



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Shared Education: Fermanagh Trust

18 June 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Education

Shared Education: Fermanagh Trust

18 June 2014

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Seán Rogers

Witnesses:

Mr Lauri McCusker	Fermanagh Trust
Ms Catherine Ward	Fermanagh Trust

The Chairperson: I welcome to the Committee this morning — I am welcoming them to their own building — Lauri McCusker, the director of the Fermanagh Trust, and Catherine Ward, the shared education programme manager of the Fermanagh Trust. I want to say a word of appreciation and thanks for allowing us the opportunity to come here today, for facilitating us and for your hospitality. It is much appreciated, Lauri, and thank you for the information that you have provided. I want to say a word of appreciation to you, on behalf of all those who have been involved in the work of the trust, for the journey that you have commenced in Fermanagh. It has been exemplary, and you are to be commended on your work. We are glad to be here. I ask you to speak to the paper if you wish, and then we will have some questions.

Mr Lauri McCusker (Fermanagh Trust): Thank you. It is a delight to have you here this morning. Hopefully, being in our own house will not make me let my guard down too much. *[Laughter.]* We would like to take you quickly through the briefing paper and highlight the challenges that we face and our thoughts on them.

The Fermanagh Trust is not an education body; we are a community development trust. Like all good organisations, we look to see how we can make a difference and a positive contribution. In 2007 and 2008, when we were looking at what the big issues were externally and what the potential big issues were for County Fermanagh in the coming five or six years, education came onto our landscape. We looked at what was happening in education and what that could mean for County Fermanagh.

I will make particular reference to two pieces of work that were being done at the time. One was a document produced by the Western Education and Library Board, which was a post-primary review of controlled schools in Fermanagh. At the same time, a review of the Catholic sector was produced by the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education. Those two documents looked at the future of post-primary schools in the controlled and maintained sectors, but were operating in a parallel world. The future of post-primary schools in this county was being looked at to determine the future for the next 30 or 40 years. The two documents were produced as if the other world did not exist.

That got us thinking: what does that mean? When we discussed it further, we recognised that it potentially meant that an area-planning process would be initiated at post-primary level and subsequently at primary level and that we would be living in a parallel world. It was from there that we came to the concept of shared education in Fermanagh. Alongside that was our experience of working with cross-community playgroups, which provide the preschool education in large parts of the county.

What could we do in that big picture? How could we make a positive contribution? What was the potential impact of those policies? What was the potential impact of an area-based planning process in parts of rural Fermanagh where you have majority and minority communities and, in some cases, very large majority and very small minority communities? What were the implications for rural Fermanagh? What were the implications for our young people? What were the implications for society in 10, 15 or 20 years' time of decisions that mean that education will not exist in those areas for that particular sector? That is where we came at shared education from.

In 2008, we did significant research. We talked to 400 parents directly and asked them whether the concept of working more closely with their nearest neighbours would be attractive and of value. We talked to the wider community and to the school communities, by which I mean boards of governors, principals, teachers and wider staff, etc. The feedback was that they were up for working more closely together. We then secured support from the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) and the Atlantic Philanthropies. We got significant support of £2.1 million for a four-year programme. That is around £500,000 per annum to go on developing and building relationships between more than 50 schools in Fermanagh. When you break that down on a county-wide basis, you can do the sums.

At the start of 2009, we went into what is termed in some government Departments as a design-and-build phase. In 2009, we went out and talked to the schools. We said that we had these resources and that we wanted to give them to the schools to build on the thoughts that they had shared with us earlier. We said that we would do it in such a way as to develop strong collaborative linkages to develop schools and school communities in neighbouring areas. In summary, the model consisted of joint curriculum planning; regular shared classes; joint staff development; sharing of facilities and resources; shared teachers and teacher exchanges; joint events and training; and workshops for parents. Substantial numbers took up that opportunity. In fact, we were very surprised — pleasantly surprised — that the appetite and willingness was there.

We do not have to explain to you politicians about community relationships and challenges in border and other areas. Fermanagh, like many other places, has gone through its tragic and difficult times. So, we were delighted that the uptake was there. Ultimately, there were not a lot of resources for schools. When you look at the number of schools and the amount of resources, you will see that it was not as if they were getting hundreds of thousands of pounds. We were delighted that the appetite was there for schools to work with, to reach out to and to join their nearest neighbour or neighbours and work in partnership. The widespread support was very important. We had political support locally, and we had the support of the Churches and the wider community. The framework was there that meant that there was willingness, and people were not taking big risks, because that support environment was developed and explained.

What were the benefits? Following on from the previous presentation to the Committee, I can say that substantial research and evaluations have been done of different elements of the programme, including the teacher exchange scheme. Those documents are available. The key strength of the Fermanagh shared education model since it started in 2009 is that it involved partnering with your nearest school, regardless of size. In other words, you work with your neighbours. In most cases, people had neighbours to work with. In some cases, they did not necessarily have a natural partner because of the geography of Fermanagh. It was very important that that was directly related to the curriculum. The easy thing is to go for after-school programmes, but we wanted it to be curriculum-based. It was about regular activity and regular classes. We called it a premium, and we wanted to make sure that everyone could get some of the resources. We looked at the resources that we had and said, "If schools apply, this is what they can access". So, there was fairness, and we built a formula around that. There is a geographical focus. Anyone who understands community development will know that you often look to see what your neighbours do. If your neighbour has successfully developed a credit union, why can we not do that? It is the same with shared education. Schools see that other schools are doing that and say that they can do it. As I said, there was a geographical focus, and people were able to share their experiences across that.

In the partnerships that were developed, we were constantly learning from one another, so we used the opportunities to bring together principals, teachers and others to learn from one another and to

share good practice. It increasingly became the norm for shared education to take place. It became quite natural, because it was going on at such a level and to such an extent. Very importantly, we trusted the schools and the principals. Principals came together and teachers came together to decide what their needs were, and that was very important. We said, "You tell us how your working together can add value to and meet the needs of your schools and your school communities".

I will now deal with some of the key successful features of the programme. We felt that teacher exchange was invaluable, and there are real lessons there that can be shared and picked up across Northern Ireland. We have no doubt about that. Why have people working in splendid isolation in schools when you have neighbouring schools from which you can access that skill set and that learning? We think that that can make a real added benefit to education. The respecting difference programme was very important. It was being delivered on a cross-community basis, for not only the children and the teachers who were being trained up on it but parents. Parents were learning together about respecting difference. That was important because it started to build links and friendships among parents. That is very important in rural areas, where those links may not have existed.

From learning in the first year, we built another element into the programme in the second year, and that was partnership-building. That was around giving resources towards joint staff development on common needs in partnered schools, and joint training, events and meetings for governors and parents. It is fascinating to see boards of governors come together for the first time when they have been operating in a village for 20 or 30 years yet have never been in the same room together. They are doing the same jobs but have never talked about the needs of children and how they can work together for the betterment of all the children in the community. There was the development of joint school policies and strategies and the development of shared education policies and agreements, as well as the wider sharing of resources, facilities and expertise.

We then came to area planning. I remember going out to schools and talking about the area-planning process that is being kick-started. There was quite an interesting reaction. Quite a number of schools said, "Lauri, these things come and go. Do not worry about it". They told me to see what happened in three or four years' time. They said, "That is education, Lauri. That is the way of the world". I said that it is very important, and I was told by the schools that it is not really that important. I think that the schools have been proved right, but we will come to that. For us, area planning was very important in getting the schools to think about their future. Shared education was about the here and now, about this year, and about the school development plan this year and next year, but area planning is about schools looking to five years' time and 10 years' time.

Very importantly, the area-planning guidelines that the Minister issued included the need to look at shared education, but, when the initial papers came out at a primary-school level from the Western Education and Library Board, they excluded the need to look at shared education. Following some toing and froing, we were delighted when the Western Board reissued its guidelines for area planning to the primary schools in the county to include shared education. That is addressed in our paper. Interestingly, 14 partnerships in Fermanagh produced substantial submissions to the area plans. Those were submitted last June, and schools are still waiting to hear back. Those things were not considered to be just pieces of paper but as boards of governors coming together: what is our plan for the future together? They were considered by principals, staff and the wider community. There were community consultation meetings around joint working in the area-planning process. Those substantial submissions by schools jointly — 14 submissions, involving approximately 37 schools — have been sitting on a shelf for a year. Imagination, thought and the building of relationships for the future have gone into that process. For those 37 schools that have thought about this, it is a journey. In last week's paper, I saw that one of the learning communities created between four rural schools had launched its plan to say, "This is our future together in this area". That is where shared education has taken those schools. We just hope that the system allows them, and their imagination and their creativity on joint working in the future, to be caught up with.

Those plans include things such as joint governors of committees; joint curriculum planning; mainstream and shared teacher exchanges between schools in the long term; and joint staff development. Although two schools still exist, they become extremely fluid in their relationships. Who knows what that will look like in 10 years? Six or seven years ago, when the authorities were producing documents, it was a parallel world. For me, the difference is an integrated, shared education. The schools are not in a parallel world now, and that is what the schools in Fermanagh have achieved with a bottom-up approach.

There are very strong strengths in the cross-sectoral proposals presented, and we feel that those really match governmental and societal aims — a point that was brought up during the previous

presentation. We think that those proposals really tie in with the Programme for Government commitments; the ministerial advisory group (MAG) report; the Together: Building a United Community strategy; the rural White Paper from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development; and, more recently, the announcement of the consultation process for the Peace IV programme.

Finally, what do we see as the challenges going forward? Shared education cannot be seen as a programme. If it is seen as a programme, these guys may as well go back to where they were six years ago and get back into area planning in the parallel world that they were in. We should not allow that to happen. When the Minister made his address on the issue on 13 October, he said that sharing must be in the "DNA of our education system". If it is in the DNA of our education system, the projects and proposals will flourish, as will sharing, closer cooperation and joint working. However, it needs to relate to all areas of education, not only area planning. For every decision that the Department makes, it needs to think of its impact on the community at large. For example, if a capital build announcement comes out next week, what will be the implications of that for the community and for society?

We firmly believe that there needs to be a joined-up approach across the various elements of education policy development, but there is a gap. Communities are up for this. There is no doubt about that. It is clear that the Executive, in their Programme for Government, are up for it. I know that there are challenges with relationships, etc, but the direction of travel that you have set is that you are up for this, but where does the support come from? As I said at the beginning, the Fermanagh Trust is not an education body. How do we get the support mechanism in place to ensure that schools get the support to guide and facilitate them along the path of sharing? In this room in February 2013, four schools sat down with representatives from the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). Those schools were on a journey and wanted guidance. They were promised guidance, but they still have not got it. Those schools took risks, and in their communities there might be one or two knockers. It is hard for schools to go on a journey unless guidance and support is there from the powers that be.

The way in which schools are funded should encourage sharing, not competition. That can be built into the common funding formula. In addition, and this is really important if you are interested in mainstream and shared education, there needs to be a joint budget between schools that are working together. Every school has its code — school 115, for example — and its goal within the board. We need to help to facilitate shared education so that schools can pool resources; for example, how school 115 and school 222 are going to spend their resources together this year. That is a mechanism, but it is an important mechanism.

On area planning, where education authorities are going down the road of closing schools, they need to consider the impact and potential of working with their neighbours. That needs to be explored, and options considered. That may be happening in one other area, but it should be the rule rather than the exception. What does this mean for us as a community and what are the opportunities for the broader community? I know from recent work that we were asked to support in other parts of Northern Ireland that those are real challenges that communities are facing.

Do the managing authorities have the time, resource, expertise or commitment to help school communities explore options and develop shared models? We may see how the Delivering Social Change programme works out, but, to date, with some exceptions, that is not inbuilt in how the managing authorities do their work. Even though the direction of travel from the Programme for Government and the area-planning guidelines has been quite clear for some time, we have not seen that commitment carried through.

Recommendation 15 from the MAG report states that the Department, education and library boards and the CCMS should provide:

"advice on how two or more schools can transfer their status into a 'shared school' whereby they maintain their respective forms of ethos."

Those things are very important. We need to see an action plan around those.

Finally, there needs to be a clear process and support mechanism for schools wishing to bring forward cross-sectoral models in the area-planning process. Schools are up for it. I am convinced about that from all the evidence, but the mechanism and the system need to support them.

That is a quick sharing of where we are at and how we see the world through the eyes of shared education in the county. Hopefully, it has been helpful.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Lauri, and thank you for the paper that you gave us, because it is useful. We may not be in a parallel world, as you said, but do you think that you are still being held as a hostage to fortune because of the unwillingness, inability or whatever of the managing authorities to deal in a serious, meaningful way with the issue, for have we not seen in that county some of the worse examples of protectionism in sectors at the expense of what happens in any other school or sector?

Mr McCusker: Going back to 2007 and those documents, we had long discussions in this building on how we best use the resources from the IFI and the Atlantic Philanthropies and whether resources should be used to support sharing at post-primary-school level. The direction of travel that the managing authorities have taken is quite clear. It has been outlined. I think that, in the Assembly yesterday, we possibly saw the outworkings of that in one instance.

There was also a challenge for us, because the Western Board and the Department were saying that shared education should not get involved in the entitlement framework of the learning communities, as that was being resourced by government. So, the situation was complex.

Look at how post-primary schools in Enniskillen work together under the leadership and direction of Devenish College, which took the lead and brought schools together. On Fridays, 400 post-16 pupils share a range of subjects in a range of venues and schools across Enniskillen. People chose what they wanted and could show the benefits of sharing, but the managing authorities have their own world. We hoped that the area-planning process would change the direction of travel or help persuade people to think about shared options, but that was not the case in the post-primary schools, and we have seen the outworkings of that with Lisnaskea High School and other things. We worked tremendously well with Lisnaskea High School in the Lisnaskea, Derrylin and Rosslea area. Wonderful sharing was taking place, but that was not considered by the managing authorities.

The Chairperson: That all happened prior to the Western Board changing the terms of reference for area planning. You referred to changes that it made and has now reissued.

How much of an impact do you think the reissuing of that element of the process will have on the initial area plan, particularly in the primary sector? There was such a hiatus with the areas plans, and this Committee — it is not often that someone thinks that this Committee does anything of value or worth — issued a very clear warning to the Minister and the Department not to issue primary school area plans, because you will set the education world afire. They did not listen and went ahead, and we now have a document across the country that means that nobody knows what their worth or value is or where they are going, yet we are sitting in a county today in which one education and library board has reissued guidance about a plan that we do not even know will go anywhere.

Ms Catherine Ward (Fermanagh Trust): The pro forma was issued in May 2012, and the school communities completed that. They had only a two-week time span to get it completed. They got an extension and that is the revised pro forma, which included the shared options. School communities brought together governors, and they thought about whether to put in shared options. They consulted parents and held meetings and then filled in the pro forma, and a number of the partnerships at that stage said, "We would like a shared model explored or developed for our partnership". That was before the draft plan was issued. When the draft plan came out, only one of the partnerships was mentioned as a shared model. So, the rest were not in even the draft plan. That was very unfortunate, and a major opportunity was missed, because, when they were consulting on the draft plan, schools would have been consulting on a shared option. We talked to the sectors and the managing authorities about that. Although the pro forma was issued on behalf of the area working group in the Western Board, which makes up all the sectors, the other sectors did not see the pro forma submitted by the schools.

The Chairperson: That is the point that I want to get to: it was a document, but it was not a document that everyone had been involved in and agreed that it should go out on behalf of everybody; that is, the managing authorities. The Western Board produced it —

Ms Ward: It said in the covering letters —

The Chairperson: Yes, it did, but — correct me if I am wrong — is it not the case that there were elements of the managing authorities who then said, "We did not see that in the way in which it is now being presented"?

Ms Ward: I do not know what took place subsequently other than that, when the draft plan came out, it did not reflect what people had asked for.

The Chairperson: Yes, and that was based on the partnerships, and there was only one mentioned.

Mr McCusker: By doing that, you are sending a strong signal to the schools that have put forward submissions before the draft plan.

The Chairperson: They are just going to ignore you.

Mr McCusker: Yes, so all this stuff is of no value.

Ms Ward: All that took place after the post-primary plan had been issued.

The Chairperson: Yes, and there has been nothing since. It has all gone underground and quiet. I am disappointed.

Ms Ward: The schools had hoped that the final plan would come out in autumn, because there was going to be a consultation period, and they were getting ready for that. Then, they thought it might come out in April. So, a whole academic year has gone. They certainly have not lost momentum, but parents are asking what is happening, because they were consulted and put in their responses to the consultation process. They are wondering what is happening and where this is going.

The Chairperson: One of the downsides of all this is that it will further compound the scepticism and suspicion that parents have about any proposal that is brought to the table ultimately being implemented. We are sitting in a county and a town where an element of the education provision was promised. I will name the college, because it is the reality. It is Devenish College, and it is a scandal that we have never seen the implementation of a proposal that is almost 11 years old. That is a stand-alone issue that has been in this county for all those years, and parents are very sceptical as to whether anything happens within the system and view it as a continual perpetuation of stagnation. The view is that, if we do not do anything, something will happen, because the system will eventually go in a particular direction. That is not the area planning, that is throwing —

Mr McCusker: Schools and school communities have embraced shared education in a context of flux and uncertainty. They may have been ignored when putting forward proposals etc, but they have embraced shared education. That shows that there is a real appetite for sharing, collaboration, joint working and closer working together when all this other stuff is out there and is impacting on people.

Mr Hazzard: Thanks, Lauri, for your very detailed and thorough presentation, which summed up some of the fantastic work that you have been doing. You talked about local communities wanting to steal from their neighbours being a good idea, and the Fermanagh Trust is a great platform for change.

I looked at your document and the part of it that covers the partnerships. How can we make sure that the partnerships are sustainable and future-proofed? How can we best put into practice elsewhere the knowledge and experience that the Fermanagh Trust has garnered over the years?

Ms Ward: I will answer the first question. When the programme was being designed, one of the core elements was that it would be designed for sustainability. We have seen too many excellent projects that are now "have-been projects" and people talk about them in the past tense. We were determined to avoid that when we designed this. Therefore, it was not something done unto the schools; the schools delivered the shared education themselves.

On occasion, they may have brought in a specialist, but, by and large, they were delivering the shared classes in one another's schools themselves. That developed the links and the capacity and built the relationships between the school communities. They had the autonomy to do that, which empowered them because they had ownership of what they were doing. That is the most sustainable thing, because, whilst we get frustrated about area planning, I am not overly concerned because, as Lauri said, that learning community is four partnerships that are officially launching their partnership and are

saying, "This is how we are going to conduct our education from here on in, as a partnership". So, the partnerships are still driving forward. The area planning process might be slightly left behind, but they are moving on.

You asked about sustainability. These partnerships plan to continue and hope to have an opportunity to submit bids when the mainstream funding from the Department of Education opens, because they need some funding for transport and for substitute teacher cover so that staff can meet to do planning and so on.

We would really like it if, when the area plan is published, it gives official recognition to these partnerships. Sometimes, we see area planning as being purely about infrastructure, capital and the schools estate, but it is also about how schools deliver the curriculum and about how they do their business, so it could also include partnerships, federations and confederations.

We also talked about wanting guidance from the Department. There are shared faith models and shared managed schools. There is a range of things, and these partnerships need that at the moment in order to plan their path forward.

Mr McCusker: In moving forward, we have many other areas of work outside shared education. The trustees have a strategy in place. When the trustees met recently to discuss our continued involvement in shared education, they made a commitment to continue to work with these partnerships until 2016 to try to offer support and guidance to them where needed.

We have a challenge in that some schools from outside Fermanagh are looking for support and guidance and are also looking at shared education, so we are trying to work on that at the minute, and I will do my best to utilise that. We are a very small team. We have two and a half members of staff working in shared education. It was always about the schools. It is not about the Fermanagh Trust; it is about the schools and how we utilise those staff resources. The critical thing for us is mainstreaming Delivering Social Change and the roll-out of the Peace IV shared education programme resources. Delivering Social Change is where it is at, and the implementation of the ministerial advisory group's report is important. Hopefully, schools can continue on their journey. That is where we see things.

Mr Hazzard: You mentioned Delivering Social Change, T:BUC, Peace IV and whatever else it may be. How do we ensure that those are complementary?

Mr McCusker: That is very important. This really needs to be joined up. I was at a school last night that was having its fiftieth anniversary celebrations. It is looking for news on a shared campus proposal, and that is what everybody was asking me about. Another question I heard was this: "It is great news about Peace IV. When do we get the money?". We need joined-up thinking around Delivering Social Change, the Peace IV programme and T:BUC. That needs to be done at the most senior level of government.

Ms Ward: The last thing that we want is to have schools applying for a cocktail of funding from a range of sources and trying to meet the demands of every programme. Schools do not have the time to do that; they want to deliver the curriculum. The point that you are making is very important: there is a strategic plan in how this is all rolled out.

Mr Hazzard: Lauri, you touched on senior levels of government, and we talked about the enthusiasm on the ground. You alluded to a gap in the middle. From my experience in and around the east Down area, I think it is fair to say that there is increasing if not massive demand for, if not a shared education campus, certainly a new integrated school between, for example, Lagan College in Belfast and Shimna Integrated College in south Down; something in the middle. There is increasing demand there. We see that in Ballynahinch especially, where the popularity of an integrated primary school is clear. However, from senior levels of government, everything just seems to slow down and stop in that middle gap. How do we overcome that, or what needs to be done to empower the people at the bottom and meet their demands? There is no use in having parental choice if that choice does not mean anything.

Mr McCusker: The shared education programme was supported by Atlantic Philanthropies and the International Fund for Ireland. They empowered Queen's University Belfast, the North Eastern Education and Library Board and the Fermanagh Trust. It would be interesting to find out why the

fundere chose the three. One was an organisation in Queen's University, one was a local community foundation and one was a statutory organisation.

The people in Queen's and the North Eastern Education and Library Board all did the job well. The model could be either/or. I am not talking about organisations but about types of organisations. If it is to be mainstreamed, I think the lead player needs to be the managing authority or authorities. There should definitely be some support and resources for the facilitation of school communities. It is a different mindset. It is not top-down but bottom-up. To do that work, you have to allow those grass roots and empower the school communities to develop and move forward. Again, going back to the previous discussion, if that is just left to the managing authorities, as it currently is, we are going to continue in a parallel world.

Mr Hazzard: I cannot help but move beyond the idea that managing authorities and sectors are always going to look after their own strategic interests. Look at the South and the pluralism and patronage forum, which went out to the very basic level of citizenship-type forms that were filled in and a questionnaire. Is that something that —

Ms Ward: Part of the strength of this programme was our independence in that we did not belong to one or other sector, but how do you roll that out on a large-scale basis? That independence was crucial. The localised support — knowing those school communities and where they have come from — was also a big factor.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you for your presentation. Lauri, you are obviously very passionate about sharing education and what you do, and I commend you for that. You have engaged in shared education since 2009, and obviously you can see the benefits for the pupils involved who have passed through primary and post-primary schools. It is good to see that, by the fourth year, pupil numbers had more than doubled. Why do you feel that demand increased so rapidly between year 1 and year 4? Do you think the parents were central to that crucial rise in demand? Obviously, the community and the parents see the benefits. Will you take us through the reasons why you feel that demand increased in those years?

Mr McCusker: Maybe first of all people were putting their toe in the water. It is OK to go in? Is it too cold or am I going to get a shock? I think maybe school communities were trying it. Then, schools saw the benefits when relationships were being built. If you have a P6 teacher sharing with another P6 teacher from another school, no longer operating in isolation but sharing and learning, and they go back to their staffroom and talk about that experience, it can rub off on other colleagues. I think it is organic. Parents' involvement —

Mrs Dobson: It is crucial.

Mr McCusker: Absolutely crucial. When we started on the journey, we went to parents first and asked 400 of them across Fermanagh what they were up for and what they were not up for. We asked what was possible. We have always thought that parents are the backbone. I think there were a number of things. It was people putting their foot in the water in the first year to see whether it was OK. Would they get their heads knocked off? Would somebody come round and say, "Actually, you shouldn't be going up to that other school. What are you doing?". But it was acceptable and there were benefits from it. The education benefits and kids simply coming home and sharing their stories — I think all that rubs off and helps to build momentum.

Mrs Dobson: As you said, the views of the parents and the community are crucial in building an education programme.

Mr McCusker: Absolutely.

Mrs Dobson: I want to touch on area planning again, which we have spoken about quite a lot. In your brief, you called for the shared models to be explored in the area planning process. I know that the Chair spoke about this at length. I have been extremely critical in my constituency of the Southern Board for its relentless attack on the Dickson plan, which has been supported by the community it has served for over 40 years. What is your view on the link between the boards and the schools, and how reflective are they of the community opinion in the area planning process?

Mr McCusker: I could take you to about 10 schools whose views would be highly negative. Sometimes, I still find it challenging to understand the relationship between the managing authorities and individual schools. Is that relationship about managing, facilitating or being supportive? We just have to look to this week to see where a school community feels extremely hard done by because of a decision taken by its managing authority. Managing authorities undoubtedly have a very difficult job given the current level of uncertainty regarding their future, but, in some schools, they can seem quite aloof from the school itself. Some people in those school communities keep them quite aloof purposely; it is better having them 30 miles or 90 miles or 100 miles away so that they can get on and do their bit. For some others, it is about personalities and relationships. I do not know anything about the Dickson plan.

Mrs Dobson: How long have you got?

You spoke passionately about the impact of decisions if they are inflicted on the community, and you talked about looking at the bigger picture five to 10 years down the line. I commend you for what you are doing; it has been great to listen to. Things need to improve. If a system loses the support of the community, our children will be the worse for it, and that is the reality.

Mr Rogers: Thanks to Lauri and Catherine for a very worthwhile and passionate presentation. You summed it up when you said that shared education is not a programme but is in the DNA of the future of rural Fermanagh and many rural areas throughout the North. Do you believe that area planning is inhibiting the ability to develop shared education and our ability to keep our rural communities intact?

Mr McCusker: That is a very good question. In one way, area planning can provide the impetus for sharing and closer working. In another way, it can scare the — out of communities because it puts people out there as having no future. It is interesting that, when the draft area primary school plan was produced, in many instances, it used the term local area solution. So, village A has two schools, both of which do not have the magic number of pupils. To Catherine and me, the local area solution means that there are two schools working closely together. The local area solution to managing authority A means closing that school and the pupils going to the school in the village down the road. The local area solution to managing authority B means closing their school and moving their pupils to another village down the road. That is all that local area solution means. If the draft plan says that we are interested in options A, B and C, and we want to do a community consultation on options A, B and C, that is area planning. If area planning is done correctly, it can be beneficial for closer cooperation, sustainable communities, which fits into the rural development agenda, and good relations, which fits into the OFMDFM agenda, T:BUC and all that type of stuff. However, if area planning is done badly, it can be detrimental to good relations, rural development and community development in that area. The schools are saying that they want to do it for the benefit of good relations, community development and rural development, but what is the process saying? For the benefit of what? For our young people? It does not make sense as it is currently planned and implemented.

Mr Rogers: I think that you have answered my question, Lauri. It really is a travesty that the good work here and the bottom-up approach that could feed into a really good area plan is not even getting out of the cupboard. That is just a comment.

Ms Ward: Area planning is a very valuable tool, but it depends on how it is used.

Mr Lunn: I like your assessment of local area solutions. I think that you just about got it in one. That is a warning, is it not?

I greatly admire what you are doing with the programme. You have gone further in Fermanagh with the direction of travel that I would like to see this going in than perhaps has happened in other places. I do not need to elaborate on that.

In your paper, you refer to the evaluation regarding learning for change consultancy in 2010. Have you done any assessment since 2010 in terms of the development of relationships, friendships and all that sort of stuff?

Mr McCusker: Absolutely. We worked with the North Eastern Education and Library Board and Queen's University, and together we commissioned consultants to look at the impact of shared education from the outset of the programme to the end of last academic year. We have that information, and I will make it accessible — I will share the links with the Committee Clerk. There is a lot of reading in it and a lot about the social and educational benefits and the economic elements.

Ms Ward: You talked about the impact, and I was glad to hear some of the input from the inspectorate this morning. We had very frustrating initial meetings with the inspectorate and the Department about impact. They clearly wanted to look at the impact on the pupil, and we kept trying to explain the community impact and the impact on the parents.

With the programme, a great number of parents are involved in the partnership, and they come together regularly for training, workshops and all that. They use community venues such as Orange halls and church halls — all their local facilities. Those venues may once have been single identity, but they are now being used by all sections of the community. I was trying to explain to the inspectorate that we need to look at the whole community impact, and that it is not just about the impact on individual pupils. Even when you take that whole community impact into consideration, you see that it gives pupils a sense of place, identity and who all belongs to our community. I was always fearful of an ETI inspection evaluating a very small impact and not that wider ripple impact.

Mr Lunn: Lauri, you talked about the way that the schools have developed and how they work together, to the point that you distinctly said that you have four schools here that are taking risks and really cooperating in a meaningful way. You also talked about the various models that are potentially out there for shared management and all the rest of it. If you look at that and what eventually will happen with area planning — God knows when it is going to happen — you will see that there are inevitably going to be situations in which schools will have to close. It does not make any sense. We have 1,200 schools; we do not need that number. I am with the Minister: just because a school's numbers are low does not mean that it has to close. I completely agree with him. There are other factors in play there such as sharing, community involvement and all the rest of it. You know the criteria. Is it possible that the working relationships will become so close and that the barriers will have been broken down so much in this county, which is leading the way in some ways, that an amalgamation might be seen as the preferred outcome? I mean across the sectors.

Mr McCusker: Yes, absolutely, but six years ago it was not a possibility. Six years ago, some people were challenging shared education as a concept. If we had gone to many parts of this county where there are two schools in the same village and said that it was a possibility, they would have laughed at us. They are not laughing now. It is a possibility; of course it is. For some schools, it might be a possibility in 20 years.

When you see forced mergers or attempted forced mergers of schools and the resistance, court cases and whatever might be the case — I am not just talking about this county but other areas — you learn that, if you work from the bottom up and build relationships, links, connections etc, when people talk about maybe taking the next step, it is much easier. Whereas, the top-down approach that forces people together does not do that. I think that shared education offers people the potential; no, it is more than that — it offers them the space to have those conversations about the next steps, ie area planning and producing plans.

Mr Lunn: Finally, you talked about the use of community facilities and mentioned Orange halls. I recently read a report by the Orange Order in Fermanagh. It was a good report and quite a hopeful document. That tallied with what you said. You are getting a movement from all directions in Fermanagh that maybe the rest of the country should be listening to and watching. I wish you well with it. I think that you have done great work.

The Chairperson: Members, thank you very much. Catherine and Lauri, thank you. I think that it has been very useful. Your paper has been exceptionally helpful and useful.

Earlier, we had a telling comment from the representative of the ETI, who talked about rewarding success and what he had seen during his experience in Germany. Unfortunately, it would seem that, given the plans that are prevailing in Fermanagh and the particular issues with the Collegiate, there is a desire to punish success rather than expanding successful schools.

It is timely that we are here and that we have had the discussion. As we have done in the past, we will continue to work with you and others in promoting and trying to advance some of these things in a very challenging climate. Thank you. We wish you well for the remainder of your work and look forward to it being embedded more and more in what goes on across Northern Ireland plc.