



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Education

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Area Planning — Primary School Consultation:  
Department of Education and Southern  
Education and Library Board

2 April 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Education

Area Planning — Primary School Consultation:  
Department of Education and Southern Education and Library Board

2 April 2014

**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)  
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Jonathan Craig  
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson  
Mr Chris Hazzard  
Mr Trevor Lunn  
Mr Robin Newton  
Mr Seán Rogers  
Mr Pat Sheehan

**Witnesses:**

Mrs Lorraine Finlay	Department of Education
Mr Diarmuid McLean	Department of Education
Mr Gavin Boyd	Southern Education and Library Board

**The Chairperson:** Good morning, Diarmuid, Lorraine and Gavin. I welcome Diarmuid McLean, director of investment infrastructure. Please do not ask him about any capital builds; he is here to talk about area planning.

**Mr Diarmuid McLean (Department of Education):** To update you, that is no longer my title; I have now taken on area planning. Philip has taken over, so he can answer —

**The Chairperson:** We will just send Philip our contact details. I also welcome Lorraine Finlay, from the area planning policy team, and Mr Gavin Boyd, the acting chief executive of the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB). You are all very welcome. Thank you for coming and for the information that we have received to date. Diarmuid or Gavin, whoever is going to lead, we will take the presentation, and then members will ask questions.

**Mr McLean:** Thank you for the invitation to meet the Committee to provide an update on the current position regarding the primary planning process. First, I would just like to clear up any confusion there may have been regarding our attendance today. Contact was made with the secretariat last week in order to get clarity on your expectations for the session. That appears to have led to some misunderstanding regarding our attendance today. I would like to assure you that it was never our intention to postpone or cancel attendance at today's session.

As you are aware, responsibility for area planning, including producing area plans and conducting the consultation process on those plans, rests with the education and library boards. In doing so, they

work closely with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the other sectors. The Department's role is to set the policy, which, in this regard, is the sustainable schools policy, to provide advice and guidance and then, when the plans are prepared, to scrutinise and, if necessary, challenge those plans against the terms of reference in the area planning guidance.

The education and library boards have undertaken an area planning process for the primary sector, drawn up the draft current plans and published them for consultation. They have analysed the responses and produced a consultation report, which you have now received. In that regard, they are best placed, along with CCMS, to provide the Committee with evidence and detail around the primary consultation.

As with the primary consultation process, the central management support unit in the Southern Education and Library Board acts on behalf of all the education boards and CCMS in providing a summary report on the consultation exercise. In that regard, I am very grateful to Gavin Boyd, the acting chief executive of the Southern Education and Library Board, who, despite the short notice, has made himself available to attend the session today to answer any questions you might have on the consultation.

Given the time that has elapsed since we last met the Committee to discuss area planning, and given that there have been a number of changes on the Committee, it may be helpful to give a quick synopsis of the background to area planning and the current position regarding the primary sector plans.

As the Committee will be aware, the Minister's statement to the Assembly in September 2011 identified effective area planning as an important process in supporting the Department's key objective of raising standards for all. The objective was to develop a network of viable and sustainable schools to enable us to provide the quality of education that our children deserve. The Minister commissioned the boards and CCMS, as the bodies with the statutory responsibility for planning the schools estate, working in conjunction with all sectors, to develop strategic plans to meet the needs of future education provision here. Given the statutory requirements in respect of delivering the entitlement framework, the initial work was focused on post-primary provision.

The first draft post-primary plans were published for consultation from July to October 2012. Those attracted over 49,000 responses. As a result of that process, revised plans were received by the Department, in December 2012, for assessment against the terms of reference. As you are aware, Chair, that was the first time that area plans had been drafted, and it was a new experience for all those involved. The Department's assessment of those plans sought to ensure that the key messages from the post-primary consultation were addressed in the revised plans on issues such as consistency of application of the policy as well as a consistent and coherent approach to the provision of information and the inclusion of clear and unambiguous proposals where there was agreement. Revised plans were received in the Department in October 2013 and are published on the boards' websites.

It is recognised that the plans do not represent the final plans for all post-primary provision in any area. What they do provide is a picture of where we currently are, and they outline areas where actions are planned and can be advanced. They also highlight other areas where further work will be required to determine the most appropriate pattern of provision to meet future needs. Examples of where actions have been progressed recently include the decisions on post-primary provision in east Belfast, the future shape of controlled post-primary provision in Newtownabbey and Monkstown as well as maintained provision in Armagh and Lurgan. Others are under consideration.

I believe that progress is being made. Before we go specifically to the primary plans, I thought that it would be useful to highlight the extent of that progress. Between devolution in 2007 and the publication of the sustainable schools policy in January 2009, some 60 development proposals were brought forward and approved, three of which involved amalgamations. Between January 2009 and the introduction of area planning in September 2011, 67 development proposals were brought forward, four of which concerned amalgamations. Between September 2011 and the Minister's latest statement to date, during which time area planning has been developed and embedded, a total of 120 development proposals were brought forward and approved, 12 of which relate to amalgamations. It is obvious that the area planning process is having an impact, albeit the area plans themselves are not as well developed as we would have hoped. That suggests that the process of area planning is important, and we shall seek to strengthen that process in order to secure further benefits for children and young people.

I will now turn to the primary area plans. The first draft of those plans was published for consultation in March last year. The consultation, which ran from 30 June 2013, attracted over 11,000 responses. Gavin is available to answer any questions that you might have regarding the process and the findings of that consultation. It had originally been intended that the response to the consultation exercise and the updated primary plans would be available in the autumn of 2013. However, at a meeting of the area planning steering group with the Minister in August 2013, the board highlighted the pressures in its systems and concerns regarding its ability to meet the timelines while also advancing work on the next iteration of the post-primary plans. It sought and received agreement from the Minister to postpone the publication of the updated primary plans until the end of February 2014.

At a meeting in early February 2014, the area planning steering group members highlighted and discussed the fact that the annual school consensus data, which provides the enrolment numbers for 2013-14, were due to be published at the end of February. It was agreed that it may cause confusion if the primary plans were published in February based on 2012-13 data, when the 2013-14 data would be available a number of weeks later. In that regard, to coordinate the availability of the verifiable data and to ensure that the primary plans reflected the most up-to-date information, it was agreed to move the publication of the plans to the end of April. Those plans will include the 2013-14 data.

I have given you a brief timeline of the key milestones and decision points in the primary process. Although it may appear that the process has been protracted, that is a consequence of the volume of work needed in this area as well as the pressures being faced by the boards. Most of those involved in delivering the post-primary plans are also responsible for advancing the primary plans, and changes to the timescales were deemed to be a sensible response in the circumstance.

It has always been recognised that area planning would be an ongoing and iterative process and that any necessary actions required to reshape the provision in an area should not be delayed pending the publication of area plans. Progress is being made with respect to post-primary area planning. It is acknowledged that there has been a slippage in the original timetable for the publication of the primary plans. However, that has not delayed progress in reshaping primary provision. As previously outlined, the relevant managing authorities and the Department have continued to process proposals in the primary and post-primary sectors.

The role of the boards and CCMS in developing area plans was always seen as an interim arrangement, pending the establishment of a single planning authority. However, with work on the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) currently not being progressed, we still need to progress with effective area planning. In that regard, we will continue to take forward this programme with managing authority colleagues and others. There are heavy demands on the resources of all boards and CCMS at present, and I take this opportunity to acknowledge the pressure that they continue to work under.

Area planning is a complex, multifaceted and iterative process. We must continue to drive the process forward, so that we have a network of viable and sustainable schools to help achieve our overall goals for education here. That involves identifying future education needs and planning to meet those needs on an area basis. I will pause at that point, and we will try to answer any questions that the Committee might have.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you. First, Gavin is here, obviously, as the interim chief executive of a particular board, but will you clarify whether you have a responsibility to speak on behalf of all the boards or just yours?

**Mr Gavin Boyd (Southern Education and Library Board):** I can speak about the area planning process only on behalf of the Southern Board. I may be able to add some value around the consultation process, because it was carried out for the five boards by the central management support unit, which is part of the Southern Board. So, I can speak on the consultation process and draw on some of the experience that I have had with the Southern Board, but I cannot speak on behalf of the other boards.

**The Chairperson:** In relation to post-primary, Diarmuid, you used the phrase "clear and unambiguous proposals" and said that progress had been made. You then cited a number of examples of where that is seen to be the case, including Armagh. I do not think that people would regard Armagh as a success, particularly those in the controlled sector.

**Mr McLean:** I was referring to the fact that the area plans there identified the maintained provision, and that what was in the plans identified the changes planned for the maintained sector in the Armagh

and Craigavon areas. Those have been advanced through the development proposal process and decisions have been taken on them. It is likewise for the North Eastern Education and Library Board, with the Monkstown and Newtownabbey proposal, which was flagged up in the area plan and has now been advanced.

**The Chairperson:** I accept that. There is no agreement in one sector in Lurgan, where there is obviously the Dickson plan. Of six development proposals produced in east Belfast, only one was approved. So, that is clearly not a good example of a job well done. Fermanagh is a time bomb, because issues will undoubtedly arise there over the next weeks. I have written down a word to cover one of the key issues that arises from it all — alignment. Where is the alignment? I cannot see it happening other than particular sectors deciding what they want to do to protect their own interests. There is no alignment between area planning, shared education and a desire to ensure that we maximise the benefit from our estate.

That is particularly so for FE. It was only last November that, after being pushed, prodded, asked and cajoled, the Minister — along with the Minister responsible for further education — decided to allow the FE sector to be included on the area planning steering group. At 11.20 pm last night, I was still in the House for an Adjournment debate to talk to the Employment and Learning Minister about Ballymoney in my constituency. I declare an interest as a member of Ballymoney High School's board of governors. The debate was about the shape of provision for 14- to 19-year-olds. No area planning process is being implemented in a way that takes all those elements into consideration; it is all piecemeal. How do we get that alignment?

**Mr McLean:** I will try to pick up on some of those points. In relation to alignment within the Department, I assure you that we work closely with colleagues in capital infrastructure. As you are aware, I used to hold both portfolios. As regards both the recent announcement on the schools enhancement programme, which I was involved in establishing, and the capital announcements, there is an internal mechanism whereby any decisions around investment are aligned and take into consideration what is in the area plans. We want to ensure that any capital investment takes account of what is proposed in the area plans.

A similar process will be set up for shared education. The closing date for receipt of proposals under the Executive's shared campuses programme was Monday. I had a meeting with Philip yesterday to discuss how we would both align those proposals with area planning and our own capital investment.

On FE provision, the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning have regular liaison meetings where area planning is on the agenda. Any issues around area planning in relation to the FE sector can be discussed at that level, and between officials, if necessary. As you say, there is also the inclusion of a DEL representative on the area planning steering group. There is no doubt that, in looking at any proposals for shared education, we will want to be cognisant of how that may impact the FE sector or if there is any crossover with provision in the FE sector.

**The Chairperson:** I will conclude on this, and then we will go to members. I want members to have the opportunity to ask as many questions as they want to ask this morning. I will explain to you later what all that means, but other people are getting a message when I say that. *[Laughter.]* That all sounds fine in a policy context, Diarmuid. However, the reality, as I see it — and as, I think, other members see it — is that it is not working when it comes to being implemented. I declare an interest again — I am being very parochial — but we have a situation in north Antrim where there are proposals on the table for the FE sector to do a particular piece of work that will have consequences for the area learning community in Ballymoney. I know that the business case that has been developed is simply saying, "The best thing for you to do is take that provision, amalgamate it and put it in another location. The minute that that happens, you dismantle and disentangle and create a situation where you force the three remaining elements of the learning community to come closer together." However, what will happen is that size will determine the outcome. The bigger, post-primary element will become king of the castle. The other two elements — one is maintained, and one is controlled — will be left floundering. The Department still has not agreed a joint sixth-form provision.

I have talked to the Education Minister, the Employment and Learning Minister, and yourselves about all these issues. Everybody says, "It is a wonderful idea; great. Here is the policy. We can prove it all on paper." As the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) said, we can show it all on paper, but we cannot show it in practice. How do we break that cycle?

**Mr McLean:** Obviously, I am not really in a position to —

**The Chairperson:** I accept that.

**Mr McLean:** — discuss the FE sector and its proposals in north Antrim. However, I will certainly ensure that we put it on the agenda of the next DE/DEL liaison meeting to see what issues are arising in relation to education provision there.

**The Chairperson:** We will go to Danny after this. The other thing is that, when an organisation, such as an FE college, does a business case, it floats around in the ether. They are like development proposals. What cross-departmental discussion is there on a business case? He who pays the piper calls the tune. The consultant who does the work is beholden to whoever it is in the company who signs the cheque. They are given a remit to do a specific piece of work. Does the business case become sacrosanct? Does it become the tablets of stone? Does it become a case of, "This is the narrow focus and the only thing that you can do; all those other things, such as shared education, are very good, but your business case is about how we deliver a particular service in an area"? Is that not part of the problem? Is there any correlation between any of those things?

**Mr McLean:** I can speak only on our own business case process. There is a well-established operating practice between ourselves and the Department for Employment and Learning whereby we will not seek to replicate in any school good provision that is available in the FE sector. When we produce business cases in respect of any individual school, particularly at post-primary level, we look closely at what is being proposed for provision in that school and also take cognisance of any FE provision in the area. We set out to ensure that, in that business case, we are not supporting replication in a school of provision that is available in FE colleges, and perhaps to a better standard.

Gavin might be able to say something about how it operates in the Southern Board area.

**Mr Boyd:** If it is helpful, I will reflect on one case that I am involved in where there is a very clear commitment from both the FE sector and the post-primary sector to work together. I am talking about the city of Armagh. FE in the city of Armagh has always played an important role in the education of 16- to 18-year-olds. Historically, a lot of sixth-form provision was offered in the FE college. So, there is a very strong linkage there. As the schools and the college in the area seek to develop joint working, a very clear role for FE is being identified.

In practical terms, it is about ensuring that the significant investment that has gone into particular aspects of FE is not replicated in schools. Schools in the area have a very clear understanding that there is some provision that is better offered in FE, just as there is a very clear understanding that there is some provision for young people that is much better offered in schools. We are at the early stages of developing it. However, the logic is clear, and there are excellent working relationships among all the partners. This is perhaps a crude way of putting it, but it is supportive rather than predatory. Everybody is working together to serve the interests of the wider educational community.

**Mr Kinahan:** Thank you very much for the presentation. I think that you know where I come from on this. It is the most illogical policy and framework that I have seen going through the Assembly in my brief time here. It does not seem to be pulling together.

Will a review of the process take place to make sure that it works? We have had the call for consistency between the boards; yet, the Northern Education and Library Board is very different from the other boards in how it is doing things. There is still no framework whereby everyone knows how the whole system is working. In the Chamber, I talked about it being like a jigsaw where no one knows what the picture is. No one knows how it links to the board or school next door. Someone else across the Chamber mentioned that we do not actually have all the pieces either. The general public does not understand the framework.

When we had the stakeholders up here, there were calls for a facilitator. Are we going to review it so that we put facilitators in place in order that schools can understand the process and be led through it? When you look at the report that we were given late yesterday evening, you see that the major comment from almost every board is that around 16% or 20% felt that sharing was part of it. There is nothing in it pulling it together to make sure that schools start sharing, whether that is sharing across religion or the different types of schools.

We have development plans and a system that puts schools under threat before they need to be under threat and before the Minister has made the decision. Are we going to review how we are carrying out the process? Are we going to look at the Scottish presumption against closure of rural schools? Are we going to try to do it better? I go back to this question: are we going to review what we are doing? I could go on. We know why it has to happen. We know that it was based on the viability study at the time, but those figures are now two or three years out of date. Are we going to review it again in view of the viability figures to make sure that we have the right figures? Are we going to re-look at how we are doing it so that we get it right?

**Mr McLean:** Thank you, Danny. We review what we are doing as we go along. Part of the work of the Department in challenging the plans is to ensure that we get consistency in how the reports are produced. I remind the Committee that these arrangements were put in place as an interim arrangement pending the introduction of a single planning authority, which may have reduced any tendency to a different approach in different areas. However, we continue to move ahead with area planning. The area planning steering group guidance sets out how we will operate. Within that group, we are looking at how to ensure a consistent approach across all board areas in the production of plans and in establishing local area groups where there may be a more regional focus on issues that affect those areas as opposed to the overall picture.

How we dealt with the six development proposals for east Belfast shows that we are cognisant of cross-boundary issues when more than one board is involved. We try to take those into consideration. We have learned lessons from those development proposals coming forward at different times. The Minister has written to the boards indicating that, where there are groups of development proposals that may affect schools, they should come forward at the same time so that a full picture can be seen by all involved.

In relation to your point on the viability audits, although we are not referring to it as the viability audit process, area planning profiles, which have the same information that was produced for the original viability audits, are now produced annually and published by each board on its website. That was put in place following the initial viability audits undertaken a number of years ago. We are now at the third iteration of that. The next plans will be published by the boards in the coming weeks.

This is a new process. We have learned from moving from the post-primary into the primary process. Hopefully, we will see greater consistency in how the information is communicated to those involved.

**Mr Kinahan:** Have you looked at the Scottish system?

**Mr McLean:** I am aware of it, but there is no indication at this stage that we are looking to adopt that approach. We are dealing with a totally different situation. We are applying the Department's sustainable schools policy and trying to do that consistently across the estate and all schools in Northern Ireland. That is the policy under which the Department continues to move forward with the planning process.

**The Chairperson:** The only issue with that, Diarmuid, is that when you come to the viability audits, you apply only three elements in the sustainable schools policy. You do not apply the six. That created a bit of a difficulty, because schools were being judged on three elements as opposed to the six elements, which is the overall context of a sustainable school.

**Mr McLean:** I assure you that we were not judging schools. Those are indicators. We are gathering information. Those are the three that are quantifiable and for which the information is readily available. They are indicators of where schools may be experiencing stress at different levels. We will consider any development proposal against the full remit of the sustainable schools policy.

**Mr Rogers:** You are very welcome, Gavin, Diarmuid and Lorraine. Gavin, can I go back to the point that you made about the logic being clear? I cannot see how the logic is clear. You talk about the Armagh learning partnership; I am talking particularly about the Newry and Downpatrick learning partnerships. Those partnerships are doing fantastic work across the board. Grammar schools, high schools and further education colleges are working together. We have great examples of education being shared and of where children are educationally challenged. I spoke to a school principal last week, and he told me that, for one or two pupils in particular, the only time that their attendance is good is when there is a link course with the local college. Area learning partnerships are doing fantastic work across the board, FE was brought into the area planning process only as an afterthought and the funding to the partnerships has been cut. So how is the logic clear?

**Mr Boyd:** The comments that I made, Seán, were specifically about the work going on in the Armagh learning community, which I know well and is a particularly effective group. I cannot comment about the other groups because I simply do not know their work. When I said that the logic was clear, it was specifically in relation to some courses that are offered to 16-year-olds or 18-year-olds, for which there is a requirement for investment in plant: for example, construction-related or engineering-related courses, in which there has been significant investment in the FE sector over the past number of years to ensure that the colleges have the right kit and the expertise to deliver them.

In the Armagh learning community, there is a clear understanding that it would not be a good use of public funds to try to replicate those courses in schools. In fact, young people in the sixth form of schools in Armagh already attend some courses in the FE college. As we develop that relationship, it is particularly important that the time-tabling allows that to work effectively. We need to formalise that. So there is a clear logic to how each partner will contribute to a learning community. In other learning communities, I am aware that, for example, schools with clear expertise in music are leading the sixth-form music provision in their area. So an underlying logic is being applied locally, depending on local circumstances.

From an operational perspective, area planning is very much an iterative process. I do not think that we will get to a position where a plan is produced and that is the plan that will be delivered over the next 10 years, because circumstances change. Populations move, and schools' intake and budgeting are among many things that change. However, the plan is important from an operational perspective when issues arise in a locality: for instance, a local representative came to see me yesterday about a particular primary school. When we were talking about that primary school, we were not talking about it in isolation; we were talking about all of the other primary schools in the area.

So when the board is considering a proposal from a school to increase admissions, we do not look only at that individual school. We look very closely at the potential impact on other schools in the catchment area. It is not unusual for me to sit down and look at maps showing the home of all children attending a particular school and other schools in the locality. One of the great benefits of the process to date has been the discipline that it has brought to decision-making and the simple fact that decisions are much more likely to be based on fact rather than anecdote.

**Mr Rogers:** Fair enough, Gavin. I will not go on, but, with respect, you did not really answer my question.

**Mr Boyd:** I thought that you had not noticed.

**Mr Rogers:** It is very frustrating from the schools' point of view when they have engaged with the local further education college. Newry is one example, and Armagh and Downpatrick are equally good examples. They have engaged in the process and the children or young people have found something that they really want to do and which would prepare them for working life and so on. Principals are asking what will happen and saying that they will not be able to engage with further education colleges if they do not have the funding. So children will be disadvantaged, and the sharing of education will not happen. The young person whom I was talking about is a non-attender and will not be able to access the stimulation of shared learning in the further education college. The Department is cutting the funding.

**Mr Boyd:** I agree with you, but I will just make the practical point again. We have loads of practical experience and research to demonstrate that young people learn well when they engage with a teacher or a subject. We know that. We also know that young people have different interests. Some will engage in modern languages; some in construction or practical experiences; and others in sport or music. So there is a key to improving performance: it is about the engagement of young people. What you have identified is a real challenge. If we increase the level of engagement by improving the opportunity for young people to access courses that are of real interest to them and with which they can engage, we will improve outcomes across the whole system. However, there are challenges in that.

**Mr Rogers:** Diarmuid, you talked about the sustainable schools policy. Is it the Department's view that bigger is better for primary schools?

**Mr McLean:** The sustainable schools policy sets out the minimum numbers that it is believed provide the environment for creating the best outcomes. These are single-class schools in which there is a single teacher for each year group. That is the basis of the figures of 105 and 140 for primary schools.

Obviously, other schools can produce good results, but the ideal situation is a single teacher for each individual year group, which points to having seven-class schools.

**Mr Rogers:** That might be your opinion, Diarmuid, but that is not the opinion of all our primary-school teachers. Our primary-school principals say that the Bain threshold of 105, or whatever, is no longer valid and has created a lot of stress in schools. Even if the teaching and learning in a school is outstanding, its budget viable and its leadership good etc, it gets a red letter from the board because it has fewer than 105 pupils. That is causing stress, and, if something else slips a bit, schools will have two stress factors.

**Mr McLean:** The premise of area planning is to ensure that we have the appropriate provision to meet the needs of communities in the area. We try to provide that through a network of viable and sustainable schools. We have to operate within the budgets available and ensure that we are trying to direct funding to front line services as much as possible in an effective way. Under the sustainable schools policy, those are the figures set out as the thresholds for sustainable schools.

**Mr Rogers:** Would you acknowledge that many, many good schools with fewer than 105 pupils provide a fantastic educational experience for their young people?

**Mr McLean:** I do not think that the Department has ever said otherwise. There are examples across the piece of schools with smaller numbers providing an excellent standard of education. The question is about their sustainability.

**Mr Rogers:** OK. Might the Department need to recognise that and not have that figure of 105?

**Mr McLean:** The Department can operate only within the policy figures that are set. Those are the figures in the sustainable schools policy.

**Mr Rogers:** I knew that you would stick up for the Department and its policies.

On a different point, what is the progress on area based planning for special schools?

**Mr McLean:** The Minister, following his statement last year, tasked Claire Mangan with taking forward a review of special schools provision. My understanding is that she will submit that report to the Minister shortly. It looks at special provision in all schools across the North of Ireland.

**Mr Lunn:** The original idea was that the education and library boards were charged to work with CCMS to produce plans. We might have expected that to mean that they would work jointly and would eventually — although there has been nothing so far — produce solutions that may be cross-sectoral. Is there any evidence of that in your work so far?

**Mr McLean:** The boards and CCMS, in conjunction with other sectors, are engaged in the area planning process. Perhaps not unexpectedly, the first iteration deals with the most obvious areas in which change is needed in each of those sectors. We are aware of interaction and engagement on sharing at different levels. Part of that manifests itself in some of the applications that have come forward in response to the Executive's initiative on shared education campuses.

**Mr Lunn:** You said that change is needed in sectors. Will you expand on that?

**Mr McLean:** There has been some restructuring in individual sectors, such as the three proposals for three maintained schools becoming one school in Lurgan and the two into one in Armagh. Likewise, we have seen the proposal for two controlled schools to be combined in Newtownabbey/ Monkstown.

**Mr Lunn:** My problem with all of this is that I cannot conceive of a situation in which all the solutions will be within sectors. However, that is the way that it appears to be panning out, as in the three cases that you have just mentioned.

**Mr McLean:** Yes, those are individual sectors, but they are, perhaps, easier to move forward first, whereas getting agreement on what a shared solution might be for the others may take somewhat longer.

**Mr Lunn:** I am looking at the Committee Clerk's covering note in which paragraph after paragraph states:

*"The following schools in the controlled sector"*

or

*"The following schools in the maintained sector".*

It then gives an area and states:

*"are to be subject to a local area solution".*

The note repeatedly refers to the maintained and controlled sectors. In the Armagh City and District Council area, 14 maintained schools, I think:

*"are to be subject to a local area solution."*

In a district council the size of Armagh, can the best solution really be one restricted to particular sectors? I am not particularly blaming the Department, but there does not appear to have been any genuine attempt by whoever produced these proposals to recognise that perhaps the best solution would be schools from different sectors coming together. That just does not seem to be on the radar.

**Mr Boyd:** I will pick up specifically on Armagh. I came into Armagh after the reports had been produced and I read them quite carefully. My interpretation of what appears in the published documents for post-primary and in the documents being consulted on for primary is that issues have been identified but, in most cases, no particular solutions proposed. So when it states that a local area solution is to be explored, it essentially means that there are some stress factors or reasons why the issue requires further consideration. It does not preclude any proposition; it simply highlights that there are issues that have to be dealt with.

Trevor, that is, if you like, one of the early wins in an area planning process. You can agree or disagree with some of the parameters, but using them to test the existing provision starts to highlight a number of issues. The job, then, is to work out what one will do in response to those issues. There is a considerable sharing between schools in that area. It is not necessarily highlighted publicly, but schools are getting on with their business. In the city of Armagh, children from each of the post-primary schools attend courses in other post-primary schools.

**Mr Lunn:** The sharing agenda is fine, though I have mixed views about it. Let us face it: I would rather have something beyond sharing, but I have promised not to use the word, so I will not. However, this is a cloak of convenience that hides the fact that, in some situations, the real solution would be beyond just sharing. Sharing a music class is fine, and I would be very keen on that, but there is a gung-ho approach to sharing. What seems to be happening is that rationalisation is going on within sectors but in the absence of finalised plans that might take a more realistic view across the piece. I just keep coming back to this: I see no evidence that CCMS and the boards have cooperated in any way. I have said that before. I think that they worked in different rooms to produce those plans. Tell me that I am wrong or point me to a case that suggests differently. I know of one case, in Danny's area, of a small rural primary school that indicated its willingness to merge, perhaps, with the local maintained primary school. That is referred to in this document, but the second school is not even mentioned. It just says that it is open to the option.

I appreciate that all the delay and uncertainty with ESA may have had a big effect on some of this, but, sooner or later, we have to sort it out. I cannot believe that, when you come to carry out a major rationalisation of the school estate and our school systems, you can continue to work exclusively under sectoral banners, and I have not even mentioned the integrated sector — but I have now.  
[Laughter.]

**Mr McLean:** Trevor, the Department can deal only with the development proposals that come forward, and the Minister can take a decision on them. It is up to the managing authorities to put forward the proposals that, they believe, best serve the needs of their communities. Obviously, in making the decisions, they have to take into consideration what they believe to be right for their particular institutions and schools. There is always the need to ensure that we are open to parental preference. We must take account of that. I do not think that it is for the Department to impose solutions.

**Mr Lunn:** I would be delighted if the Department acknowledged that it would like to give more credence to parental preference. If it did, it would look at the many surveys produced in recent years and realise that there is another way. When you talk of managing authorities, are you saying that the Department thinks that it is up to the individual schools to propose their own fate?

**Mr Boyd:** What do you mean?

**Mr McLean:** I did not say that it is up to individual schools; it is up to the managing authorities responsible for them, operating within the framework, which is the sustainable schools policy, to ensure that there is effective provision. As well as that, we must be sensitive to issues in local communities and the preferences of communities for the type of schools that they wish their children to go to. That is evidenced by the attendance and applications for attendance at those schools.

**Mr Lunn:** In a way, it is good to hear that you think that local opinion and parental choice and preference will be a major factor in all this. We have before us today a Lucid Talk survey on Newtownabbey, which we have not yet got to. You will get to see it in due course, if you have not already done so.

I just think that we are not in the real world here. We will not achieve the solutions that we need. I know that it may sound a bit radical to suggest the amalgamation of a local controlled primary and a local maintained primary. I do not mean a Moy solution, with two uniforms and all that. I mean a proper — dare I use the word — integration of those two schools. I do not mean on the integrated model; I just mean that a coming together would be the best solution for that particular area to make sure that there is still primary provision for the village. It is not here, and it does not appear to be coming. All of this is purely sectoral.

**Mrs Lorraine Finlay (Department of Education):** On the progression towards sharing, we can take heart from the area learning communities. When they were originally established, there was a lot of concern about how they would operate and whether parents would be happy for kids to go to other schools. Seán, you have just pointed out how successful they have been. It is the same with bringing people together to develop integrated/shared education — whatever you want to call it. You have to build trust first. A lot of work is going on with the boards, CCMS and the other sectors to try to develop that.

**Mr Lunn:** I will finish, Chairman. When you mention the word "trust", I, not for the first time, think that the public and parents are miles ahead of the boards, CCMS and even the Assembly when it comes to trust. You might find that there is a lot more trust out there and a lot more confidence in their ability to deal with a radical solution than there is for the various authorities that propose it. I will leave it at that, Chairman.

**The Chairperson:** Danny, do you want to comment on that before we move on?

**Mr Kinahan:** Diarmuid, you mentioned that it was not the Department but the boards that would really be responsible for seeing whether they could get the sharing or coming together of the sectors. Will the Department push that, or will you just let the boards make those choices?

**Mr McLean:** It will be up to the managing authorities to determine the best configuration. The guidance produced on area planning asks the managing authorities to consider shared arrangements where appropriate and to explore sharing arrangements in the delivery of appropriate and effective provision in any area.

The proposal is in the Executive's Together: Building a United Community strategy. We have now received a number of expressions of interest on coming forward with infrastructural sharing projects. There has always been a degree of sharing in local communities, and that has been funded through various initiatives in the Department of Education as well as through other programmes.

**Mr Craig:** Diarmuid, I apologise for being a bit late this morning. I did not hear all of what you had to say, but I listened with interest to all that was said about how we arrive at an agreed solution, and I find it fascinating. However, I have one concern, and I am directing this at you because I can see that there is a major issue in my area and throughout the south-eastern region. There is a democratic deficit on the board. I will not go into the history of it. When boards are looking at area plans and discussing the potential future of any sector or provision of education in an area, what consultation do

they put in place with local elected representatives? Other boards have elected representation, but, on the South Eastern Board, there is absolutely none.

**Mr McLean:** Jonathan, I am not sure that I am best placed to comment on what the South Eastern Board has done in its consultation process on area planning. However, when it comes to any individual proposal that comes forward, irrespective of the area planning process, there is still a statutory process, which is the development proposal process. It is set out in statute, which means that there is consultation with any individual institutions or schools that will face significant change. There is a pre-publication period of consultation that the board must undertake with the stakeholders. Then, post-publication, there is a two-month period when anyone who wishes to comment or make suggestions about that development proposal process can do so. Those are all gathered together and considered when recommendations are put to the Minister, and he makes the final decision.

**Mr Craig:** I know that you may not be best placed to comment, but I am just putting it out there because there is a major issue. I have seen a lot of stuff put out there about the formal process. Ultimately, a lot of it has been backtracked on. If there had been political input in the process in the first place, I do not think that half of them would be there, so it is something to take note of.

**The Chairperson:** Before we move on from that point, I want to go back to the issue that Trevor raised. Who is in control of the process? I do not think that the Minister or the Department is in control of it. It is not an area plan; it is a wing and a prayer. The hope is that somebody will come up with a solution.

Trevor referred to the lists and lists of schools in the cover note. I counted 11 schools in Down, and all that is next to them is, "local area solutions", but what are they? In my area, the area plan said, "local area solutions". Some of the schools have asked what that means.

The Department has a policy that states to a school that, if it has fewer than 105 pupils, it is up for closure. Then you have CCMS saying that the figure is not 105; it is 84. That is because CCMS does not buy into the seven-school model that the Department wants; it buys into a four-teacher school model, which has an 84-pupil limit. It works on a parish basis, whereas the rest work on area plans.

You said earlier that the Department will not impose solutions, but it pays the bills for every one of these schools. The Department is the Paymaster General for every school, yet it does not have control over the long-term composition of the estate. The Department is held to ransom by all of these elements of the system.

I know that the Minister or you will turn round to me and say that, if we had ESA, it would solve it all. We have been hearing that for seven years. I have a serious issue with the controlled sector being left out in the cold, never mind being on a wing and a prayer, because there is nobody in there defending it or shouting for it. When it comes to area planning, it does not have the ace card. It cannot say, when it comes to closing a school, "You cannot do anything with our school because we hold the title deeds." When will we move away from that, Diarmuid?

**Mr McLean:** Under the sustainable schools policy, falling below the figure of 105 does not mean that a school is earmarked for closure; it is a trigger for a review to take place.

In moving forward with area planning, the Minister and the Department of Education must operate within the existing legislation, which sets out the rights and responsibilities of the various sectors and how they need to be dealt with. Therefore, area planning is being taken forward within the existing legislation.

If an area plan states that an area solution is required, that is an indication that, at this stage, they have not reached a conclusion on what that solution will be. That comes back to the point that Gavin made, which is that this is an iterative process. We do not expect to have a master plan that deals with every school at this stage. We expect plans that highlight those on which there is clarity and that can, therefore, be moved forward. After indicating that an area solution may be required, there is still further work to be done. A future, updated version of the plan will reflect any consensus or changes that may be required. That said, I go back to an early point about the alignment of capital investment. Only in situations in which there is clarity on the solution would the Department feel confident about significant investment in new schools. Until some of the issues are resolved and we know the final pattern of provision in those areas, it is difficult to see a situation in which there would be any new investment in newbuilds.

**Mr Boyd:** Chair, I will make this point in relation to only the Southern Education and Library Board. It is not to disagree with some of your comments but for the record to say that the Southern Education and Library Board takes very seriously its managing authority responsibility for controlled schools. The controlled schools subcommittee of the board, which is made up of elected members and transferors, takes those responsibilities seriously. It is not the approach in the Southern Education and Library Board to do anything other than try to fully engage with all very local representatives and the school authorities in the area planning process.

**The Chairperson:** Is it your understanding, Gavin, that that is the only board with that provision?

**Mr Boyd:** Sorry, Chair, I do not know. I could easily check that, but I can comment in relation to only the Southern Education and Library Board, where those responsibilities are taken very seriously.

**Mr Lunn:** What does "local area solutions" mean? I see, for instance, that a local area solution is proposed for Groarty Integrated Primary School, near Strabane, I think. There is also a local solution proposed for Portaferry and Annsborough primary schools. What does that mean if it is not in conjunction with an overall local area solution involving the maintained and controlled sectors? How can you have a local area solution for one school? What does that mean?

**Mr McLean:** Trevor, with 800-odd primary schools, I am sure you will not be surprised that I may not know the detail around those schools. I am assuming that they are looking at the full range of options that may be available, particularly in rural areas, where different provision may be under those levels. They may be looking at other solutions that would ensure some sort of sustainable provision to ensure adequate education provision into the future.

**Mr Lunn:** I am slightly guessing where Groarty Integrated Primary School is, but I think it is between Derry and Strabane. There is a local area solution for controlled schools in Strabane District Council that involves the closure of Bridgehill Controlled Primary School. I think that has already happened. The draft area plan for primary schools states that CCMS is to consult on the amalgamation of Barrack Street Boys' Primary School with St Anne's Primary School, Strabane. St Mary's Boys' and St Mary's Girls' primary schools are to amalgamate and CCMS is to consult on the closure of Envagh and St Francis of Assisi primary schools. The document adds that local area solutions are proposed for the integrated schools — Groarty. Is there any overlap there?

**Mr McLean:** I do not know that case, and those questions may be best addressed to the Western Education and Library Board and CCMS. One thing you would have to take into consideration, particularly in relation to primary provision, is the proximity of other schools and the travel times required for primary-school children. Without having a map or seeing what is on that map, I do not think I really can —

**Mr Lunn:** I do not mean to put you on the spot with a particular case. I am just using that as an example of there not being much evidence of joined-up thinking.

**Mr Boyd:** I would like to make a comment in relation to the Southern Education and Library Board because members might find it helpful. I can think of one rural area where we have four controlled primary schools, each of which has fewer than 105 pupils, but each of which provides at least good education and manages its budget carefully. The policy identified that we should look at them carefully, but, having looked and despite the fact that they would indicate a stress factor in terms of numbers, the local solution is to leave those schools as they are because they are working effectively.

**Mr Lunn:** Do you expect me to disagree with that?

**Mr Boyd:** I am just setting it out as a —

**Mr Lunn:** I am not talking about the ones that are clearly viable and satisfy the criteria. I am talking about the ones where the opposite is the case and what the solution is. I am sorry, Chairman, about this, but the solution appears initially to be not to bite the bullet but to enter some kind of sharing arrangement. The solution that nobody appears to want to contemplate is amalgamation. That is what I am saying.

**Mr Newton:** I had indicated that I wanted to speak before the Deputy Chairperson had spoken. My concerns are very much along the same lines as his. Sorry, you are welcome to the Committee.

Diarmuid responded to the Deputy Chair that area planning was to be a temporary solution; I think he said that it was to be an interim solution. Even interim solutions need to have a professional base. I joined the Education Committee fairly recently. The more you see of this, the less impression you get that there is a professional base to what is happening.

Gavin and I have had our disagreements around the east Belfast area. The Chairman referred to the east Belfast situation. Again, Gavin made valiant attempts to defend the actions of the Southern Board, but it lacks political credibility. Until the commissioners are replaced by a proper structure of a board, that credibility will continue to be missing.

The Chairman apologised for being parochial; I will not, in respect of the east Belfast situation. The situation with the Avoniel and Elmgrove primary schools is significant for the inner east. Where are we with the Newtownbreda/Knockbreda situation? The Chairman made reference to the DEL scenario in that area. I have had, I think, four meetings with representatives from the Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC), and we have talked about the development and replacement of the Montgomery Road site and, perhaps, a whole new ethos of education emerging from that site, with new curriculums, new qualifications, new structures, and so on. Where is that joined-up approach in the east Belfast area plan?

**Mr McLean:** Thank you, Robin. I will pick up on some of those points. First, I would like to be clear, and I apologise if I was not clear at the beginning: area planning is not an interim solution. The Minister has announced that we are moving forward with area planning. The interim arrangement for discharging area planning was that we would continue to work with the five education and library boards, CCMS and the managing authority, pending the establishment of a single planning authority, which was to be the Education and Skills Authority. That is now in abeyance. We will continue with area planning, and the outworkings of the area planning will be discharged with the bodies that are in place. So, area planning itself is not an interim process; it is a set and ongoing process.

I will pick up on some of the other points. I am not sure that I can give you much clarity on specific proposals in the Belfast Board area in relation to Avoniel and Elmgrove. All I can tell you is that we are aware that the board is looking at the pattern of provision in that area, but, at this stage, no development proposal has been published in relation to Avoniel and Elmgrove primary schools.

You will be aware that a development proposal on Newtownbreda/Knockbreda was published. The Minister has considered those development proposals and has approved the development proposal for the establishment of a new school which will see the two schools come together.

On the FE provision, I am not totally familiar with the Montgomery Road site in east Belfast, but we have regular liaison meetings with our colleagues in the Department for Employment and Learning. My Minister meets the Minister for Employment and Learning, and, if necessary, area planning issues will be on the agenda for consideration if either party believes that there are issues in a particular area that need to be raised and considered on a cross-departmental level.

**Mr Newton:** Your final comments surprise me, in the sense that BMC is actively out meeting local representatives.

**Mr McLean:** It is an FE college. I am not aware —

**Mr Newton:** It has implications.

**Mr McLean:** As I said, we have a representative from the Department for Employment and Learning on the area planning steering group. If there are specific issues in relation to the plans coming forward in that area, it can be flagged up. I am not aware of particular issues in relation to that provision.

**Mr Newton:** Within half a mile of the proposed new college — "proposed" may be too strong a word — you have the Knockbreda site. I would have thought that it had immediate implications.

**Mr McLean:** There is a long-standing arrangement or agreement between the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education that we will not replicate good FE provision in our schools and, likewise, any proposals around FE provision are not aimed at replicating what is available in local schools in the area.

**Mr Newton:** I will just leave it like that, Chair.

**Mrs Dobson:** I apologize for missing your briefing, some of my points may have been covered already. I have said many times that creating self-fulfilling prophecies is something that the Department should take every effort to avoid. I honestly do not think that enough consideration has been given to this. Seán made some very good points in his question about rural schools. Appendix 6 of the summary report of the consultation exercise states that:

*"The definition of 'rural' as applied to Area Based Planning is viewed as inherently discriminatory as it — and the 105 pupil threshold — apply equally to schools in cities/towns such as Lisburn, Portadown and Newry and to schools in isolated areas with small populations."*

How do you respond to those concerns? You may have done that already in your introduction, but can you elaborate further?

Seán, your timing is perfect. I have just been praising you for your questions.

**Mr McLean:** Thank you, Jo-Anne. The Department continues to operate within the sustainable schools policy that has been set. The definitions are contained in that. The Minister made it clear to the area planning steering group, based on discussions, that there are no plans at this stage to revise the sustainable schools policy. Therefore, those definitions are what we continue to operate within. With regard to definitions of rural, as I said previously, the 105 pupils is a trigger for looking at the sustainability of that school. As Gavin said, you have to look at each individual circumstance, and you have to consider what alternatives are available. Therefore, there is no set criterion that says that just because you have fewer than 105 pupils, you will definitely close. The Minister recognised that there will be the need for strategically important provision to be maintained, and that that may be below the 105 figure.

**Mrs Dobson:** I am aware of that. As Gavin knows, he has the misfortune of covering my constituency. It sometimes appears that I have him on speed dial. Some of your respondents questioned whether the policy had been rural-proofed. In your view, has it been?

**Mrs Finlay:** The sustainable schools policy was rural-proofed.

**Mr McLean:** Yes, the sustainable schools policy has been rural-proofed; it was when it was created.

**Mrs Dobson:** I do not think that it has been rural-proofed enough, but anyway. Another point, as Gavin knows well from my area, is that an area plan can throw up very controversial proposals.

In the SELB's response to the Committee's letter last month, you told us:

*"The projected increase in the total post-primary enrolment in the years up to 2025 is significantly greater in the SELB area than in other ... Board areas."*

Will you put numbers to that "significantly"? How many are we talking about?

**Mr McLean:** Those are figures that I do not have before me, Jo-Anne. However, the figures that are produced in the area plans are based on the figures that are provided by colleagues in the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). They produce figures through to 2025 that are broken down by board and council area. Those are the figures that are used in the area plans.

**Mrs Dobson:** Can we get those figures?

**Mr McLean:** They are available in the published plans. However, we can certainly provide the information that has been provided to us by the statisticians.

**Mr Boyd:** If I could make a quick comment. The information is publicly available. I have just flicked to some primary information, if it would be helpful. The primary population in the Southern Board area is projected to rise from just under 40,000 to 45,500 over that period. Those are very significant increases. However, I need to warn you of the fact that they are not evenly distributed. There are some parts of the Southern Board area where the population has increased very rapidly, particularly around Dungannon and Lurgan, for reasons that you will appreciate.

The comments that you made about the 105 pupils in rural schools came out very strongly in the Southern Board's consultation exercise. That is a good example of a board area where we have significant towns, such as Banbridge, Lurgan and Portadown, but where most of our schools are in rural areas. We have a very high number of small rural primary schools.

The point that I really want to make is that, although the indicator is there, it is just an indicator, and the board will look at all aspects of the policy. I can think of one very isolated primary school that has 34 pupils, but it ticks every other box, including supporting a quite isolated community. We will look very carefully at the fact that it has 34 pupils, but that does not in any way mean that that school is earmarked for closure.

**Mrs Dobson:** Gavin, you know that I have spoken to you many times about that and about the fear and uncertainty. I am certain that I will continue to do that.

How will you ensure that area planning solutions, including the resulting development proposals, will take that projection by 2025 into account? Are you confident of doing that?

**Mr McLean:** We will use the most up-to-date statistical information for any development proposal that is published. I would caution relying on projections through to 2025 as being entirely accurate down to the last person. There is obviously a degree of projection in those statistics through to 2025, hence they are updated every two years. NISRA will update those statistics every two years and take into account any changing factors such as migration, immigration or other factors that may influence them. For any development proposal that comes forward, we will use the most up-to-date statistical information at board, council and, as far as we can get it, individual area basis for primary and post-primary schools.

**Mr Kinahan:** I have two small questions. I think that I failed to welcome you at the beginning, so apologies for that.

I support both of the proposals that we talked about in the Northern Board area, but I want to know a little bit more detail of what you thought was meant by the shared solution. In particular, we have Moneynick Primary School working on a shared solution —

**Mr McLean:** Moneynick and Duneane?

**Mr Kinahan:** Yes. At the same time, we are also looking at a shared solution for Crumlin Integrated Primary School.

I am intrigued. I know that we have difficulties in Crumlin with how the ownership can be worked out in the sharing, but how do you see the framework of a shared school working?

Also, in the same part of their paper, they referred to the federation idea. I want to be a little bit clearer about what both proposals mean.

**Mr McLean:** I am aware that consideration is being given to a solution for Moneynick and Duneane primary schools. I do not know the details of that, Danny, so I am not in a position to discuss what is contained in that proposal.

As for Crumlin, there are ongoing discussions, as you are aware, between the managing authorities — the board and CCMS — as to how they might come forward and liaise with the integrated sector on what a solution might be. Consideration of that requires that we factor in how that ties in with provision in the surrounding areas. Again, the people who manage and operate those schools are in a better position to look at potential solutions, so I do not think that it is for me to comment on what I believe to be the appropriate pattern for provision in Crumlin.

**Mr Kinahan:** I raised that because, on the technical side, it just looks like one of the blockages for what is happening in Crumlin, and I wondered whether we had found the solution to it at Moneynick. Obviously, I am for both, but you do not need to answer, because I know that it is not —

**Mr McLean:** I do not believe that there is really an issue in relation to ownership. We are looking at arrangements in Lisanelly, and we have had discussions in other areas. There will obviously have to be solutions to the ownership issue, but I stress that, for the Department of Education to put any

investment in, we take a charge over any piece of land on which education facilities are placed. That charge stays on that land for as long as those facilities deliver education provision. There is a sliding scale in the operating procedures in the Department against which, depending on whether it ceased to provide education, a claw-back arrangement is agreed depending on how long it has been since the last capital investment has gone in. There are mechanisms in place to protect any capital investment in educational facilities.

**Mr Kinahan:** Thank you, that was very useful.

The other query I had was about the consultation responses. We got a good summary of the consultation responses today, but, to go back to where I started, there is still a hint that no review will happen. The whole point of the consultation was to listen to everybody and to fine-tune area planning. Are we going to take the consultation points on board and review them in line with that? In other words, why were we consulting?

**Mr Boyd:** Just to clarify, the report says that plans are produced and consulted on and the consultation is clearly taken into account in moving on to the next stage.

**Mr Kinahan:** So, are they really going to take all those points that we have got, the long list of percentages and so on?

**Mr Boyd:** Well, the reason for doing the consultation was to find out what people thought and to analyse those comments. Jo-Anne has commented about some of the very strong points that came out. Again, I would repeat that, from my perspective as an operational manager, this is an iterative process.

**Mr Kinahan:** So you will take them on board?

**Mr Boyd:** They will be taken on board, and plans will be updated, probably annually.

**The Chairperson:** Gavin, can you put us all out of our despair? Trevor and I would like you to give us a definition of "iterative".

**Mr Boyd:** Can I come back to you in writing? *[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson:** You have used it now several times.

**Mr Boyd:** What I mean by that is that, from a management perspective, I do not regard these area plans as being set in stone today for ever more, because circumstances change. Jo-Anne made reference to population changes, for example. That changes circumstances. Funding of schools changes, and the number of pupils going to schools change. Those change over time, and communities change their views on provision, so I see these as being living documents that are updated regularly with new facts. Every time you get new facts, you can change your position on something because it is the right thing to do. That is my long-winded definition of "iterative".

**Mr McLean:** I concur with that. We have had discussions at the area planning steering group as to how often the plans should be revisited for publication, as opposed to being revisited on an ongoing basis as part of the planning process within each managing authority. As Gavin said, demographics and factors change within communities, and, in relation to the current drafts, there are those, as have been highlighted, where it has been indicated that an area solution is required. As those are clarified and updated, we would want to see the area plans updated to reflect decisions that are taken where clarity and agreement has been reached on what those area solutions might be. That means that we might see the plans being revisited and updated on a regular basis.

Now, as to what "regular" is, we have to strike a balance between the effort required to keep this ongoing and produce these plans and actually deliver it on the ground.

**Mr Newton:** It also has to take in FE.

**Mr Boyd:** It clearly has to take in all changing circumstances, including the input of FE, which is a very important partner in this enterprise.

**Mr Lunn:** I now understand where you are coming from on the iterative thing. I wonder when the process will stop being iterative or fluid and become definitive or prescriptive. When will decisions be made?

**Mr Boyd:** Diarmuid talked about the policy perspective. From a management perspective, it never stops; it is a journey rather than an end. Things are always being updated by the circumstances as they change.

**Mr Kinahan:** It could be termed "if-erative".

**The Chairperson:** You are beginning to lose me now. I think that we will draw a conclusion to this. One last question: do we have any more idea of a timescale as to when the current set of proposals for plans will be out for public gaze?

**Mr McLean:** The primary plans?

**The Chairperson:** Yes.

**Mr McLean:** We are still aiming to have the primary plans in with us in April. As soon as we have looked at them against the guidelines and guidance provided at the time, we still aim to have the boards publish those on their websites in the next matter of months, hopefully by the end of April and certainly into early May.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Diarmuid, Lorraine and Gavin, as always, thanks for your help and cooperation.