maybe we need to rethink some aspects of the process. Maybe we should try to provide some real opportunity for parents and people on the ground to feel that they can be involved in the process and to come forward with ideas. An interesting thing about the new scheme on the shared education campuses is that that is what is happening: people in an area are getting together

and putting together proposals. They will submit expressions of interest soon. I hope that that generates good momentum. It is possible to get those local dynamics going and allow people the space and opportunity to come up with creative solutions. Everyone has an interest in a good education system.

The Chairperson: I think that, in the very useful process that you went through in Omagh, different questions were asked.

Professor Gallagher: Yes.

The Chairperson: The difficulty is that an organisation — whether a managing authority or something else because of the way in which our system is arranged — sets out a grandiose vision but, when it gets down to an individual school, that vision is lost ,and it is about the school.

Professor Gallagher: Yes.

The Chairperson: I have seen that in my constituency, where there may have been a great vision for the overall general outcome, but it all came down to the future of a school. That fed the responses, organised the opposition and galvanised the parents. Parents want the right outcome, but they are also convinced that the best outcome is within the confines or walls of a particular school.

Professor Gallagher: That is often because of the way in which the issue is cast to them, and this is about those issues exactly. If it were put in a different context or dressed in a different way, perhaps the answer would be different. Our evidence suggests that parents are prepared to be flexible as long as they have confidence that the direction is leading to better things.

The Chairperson: I have one final question, Tony, on figure 9 in your paper, which I am really asking for Danny's benefit. Why is there greater financial stress in South Antrim than in North Antrim? I see that Upper Bann comes third highest, but at least North Antrim is well down the scale. I do not mean to be disparaging or in any way derogatory about any parliamentary constituency, but it raises questions. However, if you think about the constituencies that might be under the greatest financial stress on the basis of economics, that is not how you would plot out the graph or think that it would end up like that. You would think that other constituencies would be further disadvantaged or have higher percentages. Why do you think that graph is the way that it is?

Professor Gallagher: I repeat the answer that I gave earlier: I do not know. What struck me as most interesting about the graph, and the reason why I included it, is that there is such a huge variation. It illustrates that there is a huge variation in experience across the system.

The Chairperson: I agree. East Belfast and North Down do not even register on the graph, but there are huge financial challenges in East Belfast. What is it? The graph is very interesting. If you take the Northern Ireland average and see how it is distributed, there is, as you said, a vast variation.

Professor Gallagher: I suspect that, if you were to drill down and look at the different school and management types, you would start to get a sense or an explanation of some of these things. Even within all the sectors, there are levels of variation, which is a characteristic of our system. The experience and position of individual schools, by almost any measure, vary an awful lot. That is interesting, but, from a policy point of view, it creates interesting and huge challenges for the system because, if school circumstances are so diverse, to what extent is there a risk that the experience of our young people is also diverse, not necessarily in good ways?

The Chairperson: Tony, thank you very much for your useful and helpful paper. We look forward to continuing to work with you.