



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

2012-13 Savings Delivery Plan; 2013-14 and
2014-15 Business Plans; and Programme for
Government Update:
Department of Education Officials

10 September 2014

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Trevor Lunn
Ms Maeve McLaughlin
Mrs Sandra Overend
Mr Seán Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Mr Trevor Connolly	Department of Education
Mr Gary Fair	Department of Education
Ms Fiona Hepper	Department of Education
Dr David Hughes	Department of Education
Mr Paul Sweeney	Department of Education

The Chairperson: I welcome permanent secretary, Mr Paul Sweeney; deputy permanent secretary, Fiona Hepper; director of finance, Trevor Connolly; Mr David Hughes, who is always welcome, as are other members, but David is invaluable to the Committee on the curriculum, qualifications and standards; and Mr Gary Fair, director of planning and performance management. Gary, this may be your first time at the Committee.

Mr Gary Fair (Department of Education): It is.

The Chairperson: We welcome you and look forward to working with you as you take up your post.

Mr Fair: Thank you.

The Chairperson: Permanent secretary, thank you for bringing your team. We are glad that you are here to present the issues in the Programme for Government, the business plan and the savings delivery plan. In the time that we have, I intend to endeavour to steer my colleagues towards three specific areas in the Programme for Government about which we will question you. We will try to cover issues around GCSE attainment, literacy and numeracy, early years, Lisanelly and shared education, as well as something called the Education and Skills Authority (ESA).

The second phase of the meeting will be around the business plan, which includes the entitlement framework, anti-bullying legislation and the Irish-medium workforce review. The final topic will be the savings delivery plan.

I know that you will make one presentation on all these subjects. We will endeavour to keep focused, because the Department covers a wide range of issues. If possible, this is how we would like to proceed this morning. However, I thank you for coming, and I hand over to you.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Department of Education): OK, Chair and members, I thank you for the opportunity and for your acknowledgement of Gary's first appearance before the Committee. In the day that is in it, we acknowledge the agreement by the Executive to move towards a one-board model. The Department, with the Minister, will take forward the necessary work in that regard.

As you said, Chair, it is a fairly comprehensive agenda, and it is your will that we kick off with the Programme for Government. I know that members have specific questions. We have kept the Committee informed quarterly on progress against our Programme for Government targets. The latest report was provided to the Committee on 26 August. I will just get straight into the core agenda. Do you want to focus on the five GCSE A* to C grades, including the English and maths targets, first?

The Chairperson: Yes, OK.

Mr Sweeney: I will focus specifically on those pupils and young people who are entitled to free school meals. Let me say at the outset that the Minister and the Department have set a very challenging target to have 49% of our young people who are entitled to free school meals achieving five good GCSEs or the equivalent at A* to C, including English and maths. The latest figures available are for 2012-13 and the target is just shy of 35%. It is sufficient to say that we have a huge task on our hands to close the gap between the target of 49% initially set for March 2015 and the 35% at which it currently sits.

We make no apology for setting an ambitious target. If you think about it, we are expecting just less than half of our young people who are entitled to free school meals to achieve five good GCSEs. Any society that would set itself a target less than that needs to seriously question its ambition for its education system.

I would like to focus on some of the measures that we have put in place, such as the signature project which has deployed of almost 260 full-time equivalent teachers in 301 schools, directly providing additional support to 10,000 young people. I want to talk about the work that we have been doing with continuous professional development and the impact of the Education Works campaign. There are a number of initiatives that we would like to discuss in some detail, but my opening statement is to say that we are making no apology for having a very ambitious target. We are making some incremental progress in that regard. The target itself has created momentum, and I think that there is a focus now in schools on that particular cohort of free-school meals-entitled pupils that, frankly, was never there in previous years. Perhaps I will pause there, knowing that members have specific questions.

The Chairperson: OK. I want to go to Chris on this, but there is a worry when you look at the figures. This is the difficulty when you try to extrapolate statistics and you base it on the process that we have for this. If you look at the figures, an issue is arising again between girls and boys. In English, for example, 27% did not get grade C or higher, which equates to 6,348 pupils. However, when you break it down by gender, 37% of boys — nearly 4,000 pupils — did not achieve the benchmark. Twenty one per cent of girls did not attain a grade C or above. It is that gap between boys and girls among those who did not secure a grade C or higher in English — 61% of boys — which is an issue. What does the Department believe is the reason for that? I know that we can easily say that statistics across the world show that girls always outperform boys and so on. However, that is not good enough for me as a parent, having had a boy come through the process, although his grades impressed us all and the school is good. Nevertheless, when it comes to boys, that gap seems to be widening. Would you like to pick that one up, David?

Dr David Hughes (Department of Education): You very sensibly made the first point that I was going to make. It is a recognised feature around the world and you have already made the point that, particularly in reading skills, it is shown from primary right through post-primary that girls outperform boys. However, it is not obviously a given that that necessarily has to happen.

There are a number of elements that we have recognised in the regional strategy in tackling underachievement; potentially, what we are seeing there is not simply that boys will achieve a lower level. The implications must be that there must be some underachievement there and that there must be some boys who could perform better, if you see what I mean. In those circumstances, the first and most important intervention is the understanding of those boys' teachers in the context of those boys' schools. So, schools identifying the strategies that they intend to use for their pupils would be the first and most important element of a response to a regional statistic, as it were.

I think the fact that the increasingly sophisticated use of data in schools, so that individual schools, the senior management teams and the heads of department in schools are looking at the data that they get about how their pupils are performing, means that schools will identify that issue in particular. That is very important as well. So, a very data-rich environment is one in which schools are able to identify problems and challenges for themselves and therefore target their efforts to address them.

A third element that I will draw in is that it is absolutely true that getting a qualification in English and in maths is a critical element to achieving that threshold of attainment, particularly at the end of Key Stage 4. That is why the Programme for Government target refers to five level 2 qualifications, GCSE or equivalent, including GCSE English and GCSE maths. If we think about what the other three-plus subjects might be, having the opportunity to study a very broad range of subjects in Key Stage 4 means that the English and maths is placed into a context in children's education.

We certainly hear from schools that there are some pupils — I am not saying necessarily boys or necessarily girls, but you can see how it might apply to boys equally — who find that their traction with their English and maths learning comes with their engagement with the rest of their education. So, if they are forced down a particular route and lose engagement with their wider education, that may make their engagement with English and maths that much harder. If they are given the opportunity to learn something that they are really interested in, passionate about and know will lead on for them, placing English and maths in that context can be enormously helpful.

Those are the three main points that I will make. I am not suggesting that there are not scores of strategies or interventions that teachers may say would work in particular cases, but I am not sure that, in the Department of Education, we would necessarily say, "Here is the answer that is going to address the potential underperformance of boys." *[Interruption.]*

The Chairperson: Somebody's mobile phone is not switched off. It is not mine. Mine is off. I am not guilty. Could somebody pay attention to that, please?

It is something that we want to come back to at some stage, but this week we had the Save the Children launch of the 'Read On. Get On' report. It states that by 2025 half a million children will reach the age of 11 unable to read well unless urgent action is taken. Northern Ireland had a part to play in that overall figure. I accept that there are various different strategies, but it is a worry, particularly when you see that, in English, there is still a huge gap between girls and boys. I think that we need to have a more focused intervention. I know that we are always talking about working class Protestant boys as an issue, and that is an issue that is still there, however, when you look at the breakdown of the figures, it is an issue in nationalist areas the same as in unionist areas. There is such a miniscule difference between the numbers sometimes. The majority still seem to be in one particular community. However, I do not care what the community is. If there is a problem there, it needs to be addressed in some structured way.

Dr Hughes: That is a very good point. For the individual child, it does not matter to them whether they are a boy or a girl, or in which community they are, if they need their English and maths.

Reflecting on the cause, the Delivering Social Change signature project was an intervention at a regional level. It was targeted at schools with large proportions of free school meal children, because that is where the greatest risk of underachievement seems to lie. Of course, there will be a proper evaluation of that programme, because it has been a significant investment. The informal feedback we are getting from department head teachers is that it has had a tremendously positive effect. That kind of focused attention on young people who are at risk of not fulfilling their potential by getting a grade C or above, particularly at GCSE, has been a positive step, a very positive programme.

Mr Hazzard: I have a supplementary point to that. I take your point and, indeed, I welcome that we are talking about poverty, which does not recognise the colour of a school uniform etc. When you look at the figures for Protestant boys who achieve GCSEs compared to those for Catholic girls, it is nearly

half. There must be something worth looking at there. I take on board entirely everything that you say about girls and boys, but 25% compared to 42.9% is stark and is something that may bear looking at in further detail. However, I take on board that deprivation is deprivation, no matter what. However, the figures suggest that something needs to be addressed.

Dr Hughes: I am sure that there could be input from different angles. I was struck by Jackie Redpath speaking about the focus that the greater Shankill convention is looking at placing on children and young people locally. He repeated, from his perspective, a clear narrative of how he understands education performance in that area has been affected by numerous factors over decades. He always starts by making the point that not so many years ago — a couple of generations — boys did not need qualifications to get a job. We are straying into the realms of history, sociology and somewhere beyond education. However, you see that there is clearly a narrative there.

There are twin aspects to the role of the Department of Education. The first is to ensure that, once the young person is in school, the quality of education is the best it can be. The aim is that school improvement should lead to every school being a good school. However, outside school, we should marshal those different factors, as far as we can, to support the value of education. It may well be as simple as the Education Works television campaign, which you will be aware of. That message immediately goes straight out to the parent or the young person. The messages can come through in other ways, through all sorts of forms of non-formal education and influential partners as well as parents and other carers. There is a range of approaches, and they are all part of the strategy when looking at standards.

Mr Hazzard: That is fair enough. I just wanted to ask that supplementary because you started with that issue, Chair.

This is a question for Paul or anybody: why are we missing our targets? Are they too ambitious? How do they sit within the wider UK and Ireland framework? You talked about it being crazy for any society not to be setting targets such as these. Are our targets as ambitious as those in Wales, Scotland, England and the South? Are they missing them by as much as we are?

Mr Sweeney: In a moment, David will pick up the second part, on comparing performance with England and Wales. Again, just for context, a systems-wide analysis would say that 70% of young people pass English at grades A* to C and 69% achieve maths at grades A* to C. However, when you drop down, the focus has to be on the cohort of young people that is entitled to free school meals, what is termed the trail of disadvantage. There is always a great debate about whether we have a world-class education system. Certainly, all the analysis proves that, in terms of that trail of disadvantage, we are one of the least-performing systems in the OECD countries. We are not apologising — rightly so — and the Minister is leading the Department with a very clear focus on those young people who, for various reasons, are dramatically underperforming.

The background to the target of 49% was in the literacy and numeracy strategy Count, Read: Succeed, so we did not pick a figure completely out of the air. I am personally shocked that that says that over 50% of our young people, because they are from disadvantaged areas, are going to leave school after at least 12 years — in some instances with two years of preschool education as well — without five good GCSEs, including English and maths. Of course, what we know is that, for the most part, they are not going to get into the labour market. This is a very serious societal issue.

There is no complacency in the Department; there is a very clear focus. I have to say that when we go around schools, some leaders say that we are never going to achieve that target, but I keep saying that you have to have ambition for your community and your school. I do not believe that 49% is an overambitious target, particularly as we know that approximately 70% of our young people can achieve.

In relation to England and Wales, again, I do not want to be smug in any way. We are doing relatively well, but David could give you the specific comparator.

Dr Hughes: I will start with an admission, which I hope reflects well on the Department. I do not actually know what the Department for Education in England or the Department of Education and Skills in Wales set as their own targets. We are looking at what our education system needs to tackle. The fact that we constantly have to come back and report on not hitting that target for performance at Key Stage 4 among those who are entitled to free school meals is a repeated reminder of what a challenge it is and how important it is that it is tackled.

I am not sure whether I can make the comparison with England and Wales. It is also very hard to make comparisons with Scotland, where I know they have a completely different set of arrangements. I know that in Wales the trigger for their efforts in education has actually been the international benchmarking work. They looked at how they performed in terms of the PISA report. That triggered a considerable amount of very impressive work in Wales to address the challenges that they see in their education system. The education systems are not completely different. Certain sectors are not completely different, but they are different enough so that I would not necessarily want to say our targets or their targets.

Mr Hazzard: I take that on board. You want to see progression and betterment; that is why we are all here. If you are saying that Wales has done good work, what exactly is it? When you look at the challenging circumstances, we have to look at what it is they are doing. What does the Department do now when it sees that we are likely to miss the Programme for Government targets? Will it wait and see how it develops or do you now get directly involved in changing targets and looking at different things? How do you react to what is happening now?

Mr Sweeney: Obviously, the Programme for Government will be rolled forward to complete the mandate up until March 2016. The Minister is engaged with Executive colleagues now on that process. I do not want to pre-empt any final decision he might make, but it is possible that he might be minded to continue with the target for the very reason that we have to have ambition and that the target itself should drive momentum.

It is about the various initiatives that we talked about and the signature project. The training inspectorate has brought out a best practice guide for English and maths. The two inspectors, north and south of the border, have been working very closely, again with that focus around English and maths, to see if we can highlight best practice. The Department's position at the moment is that, if the Minister wishes to remain with that target, then I understand that the process of finalising the rolling forward of the Programme for Government will be brought to a conclusion quite soon. The Minister is, rightly, tasking us to talk about ideas over and above all the things that we have been doing. That included, for example, David and I meeting every area learning community, so were able to meet all the post-primary schools. The focus of our presentation was largely on tackling educational underachievement and getting ideas about what additional steps we can take.

I do not think, without being defeatist, that there is one single game changer that we had missed. Rather, it is about solid application of the initiatives that we have been involved in, quality teaching and active engagement between the schools and the community. When those come together, quite remarkable results can be achieved. Leadership is key in the schools. Sadly, the inspectorate has been pointing out that there are major issues with school leadership. The formal intervention process, identifying where schools need additional support, is very important. We do not see a magic bullet; it is about the sustained application of existing programmes and keeping a fresh mind about what additional steps we might take.

Mr Hazzard: What is the lifespan of the benchmarking of five good GCSEs? You mentioned that some school leaders will tell you that they will not have certain people in the school. That does not mean that children are achieving and attaining. Are we approaching a time when we need to look at different benchmarks for success in schools?

Mr Sweeney: That is a key issue because it is critical that when young people leave school after 12 years or maybe more, they do so with a sense of accomplishment and pride. The added value of a school cannot always be assessed on pure academic performance. David is keen to come in on this.

Dr Hughes: What I would like to draw out is differentiating between the measurement of the effectiveness of the education system overall and that of individual schools. In school evaluation, we operate in a very data-rich environment. There is a lot of data that can be used by a school to understand how it is doing for its pupils. Whether that touches on five GCSEs at A* to C or their equivalents, including English and maths, or on a huge range of other data may differ from school to school. In some schools, it is an absolute given that the vast majority of pupils will get five GCSEs at A* to C, including English and maths. Therefore, are they taking their foot off the pedal? No, because they set themselves higher targets. Other schools will say that it is a real struggle, but that they will do their best by their pupils and ensure that they get what they need.

At the system level, however, if you look at an entire education system and set a threshold that still makes sense in the widest societal and public context, you see that it still means something. We may

never expect everyone to reach the threshold, but setting a target to improve the proportion reaching it is a fair thing to do at a system level. We need to separate out system evaluation and school evaluation, and I do not think that it undermines the five GCSEs at A* to C, including English and maths, as a valuable measurement.

That said, I do not want to pre-empt any ongoing or future work that comes up with something slightly different, but you can still see that there is value in it.

Mr Hazzard: I definitely see the distinction between the system and the school level. We are talking about the 2012-13 results. On the 2013-14 levels, some educationalists have been in the media lately singing the praises of the signature project and the effect that it is having. Are there any early indications of this year's results?

Mr Sweeney: It would not be fair to speculate. I know that this, perhaps, sounds very frustrating, but, in the past, it was about May of the following year before all the analysis was done and the authoritative figures could be released. I am with you on this: the number of principals who have said favourable things about the signature project is encouraging.

I do not lack ambition, but the figure jumped from just shy of 35% to 40%. I think that it will be more incremental, but as long as the trajectory is upwards, that is what matters. We have come a long way from a very low base. We have not speculated what the percentage will be for the current year. We have spoken to the education and library boards. We recently asked them whether they could give us an indication based on their informal analysis of the results that came out in August — like you, we are very keen to know — but it would be a hostage to fortune if I were to suggest a figure. The trend will show a more incremental change, I think, than a leap forward.

Mr Kinahan: Thanks very much. I am coming in on the back of something that Chris asked. Since I have been on the Education Committee, I have never really understood why there is a huge gap. At one end, we focus on five GCSEs, and, at the other end, we have all these excellent programmes — whether they are nurture units, the signature projects or others — for literacy and numeracy. However, in the middle, there is no step-by-step approach to attaining the targets.

In one school, I was fascinated to watch the head putting his arm around a young lad and explaining to him how he had got the equivalent of three GCSEs so could get into the tech. I saw the relief on that young lad's face when he realised that. Why do we not have a stepped approach in the middle? One such step would be three GCSEs and then building that number up through having smaller or lower targets and moving everyone up. Have we ever looked at it from that point of view?

Dr Hughes: Are you referring to the performance at system or school level?

Mr Kinahan: It is a mixture. I think that it is difficult when you split the two. I can see why there is a GCSE threshold in the system, because that is what everyone looks at when comparing countries and areas. However, I think that, at school level, we should get a breakdown of the pass rates — whether it is one, two or three GCSEs — and find a stepped approach. There seems to be a big gap in the middle, so we do not know whether a mass of young people get four GCSEs, which means that they have to move up by only one, or whether we have a mass who get none. It is systematic — finding a system of different targets.

Dr Hughes: I can see the attraction of a much more granular analysis at school level. I expect that a school that is being well managed does very granular analysis. In fact, I am quite sure that some schools are saying that they know what each individual child got.

If we were to scatter a huge number of different targets and different levels of detail at a system level, would it make the difference that is required on the ground for individual children when, in fact, the issue for an individual child is whether they have access to the next stage? That will differ depending on what the next stage is for that child. Five GCSEs or equivalent at level 2, including English and maths, still has currency. It is not a currency that is necessarily being created in the education system; it is one that exists outside the education system among employers and those in further and higher education. So, if we stepped away from it, would we be doing a disservice by not maintaining and holding up what others are saying is so important?

Mr Kinahan: It does not have to be a *[Inaudible.]* It could be just one more stage to focus on something in the middle. That is all that I was throwing out. We have statistics for boys, statistics for

girls and so on, but we never get exam results to see how well things are working, particularly free school meals. We never see what the position is below five GCSEs. Perhaps we should look at this slightly differently to see whether that might give us a different approach.

Mr Craig: I welcome you to the Committee. I welcome the signature project for a very specific reason: it is the first project I have ever seen that delivered something to schools trying to tackle underachievement, and the only one that I know ever delivered outside Belfast. That is an ongoing issue. I want to raise that with you because — I know that Chris touched on this — when you look at the free school meals figure for five GCSEs, including maths and English, there is a 9% gap between Protestant boys and Catholic boys, a 10% gap between the girls in both fields and, as Chris pointed out, the gap between Catholic girls and Protestant boys is almost double. Are you convinced that there is enough intervention in the controlled sector outside Belfast? I know that additional assistance is given to Belfast, but the simple and honest truth is that there probably are more controlled sector schools outside Belfast, and the only assistance they receive from you is the signature project — there is nothing else. I speak from bitter experience: the only Department that has helped schools outside Belfast on this issue is Health; not Education.

Mr Sweeney: Thank you, Jonathan, and I welcome your acknowledgment of the signature project and the fact that it crosses 301 schools right across the region. That is important. I should also acknowledge that this is not just a DE initiative; it is an OFMDFM/DE signature project.

Underachievement in the controlled sector is a topical issue. I have quarterly governance and accountability meetings with the five education and library boards, and I have done that for the four years that I have been in the Department. Each meeting has a major item on educational achievement, and the chair of the respective board and the chief executive are there. The Department seeks to act as a critical friend and challenger to the boards on what is being done, or what additional steps can be taken, to tackle educational underachievement wherever we find it, particularly in a board context in the controlled sector. Of course, it is sad that a disproportionate number of controlled schools are in the formal intervention process. Thankfully, a good number of them are working their way through it and coming out the other end. I think that that is important.

Given the day that is in it and the agreement yesterday at the Executive, subject to the will of the Assembly and the legislation going forward, it is the will of the Minister to sponsor a sectoral support body for the controlled sector, and a range of functions is anticipated for that body. Some preliminary work was done a number of years ago, but one of the key focuses and key functions will be tackling standards and achievement in the controlled sector. We know in life that, if you bring focus to bear, it brings additional momentum. The Minister has taken that initiative in partnership with, in this case, the transferors, and it will be interesting to see what impact that organisation can have. As you know, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), for example, was established a number of years ago for the very reason that, at that time, evidence proved that there was significant underachievement in the maintained sector. CCMS has, admirably, brought to bear a focus on that. So we are on the cusp of something potentially exciting here, and it will, undoubtedly, give an extra dimension and focus to tackling underachievement, particularly in the controlled sector.

The Chairperson: I concur with those comments, Paul.

Mr Rogers: I welcome you and acknowledge the work of the signature projects particularly. Taking that a step further, I know that it takes miraculous work from a teacher to get the 14-year-old boy who cannot read or hates maths through his GCSEs. I am talking about early intervention and addressing those issues much earlier in the curriculum. Are there any plans to take on board the good work that has come out of the signature projects and take it down further, even into primary schools, to address the issues? I agree that it is not everything.

Mr Sweeney: I want to show deference by acknowledge your background in this field. I am thinking of the conversation that we had with the area learning communities. A lot of the school leaders made the very point that you made, which is that the signature project is useful, but it is limited because, perhaps, the stage of intervention is too late. A lot of the school leaders passionately believed that intervention needed to be at primary level. So one of the practical steps that we are looking at is piloting an arrangement whereby 18 of the area learning communities will forge a closer working relationship with their partner primary schools, just to give that continuity and to ensure that literacy and numeracy in particular are tackled at a much earlier age.

Of course, one of the big debates shortly will be on the fact that the signature project has a time limit placed upon it. Initially, it was to be a two-year programme, and, for various practical reasons, it will extend into part of a third year. It is costing approximately £15.5 million in total. One of the big issues that we will soon have to confront is whether it will be possible to continue that programme or augment it. If we are unable to do either, the issue will be how we can mainstream the experience in post-primary and primary schools.

All the evidence coming through shows that, if young people, particularly children of nine or 10 years of age, are struggling with literacy or numeracy, there is, sadly, a good chance that that will manifest itself in their post-primary experience.

Dr Hughes: It is also worth mentioning that a certain proportion of the signature project is focused on primary schools. I cannot put my finger on the exact numbers, but my recollection is that it is about two thirds of teachers are in post-primary schools and one third in primary. That is probably a fair reflection of the greater challenge by the stage young people are in post-primary education. There is more to turn around, as it were, than in primary schools. As you said, turning around those who are struggling to keep up at primary level is incredibly important. I just wanted to make the point that the signature project is already in some primary schools.

Mr Rogers: Thank you. That is useful.

The Chairperson: I have a comment just before we leave commitment 21 and qualifications. Despite the targeting of support at disadvantaged students — we have had free school meals and targeted interventions for a long period, with eligibility to free school meals the indicator — the improvements in GCSE school-leavers' attainment so far, based on the figures that we have to date over the Programme for Government period, have been roughly the same for disadvantaged school-leavers as for the average school-leavers.

That goes back to an issue that repeatedly comes to the Committee, and it goes back to this point: we have never had any empirical evidence that using free school meals as an indicator has given us the outcomes that we want. We have got ourselves into a territory now in which we are not really sure what has been responsible for progress — and we have to be honest and say that progress has been made. However, when you start to narrow it down to specific elements, there are issues, and free school meals, in particular, do not seem to have made any difference. It is how we deal with that in light of the signature project, because it was based on one simple premise: get teachers into schools to concentrate specifically on pupils' literacy and numeracy.

Dr Hughes: May I just pick up on the point that you started on? The improvement in percentage points of the cohort overall and the cohort entitled to free school meals is, relatively speaking, very similar. I think that I am right in saying that. Of course, the cohort entitled to free school meals is much smaller, and the proportion of pupils reaching that threshold is much smaller. The proportionate improvement is greater within the cohort entitled to free school meals, so the focus on that cohort is showing results. In the overall figures, those showing the difference in improvement is disproportionately made up of children who are entitled to free school meals. That shows that there is an impact from having a focus on that particular cohort.

I am really looking forward to the publication of the school-leavers' results next year to see to what degree the signature project has had an impact.

The Chairperson: Are there any other comments that you want to make, Paul, on commitment 21, which is GCSE attainment and commitment 42, which literacy and numeracy?

Mr Sweeney: No, Chair, as long as members are happy.

The Chairperson: The other issue that we want to look at is early years, which is commitment 43.

Sorry, Seán.

Mr Rogers: I have another question about literacy and numeracy and levels of progression. I declare an interest as a member of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC). The Department responded to a PAC memorandum in August 2013 on its report on numeracy and literacy, which indicated that levels of progression had a strong potential to serve as a reference point for teachers to secure the teaching

support that children needed. I come back to the old point, which is that, for example, if your child is achieving level 4 in the levels of progression in literacy, he or she could have a standard score somewhere between 95 and 125. Really, that is of no benefit going into post-primary education. What is your comment on that?

Mr Sweeney: Again, I go back to the point about the significance of early intervention, whether in preschool or certainly in the primary sector. It is just reinforcing that point, is it not?

Dr Hughes: We need to be very careful about what we are talking about when we say "levels of progression". There is the number and there is the big A3 sheet covered in statements of what a child is able to do, which is the reference point for assessing a child's progress. The number is quite bald, and that is acknowledged. However, levels of progression are about all of those statements of what a child can do. Therefore, as teachers work through the year, they will know that a child can do certain things but not others. That is a critical part of assessment against a framework in order to inform what has yet to be learned and embedded.

Mr Rogers: David, the Department replied to the PAC saying that it had the strong potential to serve as a reference point for teachers, but there is no baselining at level 2 or level 3.

Dr Hughes: What I am saying is that the levels of progression, because they are a framework of statements of what a child can do, form a critical element of explaining and understanding what a child is and is not able to do and, therefore, assessing against that to identify what more needs to be done.

Mr Rogers: Yes, but a teacher wants to have, for example, standard scores so that they can tell exactly where children are and what their strengths and weaknesses are. That is not in the level of progression at, for example, level 4 — there is no baseline. Many children moving to post-primary could be at level 4: some could have serious literacy problems; others could read 'The Times'. Teachers need to have something more accurate — a better baseline — rather than having to spend a lot of time discovering at what stage children are.

Dr Hughes: I take your point, particularly at the point of transition between primary and post-primary. I do not expect that post-primary schools will try to interpret the bald numbers into anything more elaborate, but I also understand that they will need to engage increasingly with primary schools to understand how the assessment was done and what it means from a primary school's perspective. I am quite sure that that is not the only information on a child that a primary school has or that a post-primary school would want.

Mr Rogers: Are you basically going to continue with levels of progression as they are?

Dr Hughes: The assessment arrangements as they are designed and as they are intended to be implemented are still very valuable and significant in supporting the delivery of the curriculum. Therefore, my understanding is that, once working exactly as intended, they should be a very important part of ensuring that the curriculum is being taught and assessed and that parents and pupils understand progress against the expectations of the curriculum.

Mr Rogers: I do not disagree that they are an important part of the curriculum, but assessment for learning is also an extremely important part of the curriculum. I certainly do not believe that levels of progression are achieving that in their present form.

The Chairperson: The other thing is that CCEA does not believe that that is the case, David. In its 'Annual Report & Accounts 2013-14', it indicated that:

"100 post-primary schools, representing approximately 25% and 40% of schools respectively. This has significant impact on the reliability of outcomes and associated data."

I will add a caveat to that by saying that the majority view, I think, of this Committee is that levels of progression are a fundamental, monumental disaster in our schools. I can honestly say, without fear of contradiction, that I have not met a teacher at any function or event that I have gone to who disagrees. There is one particular teacher who would love to meet you, David, because every time I meet her, she mentions these levels. They are not presented to teachers as relevant information. Yes, there needs to be assessment for learning, but when will the Department sit down with teachers

and approve and agree a proper system that is manageable, workable and understandable? It is none of those three things at the minute.

I commend the professional expertise that Seán brings to this Committee, but are we getting it so wrong? Is there something that we are just not getting here, when the vast majority of teachers are saying that this is a flawed, failed process?

Dr Hughes: Can I ask which element specifically is causing the greatest consternation? Is it because it is a teacher assessment? I am not sure that it is that. In conversation, both around this table and in other contexts, teacher assessment is deemed to be valuable. Is it that the levels measure what a child can do rather than what they know? I am not sure whether it is that. What element of the assessment arrangements is causing the greatest concern?

The Chairperson: Go back to the GTCNI survey, and I know that there was a whole row with the Department about that. The Department even got NISRA involved in the debate around the way that the survey was carried out, but set all that aside. That survey found that around two thirds of teachers believed that the levels of progression as determined for pupils were not useful for subsequent pupil intervention, parental feedback or assessing the value added by schools. About one third of respondents claimed that the levels were not at all reliable. A very large number of respondents reported that the external moderation process was burdensome.

Seán, do you want to add to that?

Mr Rogers: I have made this point, but, to take a specific example, look at literacy level 4: there is such a difference between a child who has a reading score of 95 and a child who has a reading score of 125. I realise that there are primary school and post-primary school links, but post-primary school teachers do not have the time to go into the nitty-gritty about each child's assessment. If they know that the child has a reading score of 95 as opposed to 125, they could organise the curriculum to suit that much quicker. OK, when they do the first piece of work and whatever, they will see that there is a terrible discrepancy between pupil A and pupil B in their class. That is the point I am making. There is a particular example. It is not working.

Dr Hughes: You have identified one element of the function of the assessment arrangement, which is, as it were, informing the next phase of progress. I am not sure whether the features of the assessment arrangements fall on the basis that that particular function does not necessarily suit entirely. That is because it is also measuring how far a child has progressed at the end of a stage in education. I say quite clearly that, knowing whether a certain proportion have reached the expected level, exceeded it, fallen below it or far below it is the degree of detail required at regional level. We do not need any more information. Others may need more information. Schools are already producing more information. All schools are producing different types of assessments for different purposes: in-year; end of year; beginning of year; whatever it is. However, there needs to be some assessment of performance against the curriculum, and that is what these levels of progression provide.

Mr Rogers: I would not disagree with you on assessment against the curriculum. Yes, we need it, but it has to have a baseline. It has to be an assessment that is useful to the teacher in year 8. Knowing that a pupil has a level 4 in literacy is not a lot of use to the teacher because it does not identify where the strengths or weaknesses are. I have just given one example. They need to talk to teachers.

The Chairperson: CCEA is saying that the data is unreliable, so we have a crisis here, David. Whether it is interpretation or whatever, there is a clear chasm. I am quite happy and am sure that the Committee would be happy to have a group of teachers assemble and come here to have a specific discussion around levels of grading. You heard it, because you have gone to some of the primary school groups. The one in Ballymena, which was across all schools, made it quite clear that these are just not fit for purpose. CCEA is saying it is unreliable. There is —

Dr Hughes: Can I check what it is that CCEA is identifying as unreliable? Sorry, I do not —

The Chairperson: It is saying that about a third of respondents claimed that not all the levels were reliable. It went on to state:

"A baseline for numeracy and literacy was not established as planned."

In its annual report, CCEA indicated, on levels of progression:

"moderation school portfolios have been received from only 221 primary schools ... and 100 post-primary schools, representing approximately 25% and 40% of schools respectively. This has significant impact on the reliability of outcomes and associated data."

I again say ask teachers. They are saying that this is not working; it is a burdensome process. They would use PiE and PiM, which will tell you where the child is at. Do you see what the Department is asking them to do? They would put it in the bin.

I challenge any member of the Department's senior management team to go into any school, ask teachers how they are getting on with levels of progression and then stand back, because the reaction is getting to the level of being hostile. That is because they are weary and are being asked to plough through this treacle. The Department is saying that we have to continue with this. CCEA is saying that the data is unreliable. We are saying that there is a problem. This has all the hallmarks of computer-based assessment. It was not a crisis or a problem, but, six months later, the Minister had to come to the House and say that there was a problem and a crisis. Please do not allow us to get to that stage.

Following on from this, we will bring together a number of teachers and ask for a discussion with you and others to ask this: are we, the Department or teachers getting it wrong? Somebody is getting it wrong.

We will leave it there, because we are never going to get through. We will be here for as long as we discussed ESA — well, maybe not that long. I want to get home this evening.

The other one was early years: commitment 43. Do you have any comments to make before members have questions specifically around early years?

Mr Sweeney: The conundrum for the members in terms of this objective is that we have achieved it: 99.9% of children are placed. However, I bet that you probably get a great deal of mail in relation to this issue. To recap, the programme is about £56 million. Last year, there was something in the region of 23,500 applications, which was about 2% more than the previous year. The Department, in conjunction with the education and library boards, was able to place 86.2% of the parents who indicated their first preference at the first stage. You then go to the second stage. As I said, 99.9% of parents who remained participating in the scheme got their child placed. At one level, without being complacent, the programme was well run. It is a successful programme; we have more than exceeded the target. However, I appreciate that there is a small number of parents in each constituency who feel that they did not get their first preference or decided to withdraw for the scheme. This year, we are going to carry out a survey to identify why people withdrew at stage 1. Was it just a huff at that stage? It is a success story, but I acknowledge that members probably get a great deal of mail around this. It is a very sensitive and emotive issue. Without being complacent, we are pleased with the progress that has been made over the last number of years, particularly in terms of meeting the Programme for Government target.

Mrs Overend: It is good to meet you. This is my first Education Committee meeting. I want to look at a couple of different aspects of this issue. It is good that you are meeting the targets that you specified, but look at the other aspect of that. Seemingly, 92% engage in the process of looking for a preschool place for their child, so 8% seemingly do not want a place for their child. How do you measure that? How do you find that out? Tell me how that is measured. Do you look at the background of those people? For instance, do they receive free school meals? Why are they not engaging? Have you looked at that?

Mr Sweeney: As I said, we are going to use a questionnaire for the parents who do not participate to identify the reasons why they select not to participate. There may be a range of reasons. That is an action point that we have set, and we are embarking on that this autumn.

Mrs Overend: Tell me how it is measured, then. Do you not know that they are not engaged until they actually enrol in P1? How do you measure it?

Mr Sweeney: The education and library boards have that data. They manage the scheme on behalf of the Department.

Mrs Overend: I am still not clear on how it is measured. How do you find out?

Mr Sweeney: Just to recap, the number of applicants was 23,500. Of those, 86% were placed straight away in their first preference. Some withdrew from the scheme because they did not get their first preference.

(The Deputy Chairperson [Mr Kinahan] in the Chair)

Mrs Overend: I am not talking about the people who applied; I am talking about the people who do not bother applying and do not even look for a place for their child of three or four. When do you identify that they did not actually look for a place? How do you know how many there are?

Mr Sweeney: I cannot answer that question. I would be more than happy to talk to the boards. I was talking more about the people who pull out after stage 1. Obviously, we have the data around those. A parent's prerogative, for whatever reason, might be to not apply for a place. How would one identify those people, and how would one engage with them? I am more than happy to have a conversation with the education and library boards around that. I am not in a position to develop that further today.

Mrs Overend: That is something that we really need to look at. The commitment is to ensure that at least one year of preschool is available to every family who wants it, but we need to turn that around and look at why there are families who do not want it. We need to increase that so every child of preschool age has a place.

Mr Sweeney: I think that the key thing is that there are people who want it. It is not statutory based, so it is not in any way mandatory.

Mrs Overend: We need to understand why people do not want it. It is about looking at the education of our children, and it is about increasing that mindset that education is something that we value and asking why it is not valued by some people to begin at those early years.

The other aspect that I wanted to look at is that the Department seemingly has a study that shows that full-time provision provides little educational advantage for children compared with part-time provision. That is the full-time versus part-time aspect of preschool education. Is that really the case?

Mr Sweeney: Yes, the differential is not material. It depends largely on the quality of the learning experience in the preschool setting, but the evidence is that there is not a huge differential between full time and part time.

Mrs Overend: I note that full-time provision seems to be more available in the Belfast area, whereas there are more part-time places available outside Belfast. Will there then be a different perspective from the Department of Education on the provision of full-time places versus part-time places? Will there be a different focus?

Mr Sweeney: No, we are not actively pursuing that at the moment. Again, I am not being complacent, but we think that the provision that we have in place at the moment is broadly servicing the needs. I am happy to look at the point that you made there. It is news to me that there is a preponderance of full-time places in Belfast relative to the rest of the region. Part of that might be explained by the high levels of deprivation in Belfast.

Mrs Overend: Thanks. I appreciate your responses.

The Deputy Chairperson: It will be interesting to see what it is when you get to the parts outside Belfast that are more urban than rural.

Mr Sweeney: I think that the concentration of population might be a factor.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: My question is along a similar vein. The statistics that we have in front of us are that 78% of the provision in Belfast is full time. In Antrim, 90% of the provision appears to be part time. So, there is clearly an issue around regional differences or discrepancies, and I suggest that those need to be addressed. Regarding the numbers, the briefings and information that we have had from the likes of the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership indicate that the levels of

engagement have reduced. I do not know whether you can clarify that. You made reference to the 99.9% and that, of 23,215 applications, 85% got their first preference. Obviously, there will be a difference in those figures, but the question I am asking is this: is there a disengagement in early years or is what the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership told us not accurate?

Mr Sweeney: That ties in with Sandra's point as well.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Yes, it is linked.

Mr Sweeney: As I said, we carried out a questionnaire on the people who pulled out after stage 1. The members are making the point that we need to examine the people who just do not participate. Are there a greater number of people who are not participating? Again, the trend has been 2% upwards from the previous year in the number of applications. On the basis of this conversation, I will engage with the education and library boards on this very point to see what evidence is available to suggest that people are, as you say, disengaging. If that was the case, we will try to identify what the motivation for that was. We do not have a plan of work, if you like, to tackle that, but, on the basis of this conversation today, I am happy to have a preliminary engagement with the education and library boards in the first instance. I will engage with all five of them and at least get an overview of that position. I will perhaps be in a better position to advise members, if you give me a short time to work on that.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I would welcome that clarification, because it was pointed out by the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership. I am sure that, if you looked at the figure of 23,215 and then at previous years, it might give you a fairly active reading. So, we welcome that forthcoming clarification.

Finally, in relation to the new proposal across a number of Departments around the early intervention transformation fund, is there thinking going on in the Department about how that can support early years?

Mr Sweeney: Again, I do not have the benefit of having the programme director Linda Wilson with me, so I would rather not speculate at this stage. Can I come back to you on that once I ask Linda specifically if she can follow it up?

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: That would be useful. My point is that, if there are additional gaps in the Programme for Government commitment and in the Department's commitment on early years generally, and if we are identifying a decrease, surely support streams that are coming on line should be used to support that. If you could come back to us on that, I would appreciate it.

The Deputy Chairperson: Trevor, before I come to you, Sandra wants back in.

Mrs Overend: Thank you, vice-chair. I just wanted to come back in briefly. You are saying that the increase in applications is used to measure the number of those not participating. The number of applications has increased, but what if you compare that with the birth rate? If the birth rate is increasing year on year, applications are increasing year on year. So, you can see how you could measure how successful it really is.

The Department has applied a moratorium on full-time provision and is, to use the Department's phrase, "to standardise patterns of attendance". Can you clarify what that means? Does that mean that the availability of full-time places will be reduced?

Mr Sweeney: Again, I would rather come back to the member on the specifics of that, because I am really not in a position to give you a specific response to that now. So, again, I will discuss that with the director Linda Wilson and come back to you on it quite quickly.

Mr Lunn: Everybody else has welcomed you, so welcome to the Committee.

This is an area where I think the Department has performed pretty well, even though I get the same letters that everybody else gets from disgruntled parents. It is not because they have not got a place; it is because they have not got a place where they want it. We seem to have got away from the situation where people in Bangor were being offered a place in Lisburn; that has gone. I encourage people to stay with the system. It usually works out.

Is it still the case that underage children can displace children in their final preschool year?

Mr Sweeney: That was the case previously, but we took steps to address it. I cannot say that it has been entirely eradicated, but it has been significantly reduced. Again, I could maybe get some figure work around that.

Mr Lunn: Can the Department not solve that problem fairly easily by just providing preschool education in the final preschool year?

Mr Sweeney: Again, we have tightened up the criteria. I think that the numbers have changed quite dramatically, but I would rather get the exact statistics, Trevor.

Mr Lunn: OK.

On this question of full-time or part-time provision that other members referred to, I must confess that, on a personal basis, it is beyond me why parents are so keen to get full-time provision for a three-year-old. What happened to childhood? I have said that so many times. As a parent and a grandparent, I must say that it just would not be for me. You have to let children play.

I think that you now have a moratorium on new full-time provision. Are you going to formalise that and make all new provision part time only?

Mr Sweeney: Again, we have not got a definitive position on that.

Mr Lunn: What is your feeling about it?

Mr Sweeney: Part of it is about resource, as you might imagine, Trevor, and that is a key driver. So, what we are trying to do is ensure that we meet the Programme for Government target for those parents who wish to get a full-time place. In some instances, it will be part time, and, in some instances, it will be full time. What we do know is that the quality of the education will be largely good to very good.

Mr Lunn: Surely it is cheaper to provide part-time places than full-time places.

Mr Sweeney: Again, I am happy to look at the differential cost in that. It may well be that the gap is not huge when you look at the sum cost and overheads etc.

Mr Lunn: You mentioned resource implications. The resource implication would be positive, not negative. Are we just going to stare at each other? *[Laughter.]* OK. Thanks very much. That is grand.

The Deputy Chairperson: Can we move on to Lisanelly and shared education? Do you have a few comments to make on Lisanelly?

Mr Sweeney: I will invite Fiona to please update members on that.

Ms Fiona Hepper (Department of Education): I will start with Lisanelly, and Paul will widen it out to the other aspects of shared education.

During this year, there has been substantial progress on pushing forward the Lisanelly programme to the point where we have the site cleared for the Arvalee special school. All the elements that civil servants have to get involved in to make a project work have been pushed forward, not least the procurement work for the building of the Arvalee school. That is out to tender at the moment, with the expectation that the construction contract will be let this year and that building on-site will commence in January 2015 or so.

(The Chairperson [Mr Storey] in the Chair) Work is also being taken forward on the wider site clearance for the other schools, including the work on asbestos surveys and various environmental surveys. We have put in place a refreshed project managing board with all the key stakeholders who need to be round the table and two independent members who bring expertise to these sorts of large-scale projects.

On the design of the site itself, work has been moved forward substantially on what is called the stage C design. We have taken the opportunity this year to pull together the principals of the schools into a working group. They are working actively and positively very closely together to input their views and thoughts etc on the actual design of the site and the schools. That work will move to a conclusion by the end of this calendar year so that, early next year, there will be further procurement for the design-and-build team, which will take this project right through to the end.

We have also focused on bringing together what we call the wider elements of the project by starting to set up a stakeholder group that will bring on board members of the community in the Omagh area, Omagh District Council and various business groupings in the area etc, as well as what we call Strathroy community group. The group will start to look at the wider benefits from the site and how they can spill out into the community. We have identified most of the membership of that group, and we are looking to schedule its first meeting in September.

We have started an engagement through the Minister writing to Ministers in other relevant Departments to bring together, at working-group level, officials who will look at what elements of other Departments' work can start to feed in to the operation of the site. For example, we are looking at whether the Department of Health will bring forward elements to some of the shared centres or the gateway building, such as dental services, crèches etc, that would benefit the operation of the site.

Likewise, there will be engagement with representatives from the Department for Employment and Learning to see where there will be dovetailing with the further education college, which is physically very close to the site, and to see what services can be brought on board there and how they will complement the school etc.

Likewise, there will be engagement with DETI and Invest NI on the wider economic benefits. We have also had engagement with the Department for Regional Development. Obviously, one of the other major infrastructure pieces of work that need to be done is the development and building of the Strathroy link road. So, we have had engagement with that Department.

We have also taken the opportunity during this calendar year to refresh the timetable and to look fairly strategically at what is possible and at when the site will open. We have worked very closely with our senior colleagues in the Strategic Investment Board, who are helping to deliver the project, and we have agreement from the Minister on the site opening date. At the minute, that is sitting at 1 September 2020. All schools are keen that they come together as one and that the site opens to all schools on the same date. So, we are targeting the start of the school year on the basis that it is obviously less disruptive to do that than to try to move six schools, 4,000-odd pupils and 500 teachers midway through a school year.

The project board will keep a very close eye on the timetable for the overall delivery. At any stage, if it is possible, it will look to draw that timetable forward. Again, that would be on the basis of an increment a year, so if there was a possibility of building it faster, it would potentially open on 1 September 2019 rather than mid-year. The plan is that all the construction work will be finished earlier than 2020, and that would give significant time for the decant to happen over the summer period.

As I said, we have brought the school principals together into a working group of their own. They are working very closely on matters to do with what we call the sharing model. We have an educationalist directly from the Education and Training Inspectorate working very closely with the group on what will be shared, how and where it will be shared, and whether it is in the buildings that will be the shared centres and the likes of school activity, etc, or what they call sharing at the core of the individual schools. So, at this stage, we have made significant progress during this year. We now have a new member of the DETI team, who is going to take full-time responsibility as the senior responsible officer. He has taken up post, so I will be handing that over to him. I think that that gives a very significant impetus to the amount of senior resource that will be there to drive this forward, such is the import that we have for this project as one of the biggest capital builds that the Department and possibly even SIB have been involved with.

I will stop at that point. I will be happy to take questions.

The Chairperson: I have just one question before we go to Trevor. In considering the make-up of the management board as representative of the core component parts of the schools, is the Western Education and Library Board still representing the controlled sector?

Ms Hepper: Yes, the chief executive of the Western Board is a member of the project board representing the controlled schools.

The Chairperson: In the light of the agreement yesterday, would the Department now consider that, in the context of the controlled sector, that would need to change to reflect the passage of the Bill? There has been an issue at the heart of what has gone on as Lisanelly, which is that it seems as though everybody has a place at the table apart from the controlled schools that are going to be affected by the decision to move on to the Lisanelly site.

Ms Hepper: As I said, the chief executive of the Western Board represents the controlled schools on that board. As time moves on and there are developments in the wider education administration functioning, we will keep a very close eye on membership. We have not been prescriptive and closed down how that would operate. I may be speaking out of turn and too soon, but if a controlled sector body was set up over the lifetime of the project, we could look to bring somebody on board from there.

The Chairperson: It is an issue of concern, and it would be remiss of me if I did not raise the concern that the current construct of the project board is not reflective of the component parts of the schools that will eventually become part of the Lisanelly site.

Have we settled the issue of the transfer of liabilities in capital receipts following the disposal of assets where voluntary grammars were to retain 15% of the proceeds, given that I am right in saying that the two schools in the controlled sector are currently owned by the Western Education and Library Board? The voluntary grammar schools will have their own management arrangements. Is the arrangement still to have 15% of the value of the old school retained?

Ms Hepper: There is a specific project that will have its own project team. The project board oversees five or six core projects. This is not just one project to build a campus; there are lots of elements to it. One of the key projects that the Department will chair will be on how the campus will be run and serviced etc. The issues that you raised will be key to deciding the model.

We have taken the school principals and some of the project board over to see how shared sites in GB have worked, but those are not nailed down yet. They are ones that I know not only the Western board but the trustees and the individual schools will have views on. We need to settle a view in the Department on how we would see the site running and how each of the schools would be funded etc and to see what is possible on the basis that this is the first time that a campus of this scale has been brought together. We do not want to be prescriptive; we want to see what sort of model will work. I do not anticipate that being a particularly easy piece of work, but it is fundamental to the next steps.

The Chairperson: I will give you a word of friendly advice: do not take them to Scotland.

Ms Hepper: No, we did not.

The Chairperson: The Committee went to Scotland to see the shared provision, but I do not think that we were impressed, to put it lightly.

Ms Hepper: We took them to Burnley and Waverley, and there were pros and cons at each of those sites. Again, that was just to get a feel for what is being done.

The Chairperson: I think that there were more cons than pros in Scotland.

The second outline business case indicated the issue of the 15%. That still needs to be satisfactorily resolved to everybody's liking in the context of the practicalities of how the project can proceed.

Ms Hepper: No, I do not disagree with you. That is just one of the issues; there are lots of other issues on the servicing of the site, what would be the best way to do it to the advantage of all the schools and what model would suit best.

Mr Lunn: I will just read a wee bit from the Committee Clerk's covering note about Lisanelly. Do not worry, Peter, it is all common knowledge. The note says:

"The 6 participating schools will maintain their separate ethos and a core set of facilities while sharing other infrastructure and the delivery of some teaching. The sharing will be restricted to certain subjects at Key Stages 4 and 5 only and the related infrastructure".

Then it mentions a school of performance and arts, and a school of home economics and other activities. It goes on to say:

"There would be no sharing at Key Stage 3 — this would remain within each core school."

That is a terrifically ambitious project. You are quite right; it is without precedent, but there are plenty of precedents across the country where sharing has been in place for quite some time. I am trying to make these comments without using the word "integrated", so forgive me; it is always very difficult. Does the Department have any data garnered over the last number of years, or does it intend to monitor progress through societal benefits as Lisanelly develops?

Ms Hepper: The very fact that we are setting up what we call the wider community stakeholder group is so that we can start to garner the wider community, societal and economic benefits. There will be significant benefits, potentially, from the physical construction of the site. There will be a knock-on effect on employment. We want to see benefits not only from the educational models but in how we can integrate with further education. So, as time moves on, Mr Lunn, we will gather that information as part of the individual project.

Sitting alongside that, however — this is something that we will stray into, if that is appropriate — is the delivery of another Programme for Government target on shared education. That also falls under my remit on the 10 shared campuses. So, there are going to be lessons that we learn as we push forward with the 10 shared campuses, or whatever number we get. We will learn from our colleagues that are working on Lisanelly, and likewise they will learn from these other projects. They may be smaller and slightly different, but some of the issues will be similar. I see all this starting to come together in the Department quite neatly.

In the context of the sharing that will be done at Lisanelly, there is no doubt that, in being brought together into working parties, those schools are working very closely together. As time moves on, they are coming up with suggestions and pushing the boundaries further from where they were even six months ago with sharing.

My personal view of the whole initiative, whether it is Lisanelly or the 10 shared campuses, is that an awful lot of it will grow organically. Schools will be doing things automatically in one, two and three years' time that they would not have thought of in the past, and they will become more comfortable with it. I think that that is something that we would welcome, and, as time moves on, we will see what sort of metrics we can sensibly put around it. I know that Faustina Graham, in her new directorate, will have a locus on some of this, and we will be engaging with her very closely.

Mr Lunn: Thanks for that. I hope that you are right, because if there are not to be societal benefits and the long-term aspiration of having our children growing together rather than apart, bringing six schools together seems like quite an over-the-top project when they were probably capable of stand-alone existence. You can correct me if I am wrong, but I do not think that any of them were under the threat of closure. Even if they were, this will not change the situation; it will just move them all on to the one site. I am sure that the various schools and the authorities down there will work at this; it does not make sense otherwise.

Mr Sweeney: It is a flagship project for the Executive. The transformation of the former military site into a flagship facility would yield societal benefits. So, that is unashamedly the vision for the project.

Ms Hepper: I mentioned the principals coming together, and we have put in one of our own educationalists to work closely with them. The other key element is the overall educational benefits. Schools on the site are going to come together to share classes and to share their expertise.

Mr Lunn: That is what sharing is. That was the original reason for it: economy of scale and being able to deliver the full curriculum. I have no problem with that whatsoever.

Are we talking about the ministerial group as well?

The Chairperson: Yes, go ahead, Trevor, and ask about it.

Mr Lunn: After the ministerial advisory group reported in October last year —

The Chairperson: Is this on shared education?

Mr Lunn: Yes. After that report, the Minister indicated various things that he wanted to do. The first was to bring forward a statutory definition of shared education. Was that ever progressed?

Mr Sweeney: Yes, the commitment remains. The Minister has agreed to bring forward legislation to define shared education, and he has undertaken to brief the Committee in advance. I will say at this stage that, in the Department, how we discharge our duties is evolving in Irish-medium education and the development of the integrated sector. In that regard, I thought that the Drumragh judicial review was quite significant. The Minister remains committed to bringing forward that legislation, but there is no specific time frame at this stage for doing so.

Mr Lunn: I am just picking points that the Minister made. He wanted to include support for sharing and teachers' professional development packages. I might be showing my ignorance here, but what would be the skills or performance development that a teacher would need because they happened to be teaching in a shared environment rather than in a single-school environment?

Mr Sweeney: I am not too sure that I can go into detail on that today. Obviously, DEL is looking quite structurally at the whole area of initial teacher education, specifically the role of Stranmillis and St Mary's, and at the scope, as you say, for greater sharing at every level in education. In continuous professional development, teachers from all sectors come together under various opportunities but specifically under training in shared education —

Mr Lunn: That is what the Minister said; I am just curious. Another thing that he said was that he intended to bring forward guidelines on the development of area plans to ensure that shared education was encouraged. You mentioned the Drumragh judgement — I cannot get through a meeting without mentioning the Drumragh judgement.

Mr Sweeney: I thought I would mention it first.

Mr Lunn: According to the Drumragh judgement, or to the judge's opinion at least, the area plans just cannot be based on the needs model any more in complete ignorance of the demand for integrated education. How does that fit with the Minister's stated ambition to develop area plans to ensure that shared education is encouraged?

Mr Sweeney: I think that, importantly, the Minister has been good to his word, in that there has been active engagement between the Department, the Catholic trustees and the transferors on specific guidance in shared education on the area planning process. It is true to say that those negotiations have been mature and challenging. A number of legal issues emerged, and we are bottoming those out. Subject to those legal issues being bottomed out, we would then be in a position to conclude those negotiations and to bring advice to the Minister, specifically about factoring in guidance on area planning related to sharing. So, that work is very actively ongoing.

Mr Lunn: He intends to allow schools to change their ethos by adopting new management schemes, as provided for in the Education Bill — I presume that he means the ESA Bill. On this question of allowing schools to change their ethos, is he talking about transformation? The only one that I can think of at the moment is transformation into integrated status. Is that what he means?

Mr Sweeney: Obviously, the Minister will be bringing a paper to the Executive setting out a draft Bill. As he mentioned yesterday to the media, that would be a minimalist Bill, so it will not have anything like the all-encompassing functions that were anticipated under the Education Bill, which this Committee heard at Committee Stage up until April last year.

The way forward for a school that wished to change its ethos or transform would be within the development proposal statutory process. So, if a school wished to change its ethos, that would be a significant step, and the process would be to sponsor it through the respective education and library board and to take it through a development proposal process.

Mr Lunn: When I read that, I was thinking, "What is the Minister at here?" We have talked about ethos, Chairman, and it is quite a nebulous kind of thing except, perhaps, in the maintained sector,

where you can see that there is a clear Catholic ethos, and rightly so. I do not get this about changing their ethos. It is the kind of thing that Ministers say, and they can say it in a speech, but when you come down to the nitty-gritty, you may have trouble defining what he actually means in legislation or whatever it comes to.

Mr Sweeney: There is one ongoing issue, however. One should not delve into one particular example, but the media is covering a particular case at the moment that is going through a development proposal process where its intention would be to change from one sector to another.

Mr Lunn: Yes, that is a transformation. I do not see transformation. My understanding of that is that it is the same as a change of ethos. I do not know how you would change. If a school has been in existence for a long time, how does it just suddenly change its ethos? I know the school that you are talking about. I do not want to get into that, but it is a strange one.

I think I am done with that. I am fine, Chair, thanks.

The Chairperson: Chris, do you want to ask your question now? I know that it is not the same subject.

Mr Hazzard: There are two separate issues. First, we have seen the Department do continual work on the removal of barriers in qualifications to those kids going South to study at universities in Dublin. Do we hope to see that continuing and finally, once and for all, eradicating any difficulties? Is it possible to eradicate any and all difficulties that there are for our pupils who want to go to UCD, Trinity or anywhere else?

Mr Sweeney: Progress has been made on that. At the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) educational sector meeting, both Ministers are regularly engaged on that issue. There is an interdependency, because the universities have a great deal of autonomy, but, as a result of the work that has been done at that level, there has been progress. In particular, I pay tribute to the work that Trinity has been doing to reach out so that it can proactively encourage young people from Northern Ireland to apply. So, that work is ongoing. David, is there anything that you want to add?

Dr Hughes: No, I think that you made the point. The critical decisions are those that the universities are making, but I think that, where movement has begun, the value of having made that movement should then be more evident to partner universities.

Mr Hazzard: No problem, thanks.

The other question was about the aims of Peace IV in and around education and how that can be a benefit to us. We are looking at a lot of money being spent in the future. To what extent is the Department engaging with Europe on Peace IV?

Mr Sweeney: On that and on shared education, the Committee got a high-level briefing on Peace IV. Of course, nothing is agreed yet. The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) is out for consultation at the moment. I am not at all being presumptuous here, but obviously the Department has been proactive. One of the areas that the SEUPB is consulting on is the idea of putting a very significant injection of funding into shared education. A figure of €45 million is being talked about. That is over a period of a number of years. Consider that and the work that the Department has been doing with OFMDFM and a charitable organisation on a signature project on shared education, for which the envelope of money that is being talked about is to be in the region of £25 million. If those two funding injections and programme designs were to come about, that would be a real step change in giving momentum to shared education.

The Chairperson: On that point, I have met the SEUPB, and I think that it is very focused and has been very exercised about the whole issue of how it can underpin the four pillars, one of which is young people in education. I think that we are moving towards a good place with that, and I hope that that will be a good-news story.

Trevor, did you want to come in again?

Mr Lunn: Yes. I am not asking you to comment on matters that are under discussion or sub judice or whatever at the moment, but, as we all know, Drumragh was refused permission to take a place on

the Lisanelly site. It has also been refused permission, as it stands at the moment, to expand its own facility. The Minister has retaken the decision, whatever that means, and we look forward to the eventual conclusion of all that. In the meantime, I take it that the facility for sharing education in Omagh would also include Drumragh as necessary.

Mr Sweeney: Yes, the Drumragh issue continues. The Minister has tasked me, as the senior official in the Department, to keep the duty of encouraging and facilitating the development of both integrated and Irish-medium education constantly under review. We have had engagements in the Department and with legal advice about how we can enhance or approach those duties. Coming out of the Drumragh judgement, for example, Justice Treacy was clear about reminding the Department of the importance of factoring in the duty at the strategic level. Here, strategic level means area-based planning, particularly. Hence, we are now working on guidelines in that regard. I do not want to be smart-alecky about Drumragh. A number of years ago when Drumragh was getting a newbuild, the conundrum was that, at that stage, Lisanelly was being conceptualised. One option would have been to have held back on the newbuild pending Lisanelly becoming more concrete in the future. Rightly, at the time, presumably, the school took the view that it must proceed with the newbuild. The difficulty now is that we have got that sunk cost in a first-class facility.

Mr Lunn: I have heard that argument before. I did not intend to get into this, Chairman, but Drumragh was put into a position where the school was falling apart and its only option was to accept the newbuild, which it did reluctantly.

Regarding Lisanelly, you are currently vacating five other schools and are going to sell them on whatever basis. There may be some clawback to the original owners, or whatever, but there is going to be that number of empty school buildings to dispose of. If Drumragh had been brought on to the Lisanelly site, it would have meant just one more building — a very good building, which, perhaps, could have been used in some other way within the education system.

One of the excuses I heard for not allowing Drumragh to go on to the site was the fact that half of the site is on a flood plain and that there was not room for it. I find that astounding. It is a huge site. It is not as if you could not have gone vertically rather than horizontally to make room. Here you have the classic example of where sharing is supposed to lead but where access is being denied to this sparkling facility in the middle of Omagh.

Ms Hepper: You are right. The site is the size that it is. It has been carefully designed and scoped to allow six schools to be fitted on to it, and the facilities that they need round it. I think that it would not have been physically possible to put another school on, as you say, without going upwards, and there were various design issues around that. One of the other issues is that not being on the site does not mean that there cannot be sharing through the area learning communities or through other arrangements which, over time, can grow.

Mr Lunn: That was my original question. I take it that there will be no impediment to Drumragh sharing its facilities in the same way as all the other schools.

Ms Hepper: Those are discussions that should be open and fully aired around the table to see how sharing in any area, not just Omagh, can be accommodated. The first steps, and David knows more about it than I do, are around the area learning communities. As I mentioned before, I think that we will start to see more of this with the other projects, albeit on a much smaller scale, that have come out as a result of the call for the 10 campuses, as we move forward. As you rightly said, even without the banner of that, sharing has been going on for some time in different ways, and it is about how that can be encouraged to grow over time.

Mr Lunn: Fair enough. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson: Fiona, I appreciate what you say in relation to the Lisanelly site, but the Department also owns the St Lucia site, which was gifted to it by the Ministry of Defence.

Ms Hepper: I think the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister owns that site.

The Chairperson: No, not according to your publication, which is your resource accounts. It states:

"Land comprises former military sites in Omagh (known as Lisanelly and St. Lucia), which were transferred from the Ministry of Defence to the Department of Education on 15 April 2011. This land was 'gifted' under the Hillsborough Agreement 2010, made 5 February 2010."

Ms Hepper: As far as I am aware, the element of the full site that has been gifted to the Department is being utilised in the planning for the six schools.

The Chairperson: Maybe you could clarify that, because it is in your resource accounts.

Ms Hepper: I do know that there is another listed building, which I knew as St Lucia, at the edge of the site. That is not the Department's, as far as I know.

The Chairperson: That is, according to the resource accounts. Maybe, Paul, you can cast some light on it.

Ms Hepper: We will check that through.

Mr Sweeney: We will check it through. It is the term: "formerly known as Lisanelly and St Lucia".

The Chairperson: No, it states:

"Land comprises former military sites in Omagh (known as Lisanelly and St. Lucia), which were transferred from the Ministry of Defence to the Department of Education on 15 April 2011."

Mr Sweeney: "Formerly known as". Certainly, OFMDFM has ownership.

The Chairperson: OFMDFM is not mentioned in this document. It is the Department that is mentioned.

Mr Lunn: Chairman, you keep it going. You are going rightly here.

Ms Hepper: I think that we are right in saying that the full site as scoped is being used for the design of the schools.

The Chairperson: Can you just clarify the point about St Lucia? Let me ask you straight out, Paul: has the Minister retaken the decision in relation to Drumragh?

Ms Hepper: No, he has not. The process is under way.

The Chairperson: Finally, in relation to transformation, were there development proposals for the post-primary school, not the primary, that we were all talking about that transformed or changed its management type?

Ms Hepper: Which one are you talking about?

The Chairperson: Bloomfield.

Ms Hepper: No, Bloomfield transferred under article 17 of the Education Order.

The Chairperson: So, it is possible to change a management type without the requirement for a development proposal.

Ms Hepper: In that specific case, it was because it was in financial difficulties etc.

The Chairperson: That article of the Education Order allows that, and it met that particular criteria.

Ms Hepper: Indeed.

The Chairperson: I know that Trevor Connolly, not Trevor Lunn, is dying to get in, so I would not want to disappoint him if he left. If members are happy, we will move on to the savings delivery plan rather than deal with the business plan. If members are happy, and if, Paul, you are happy on the business plan, we will forward to the Department any questions that we have on the entitlement framework, anti-bullying, Irish medium, the workforce review and others. I am conscious that the Committee has to be out of here for the Health Committee and I would not want to have the wrath of the Chair of the Health Committee.

There are many things in the savings delivery plan. Do you want to make any comment on the overall issues relating to the savings delivery plan? I suppose that impacts on the plans, PEDU, GTC, teacher substitution costs and where we are currently in relation to finance, which seems to be exercising most Departments at this time.

Mr Sweeney: Chair, if you can bear with me, it will be helpful to set the savings delivery plan in a little bit of context.

Going back to when the Budget was set for 2011-15, it was generally recognised at the time that the Department had received a particularly challenging settlement. Indeed, if you compare the first year of the Budget period, 2011-12, to the previous baseline year of 2010-11, you will see that we were looking at a situation whereby, in real terms, there would be a reduction of about £255 million in the education budget over the period to 2015. At that time, given the gravity of the situation, we crunched the numbers and sent a letter to every school setting out the impact on the aggregated schools budget. That gave rise to a great deal of constituency effort on the part of elected representatives, which culminated with a meeting involving our Minister, the Finance Minister, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister that injected £120 million into education, such was the gravity of the situation. That process kicked off late in 2011, and, in January 2012, £120 million of additional money was injected into education in recognition of the sheer gravity of the situation. That took some pressure off the Department but still left us with the requirement to live within our budget. To do that, we brought forward the savings delivery plan. I am happy to go into detail, but I have some final high-level comments.

The savings delivery plan over that period, 2011-15, is predicated on us achieving savings of £206 million. Of course, that was from a cold start, if you like, in the first year. So, in the first year and in the second year of the last two years, we have achieved £136 million of that target, which is about £10 million shy of where we wish to be.

The target for the year, the compound target, is to move towards total savings of approximately £175 million; and then the following year the total savings would be £206 million. I do not want to be pitting one Department against another, but, if you like, November 2011, and then the decision to inject £120 million into education was our crisis moment, when it was recognised that the Department's budget was dramatically short of what was required, and, if the full effect of the anticipated budget were brought to bear, schools in particular would be in a very dire situation. So with the combination of that £120 million at the time and us achieving, by the end of the budget period, the £206 million saving delivery plan — all things being equal, unless there is some significant material change between now and then — we will live within the budget, broadly speaking.

The Chairperson: Not that we would ever accuse the Department of fiddling, but look at the figures. You know, Paul, that there has been an ongoing issue in this Committee about the Department not producing the savings delivery plan for us. Despite what the Minister said, in his letter of 3 September which you kindly wrote for him:

"I have published the necessary plans and ensured that the Education Committee has been updated on the outcome of this annually."

That is not the case. We are still awaiting information in relation to the action plan for PEDU, which we have not seen, and the savings delivery plan for 2012-13. We have not seen that. When we look at the Department's website of 2013-14 and 2014-15, the savings delivery target was revised again in 2012 and the figure is now — and, Trevor, you can keep me right here — £175.5 million, not £198 million. The 2014-15 figure is now £206 million, not £215 million. The Committee Clerk has checked this and we are not aware that, at any stage, we were informed that that was the case. We could get into an argument about what we know and what we do not know but, at this minute in time and in general terms, what is the current financial position of the Department?

Mr Sweeney: Trevor will come in in a moment but, Chair, can I just clarify something? We forwarded the 2012-13 savings delivery plan achievement report to the Committee. You actually have received that.

The Chairperson: Yes, you did. What I said was about 2013-14.

Mr Trevor Connolly (Department of Education): On 24 April 2013, we wrote to the Committee Clerk with a revised budget distribution table and the revised savings delivery plan (SDP), which is exactly as you have quoted. So, I would go back and say that every single time the Minister changed the SDP — certainly, since September 2011 when I came into post — we have given the Committee the budget distribution table and the revised SDP. That is there; the communication is there. Clearly, it is on our website. The last time it was changed was in April 2013, and the Minister wrote to you to say, "Here are the allocations", and then, approximately a couple of weeks later, we wrote with the detail of the distribution table. Actually, the last time I was in front of the Committee, we had a discussion about some of the numbers that were on that. The SDP has been communicated to the Committee each time it has been updated by the Minister.

The Committee Clerk: Just for members' information. Chair, it is absolutely right. I have information in April 2013 indicating, for example, that the 2013-14 figure was £198 million and that the 2014-15 figure would be £215 million, but when I checked the website the number for 2013-14 is now £175 million and for 2014-15 it is £206 million.

The Chairperson: So what is the actual figure?

Mr Connolly: The letter that we wrote on 24 April to the Committee Clerk had the revised budget distribution table and the updated savings delivery plan. The £175.5 million and the £206.1 million were included in what was issued to the Committee on 24 April.

The Chairperson: So, those figures are right and the website is not right. So, the website is wrong.

The Committee Clerk: I think, Chair, that Trevor is saying that the Committee Clerk is wrong. Let me come back to the Committee again. I was pretty sure that the April 2013 correspondence said £198 million and £215 million and did not give the figures that are on the website, which is £175 million and £206 million.

Mr Connolly: I have a copy of the letter here from 24 April 2013, and we are happy to recirculate that.

The Chairperson: OK; thank you.

Before I ask the Deputy Chair to take over, because I have to go out for a minute, where are we at with the resource allocation plans for the ELBs? Have they all signed off? If they have signed off, have they qualified signing off by expressing concern about their budget allocation or having adequate resources to be able to meet the demands?

Mr Sweeney: Fiona is going to update you on that specifically. Again, I have a context point. The key issue here was the context within which the June monitoring round was being progressed. Obviously, we needed to have certainty around that before we could finalise the resource allocation plan (RAP) process. The Finance Minister made that statement on 31 July, so that then gave us certainty around the budget. That is the context within which we have been engaging with the boards on their RAPs, but Fiona will bring you up to date on that process.

Ms Hepper: We have signed off the RAPs for four out of the five boards, and one will be completed this week. It has to go back to the particular board in question. Of course, boards have pressures, and we have been actively working in partnership with each of them to review those pressures, bear down on them and to see what further efficiencies can be squeezed out of it. However, it is very much a work in progress. Four out of the five boards have signed off their RAPs and are working within their budget allocation, and there is one more to be done this week. We will continue to work collaboratively with them to see where efficiencies can be maximised and pressures reduced. It is ongoing. There is no question that this year's budget settlement is tight, but I think that we have got to the point where we have allocated out, as best we can, all the money we have, and the boards are working actively with us.

The Chairperson: Obviously, in a normal set of circumstances, that process should be signed off at the end of March.

Ms Hepper: You would normally be working to try to get it signed off as quickly as possible at the start of the financial year.

The Chairperson: Why do we have the situation where there has been either a standoff or ongoing discussions since then until now? Here we are in September, and the education and library boards —

Mr Sweeney: Chair, it is for the reasons I have stated. I do not want you to feel that we waited until 31 July —

The Chairperson: No, no —

Mr Sweeney: — for the Finance Minister's statement. We actively engaged with the boards from at least the start of this calendar year. We engaged at the most senior level in the boards to say that there was turbulence ahead, uncertainty around the budget processes and that there were contingency plans that needed to be put in place. That was an iterative process that culminated with a really important meeting that I chaired on 20 May, where I brought the chief executives again — as far as I could — completely up to date about where I believed the whole budget dynamic lay.

Although it is highly unsatisfactory from a board's point of view, the reality is that we were dealing in a context where there was uncertainty around the finalisation of the budget, and we had, if you like, to deal with that reality. When the June monitoring round situation was resolved by the statement from the Finance Minister, we were very intensively engaged in getting those RAPs advanced. It would not have been possible to have finalised the RAPs in advance of that. That is the reality. If I were a board member — I always try to see life from the other person's point of view — I would be extremely frustrated by that, because I am a board member and I am tasked with delivering key functions and there is uncertainty around the budget. Give or take a £300 million budget, there is uncertainty around at least several million pounds. That can often make the difference, but there was no way in which we were in a position to do anything other than keep the boards as informed as we possibly could and then, when we were in a position to bring certainty, to finalise the RAPs. Four of the five have now largely been done.

Ms Hepper: Of course, they did have, at various stages, their interim approvals to keep spending. So, it is not as if anybody was left dangling.

The Chairperson: Related to that, albeit going back to another financial year; what are the implications in relation to the £6.3 million irregular expenditure that was reported on the resource, which is all based on the perceived drawdown and how much it will be? That gets into a technical area, but an issue is highlighted in the resource account around the £6 million. Has it had any impact on the current position in relation to the RAPs? That is what I want to try to get my head around.

Mr Connolly: The simple answer is no, Chair. The qualification relates to 2013-14. It did not impact on either the resource or capital budgets that we report to DFP. So, the provisional out-turn figures that the Finance Minister had for us on both resource and capital were completely unaffected. That was to do with the element of cash that we drew down in total. The overall total was not breached. It is itemised in our resource accounts under 13 subheadings. One of those was overspent by £6.3 million against an overall total of £2.1 billion. We did not breach the overall total. It is a technical qualification. It is an important issue for us. We fully appreciate that we need to do better in cash forecasting, but it does not have any impact on our budget allocations for 2014-15. It is different to other Departments who overspent their budgets; this is to do with the cash that is voted to us by the Assembly and the individual analysis.

The Chairperson: Paul, is that related to the ministerial direction that was not formalised? Did it follow on from the same thing?

Mr Sweeney: No, it is entirely different, Chair. It is entirely separate.

The Chairperson: Maybe you could tell us about that. Has that now been formalised?

Mr Sweeney: No, it has not.

The Chairperson: Is there a dispute between the boards and yourselves in relation to that?

Mr Sweeney: Not at all.

The Chairperson: So that we are clear in our own minds; there was a ministerial direction but it has not been formalised. Is it normal practice that a ministerial direction is formalised and signed off?

Mr Sweeney: It is. Once an accounting officer gets a direction from a Minister, the accounting officer should then seek the formal approval of DFP. When I got the direction from the Minister, I engaged with my DFP senior colleagues around the rationale for the direction; and after I had the opportunity to listen to their perspective and perhaps with a little bit of detachment on their part, I had reason to then take the view to not formalise the direction.

The Chairperson: So, where does that leave DFP in relation to that matter? Does it still have a concern then?

Mr Sweeney: It does not have a role.

The Chairperson: So, the Department has taken a decision —

Mr Sweeney: I have, personally.

The Chairperson: So, as chief accounting officer for the Department, you have taken a decision on the basis of a ministerial direction. Just so that we are clear, what was the ministerial direction?

Mr Sweeney: The ministerial direction was related to an Irish-medium post-primary school, Coláiste Feirste, and it cascaded from a judicial review that the college took in 2011. I could go into nth detail but suffice to say that, as accounting officer, I engage with the Minister around a range of issues. The Minister and I were entirely comfortable that there was no issue with probity, irregularity or value for money. The issue was a proportionate response to the judicial review and required putting a package of assistance in place for pupils travelling from Downpatrick and Crumlin. That package was approximately just south of £80,000. I had some concerns that it could be potentially repercussive, and such is the maturity in checks and balances in our system that I rightly sought a ministerial direction and received that from the Minister. The Minister was entirely happy for me to then deal with that through whatever process. I engaged with DFP and, as I said earlier, after that engagement, it caused me to reflect further on my personal role in seeking the ministerial direction. I did not subsequently formalise the ministerial direction because I was able to have the benefit of hindsight.

Mr Kinahan: I have no questions.

The Chairperson: Excuse us while we change over the top table.

(The Deputy Chairperson [Mr Kinahan] in the Chair)

The Deputy Chairperson: Apologies for chopping and changing. Do you have anything more to say on savings and delivery plans? Do members have any more questions?

Mr Sweeney: If I could just make a point: the budget in education remains enormously challenging. To give you a picture; all the members have, presumably, been approached by the boards to say just how financially challenging they find the situation. I believe, and the Minister alluded to this yesterday, that the boards have been depleted over a number of years as we were preparing for ESA. The Minister, in his approach to the savings delivery plan, has rightly sought to prioritise front line services and, as a result of that, we have had to squeeze the administrative centre.

To give you an image from an accounting officer's point of view, I think that we have probably reached the limit of pressing down on administrative costs in the system. If there were to be any further detriment to the DE budget, I believe, although it will ultimately be for the Minister to decide, that it is inevitable that we will be looking again at a situation where the schools and the aggregated schools budget would come under very considerable pressure. Is it not ironic that we had our moment in November 2011, when the First Minister, deputy First Minister, Finance Minister and Education Minister were able to inject £120 million directly in to schools because of the gravity of the situation? It

would be my hope that we would not have to revisit that because the impact of taking money directly from schools would be very grave.

The Deputy Chairperson: You hinted about not knowing what is going to happen about ESA or about that having a major effect, even given the future of the present single education board that is coming through; where does that take us? If that is not put in place, we will then have to have more funding to the boards for Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS) and others to keep them working so that they can deliver their front line services. Do you have a plan if this single education body idea does not go through?

Mr Sweeney: The Minister and senior officials engage intensely around these matters. Indeed, as soon as we leave this meeting today, we will have a meeting with the Minister. To be faithful to the Minister's position, his entire focus now is to build on the agreement reached at the Executive yesterday. His focus will be to bring a paper to the Executive at the earliest opportunity setting out a draft Bill — what he calls a minimalist Bill — that will conflate the five boards into one. The presumption then would be that, given the logic of the agreement reached yesterday and given the situation that we find ourselves in with the education and library boards, that minimalist Bill could be progressed by accelerated passage so that we could bring certainty to the education administration as soon as we possibly can. However, that is up to the will of the Assembly. Our absolute immediate focus is to support the Minister in bringing a paper to the Executive that will set out the draft Bill and then progress that through the Assembly.

Mr Kinahan: We look forward to seeing the detail of that.

You mentioned ICT in schools. Last week, two or three schools came to me saying that, due to the cutbacks on the front line, they were either getting reworked computers or computers that were not fitting and were not working to the system. I got the feeling that that was happening Province-wide. Are you aware of that problem? Does that mean that we have cut too much in computers and that we should be looking at that again?

Mr Connolly: To put this into context, we put in bids for £50 million to the June monitoring and we got £5 million. The pressures are still there. The SEN, maintenance, severance funding and so on are what we describe as inescapable pressures. There is a list of other high-priority pressures that follow, but our difficulty, as Paul has articulated, is that when you have over £40 million of inescapable pressures, it is probably highly unlikely that we will have any further increase in funding during the year. We have to live within that, although, realistically, we are protected in addressing those.

In June, we set out clearly the level of pressures that we had to address. We recognise that there are other high-priority pressures that have not got on to that list, one of which would be ICT costs, but it is simply a process of prioritisation for us to live within our overall budget.

Dr Hughes: I am interested, if there are issues arising around the ICT in schools, that hopefully they are being reported back to C2k and are being dealt with on a technical basis. I am aware that the roll-out of the C2k contract has meant a lot of work being done over the summer to ensure that equipment is there. It is not a reflection of a reduction in resourcing, but I know that there has been a technical transformation process that schools will be working through.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you. If there is nothing else, Paul, Fiona, Trevor, Gary?

Mr Fair: If I can just pick up on a process point: I think that a question was asked about the 2013-14 savings delivery plan. A verification process is ongoing on at the moment, so the Committee will be advised in due course when that information is available.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you. Thanks for being open to all the questions in a very lengthy session.

Mr Sweeney: Thank you, members.