



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Primary School Area Planning: Education
and Library Boards and the Council for
Catholic Maintained Schools

8 October 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Nelson McCausland
Ms Maeve McLaughlin
Mr Robin Newton
Mrs Sandra Overend
Mr Seán Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Mr Malachy Crudden	Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
Mr Ray Gilbert	North Eastern Education and Library Board
Mr Gregory Butler	South Eastern Education and Library Board
Mr Mike Donaghy	Southern Education and Library Board
Mrs Rosemary Watterson	Western Education and Library Board

The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen): I would just like to welcome the officials. We have Malachy Crudden, who is a senior education adviser at Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), Gregory Butler, chief executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB), Ray Gilbert, senior education officer at the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB), Rosemary Watterson, chief administrative officer at the Western Education and Library Board (WELB), and Mike Donaghy, head of development, planning and sports services at the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB). Unfortunately, the representative from the Belfast Board was unable to attend due to a family bereavement, and unfortunately he did not nominate anyone in his place. I welcome you all to the Committee and ask you to make an opening statement, which members will follow up with some questions.

Mr Ray Gilbert (North Eastern Education & Library Board): Thank you very much, Chair, for the opportunity to come forward. I will make an opening statement on behalf of the five boards and CCMS, and at that point I will be happy to take members' questions.

First, we welcome the concept of area planning, but, since their inception, the statutory duty of boards to ensure that there are sufficient places of suitable character within an area — obviously, working in partnership with our colleagues in CCMS and other bodies — has been an ongoing piece of work.

Our responsibility is to make provision, but we certainly welcome the opportunity that area planning has brought to perhaps be a bit more strategic and together on that as we move forward.

In my opening statement there are a number of areas that I would like to draw attention to, looking at the educational case for area-based planning, because it is very important that we recognise that the whole process is about providing for young people's education. I will talk a little bit about the process that we have used in area-based planning as a group; perhaps make some comments about the distinctiveness of the primary sector, given that our focus today is on the primary area plans; setting all of that in the context of the Programme for Government and policy, which is very important; and stressing the regional and cross-sectoral approach that has been taken to area-based planning.

Moving into the context for area-based planning, we recognise, first of all, that it is planning for a purpose. That purpose is to deliver on key policies — we link into things like the Northern Ireland children's plan and the overall objectives within education to raise standards and remove barriers to learning — and to enable children and young people to have access to their curricular entitlement and to the wider experiences that school brings, because, while we recognise the absolute importance of the formal curriculum, as we all know, an awful lot of what children learn in school is learned in a whole lot of other ways through the informal experiences and schools' ability to provide for that.

We recognise that it is also around making efficient use of resources at a time when resources are under great pressure. We also recognise that one of the significant issues is that of unfilled places, particularly in respect of the primary sector. We recognise that that is a challenging area and one that is under review. We also recognise that, as the primary curriculum has developed, the needs of schools in respect of space have changed quite dramatically, for example, in the foundation stage, where the method of teaching is very different now from what it was a number of years ago. We see that the planning process, which is looking ahead to make sure that there is appropriate provision, will also guide strategic decisions about the use of very scarce resources.

We also recognise that, while the device that we were using to predict the future is built around the needs model — and we recognise that there are a number of issues around that — we do look at population figures, birth rates and so on. We are very mindful in predicting future trends that once you go beyond a number of years in the primary sector you are talking about children who have not yet been born, and you have to take that into account. It is an ongoing, iterative process.

The purpose of area-based planning, which is detailed within the documentation, is about trying to ensure that the needs of young people and communities are met in order to achieve policy objectives. It is around planning future provision. Our experience is that one of the most difficult jobs is where there is a significant decline and a school comes under stress. What we are trying to do, as is stated in the area-planning document, is to provide a network of sustainable schools to avoid the awful experience that sometimes happens when a school, because of demographic downturn or whatever, declines quite rapidly and is very challenged to provide for the young people.

It also looks at innovative solutions and cross-sectoral solutions. We are very aware of the current objectives and the Programme for Government target on shared education and are trying to take all of that on board where relevant. Some colleagues cover areas touching the border and there are potential cross-border issues as well.

As members will be aware, one of the first parts of the area-planning process was what was then called the viability audit, which we know caused significant issues. I am pleased to say that we now talk about an annual profile of schools. The information that that annual profile brings is very useful in informing planning and making sure that it is an ongoing and iterative process.

The other thing that we want to stress in the process is that it is about working with schools. In the lead-in to the process of reaching the area plan for the primary sector there was a significant amount of consultation with schools. There were opportunities for schools to make submissions to try to influence how area planning went forward. I know that, in my own area, there were schools that met together and made joint submissions. I know that that has been replicated in other places.

I suppose, in some sense, one could get the impression from some of the media coverage and so on that it is something that has happened with a number of people sitting in darkened rooms around the Province. I just want to reassure members that there has been a tremendous amount of interaction with schools and between the various authorities as we have moved forward. Obviously, as part of that, when the draft area plan came forward it was put out to public consultation and, prior to the

formulation of the area plans that are currently in place, there was a significant public consultation and analysis in respect of that matter.

In moving forward with any proposal we also recognise that, in accordance with the legislation, if there is any proposal for change of any sort, that is very clearly subject to direct consultation, initially with parents, governors and staff. Should the managing authority be minded to bring forward a development proposal, there will be a two-month period of public consultation. It is important that that interaction takes place with the local community.

Partnership is a feature of all of that. Certainly, one of the great benefits that has come through from area planning is the fact that the five education and library boards, as the area-planning authorities, are working very closely with colleagues in CCMS and interacting with colleagues in other stakeholder groups, such as the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta etc. That has been formalised in a sense, so that is another tremendous benefit.

It is important that we recognise the distinctive features of the primary sector. The age group of the children involved is a very significant issue, because you are planning for provision for children as young as four. Their portability and travel ability is, obviously, very different from a 13-year-old or a 14-year-old. It is thinking about that, recognising, as we do, the core place of primary schools in communities across our Province, the links with communities, making sure that due attention is paid to those factors and recognising that there is a huge rural aspect to what we do in most of the education and library boards. Once you move outside the city of Belfast, all of the boards have a significant proportion of rural schools. We recognise the importance of a primary school in a rural community.

We also acknowledge that when you analyse the profile of schools in the primary sector, you will find that it is significantly around the issue of unfilled places and the use of resources. We recognise that, by and large, the primary schools across Northern Ireland are managing their budgets very effectively, and we recognise that they are doing very well academically, despite the challenges of getting detailed information around the levels of progression, and so on. When we look at international comparators, we see a very good performing primary sector.

There is a very local dimension to schools in the primary sector, and we recognise the opportunities for shared education. Very often, that is something that grows from the community and comes from a bottom-up model. We have many examples of initiatives and projects from which there has been a growing relationship between schools and which has led to a desire to move forward in a shared way. We recognise that small rural villages, particularly, have schools of different types, but, perhaps because of the demographic downturn, are struggling. By working together there is the potential to take quality education forward.

We have a regional approach to future planning. We work together as five boards and CCMS and link with our colleagues in other areas. That is reflected in the nature of the plans. Obviously, members will have observed the terms of the statements that are made in the plans. They are common statements around four categories of statement. There are schools which are, quite clearly, sustainable and viable moving forward. The statement that would attune to those schools in the plan is "No action required at this time". There are other schools in which, perhaps, issues are emerging. Perhaps, there is a trend of enrolment change or some other issue. Those schools will be in the category of schools that will be kept under review on an annual basis.

We also have a category that is common to all of our plans around exploring a range of options. That includes options that have grown up locally, perhaps around possible federations, confederations, shared education partnerships etc. In the plans, you will see a number of actions around exploring those possibilities.

There are a very small number of schools across the Province where there are very real stresses. I stress that the key point around looking at that is around the ability of a school to make educational provision for the young people. We recognise that a plethora of areas and wider experiences have to be covered in a school. When it comes to a very, very small school, it is very challenging to give that to the young people. Yet, those young people have to move forward in a wider societal sense. It is recognising that, yes, a very small number of primary schools, in the plans, are subject to review, but I stress again that that review process is a process of consultation and engagement with the school and the community in seeking the best way forward for the children's education. Members will be aware of the development planning process that occurs, and, again, I stress that that is a further opportunity for consultation. The Department has recently published new guidelines around the development proposal process.

In conclusion, I want, on behalf of colleagues, to reiterate the centrality of the child. It is really about planning for educational provision rather than some sort of technical or bureaucratic exercise, which we recognise that it sometimes can be portrayed as. We as educationalists are very driven by the fact that we are making provision for children's education and that that has to be the key driving feature. I reassure members that there is a lot going on. You can see that from looking at the plans and at the work that is ongoing. Unfortunately, that is sometimes not publicly seen until the development proposal is published, but colleagues are heavily involved in working with local school communities, with governors, with staff etc around some of these issues, particularly in the category of exploring the way forward. There are some very interesting conversations ongoing around shared education options, confederation options and other ways of making sure that we secure the education for the young people.

I suppose that, as officers of the boards and of CCMS, we recognise that there are certain perceptions out there about area-based planning and that sometimes it is quite difficult to unpack some of those. We welcome the opportunity to share with you today some of the background detail around how the plans came about and the process of taking the plans forward. Again, I stress that we have that particular focus on making provision for young people's education.

The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen): Thank you very much, Ray. Are you in a position to tell us how much this process has cost the boards and CCMS to date?

Mr Gilbert: Obviously, colleagues may wish to add to this. The process has been done within existing resources, and, as members will be aware, those have been diminishing resources. I am not aware of any significant additional costs. The costs will have come from the within the means of the boards and CCMS. Obviously, the main resource towards this will have been a staffing resource. Colleagues may wish to comment.

Mr Mike Donaghy (Southern Education and Library Board): I agree with what Ray said. In the last month, the Department of Education has confirmed additional staff resources specifically for area-based planning.

Mr Malachy Crudden (Council for Catholic Maintained Schools): I agree that the Department has approved additional resources, but it is only approval. Those additional resources have not materialised as yet. Realistically, it is unlikely that they will materialise in the immediate future, which means that, to a large extent, the area-planning process is being delivered, very significantly I believe, with limited resources. I think that what the boards, CCMS and the other employing authorities have achieved in the last year or 18 months is quite significant, given the fact that the resources needed do not match the resources available.

The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen): One of the reasons why I ask that is because the Department made an unsuccessful bid in June monitoring for £1.4 million to assist in the resource for area planning. Obviously, if it is bidding for that, there must have been a need for it. If that need is not being met, it is obviously coming from the boards, and I was concerned that that may then be affecting other services in the boards.

Mr Gregory Butler (South Eastern Education and Library Board): I start with an apology for Nicky McBride, who, unfortunately, had to call off. I am a last-minute substitute and, hopefully, an able substitute.

Over the years, I have made the point several times to the Committee that area planning is not an event. It is part of the ongoing process of how we operate. It does not sit aside from that. It looks at how we plan for education. In the past few years, the biggest thrust has been because of the changing demography, and there is also a greater expectation from parents of what education can provide and the range of services that the boards provide etc. So, the nature of schools has had to change over that period.

While we can deal with the resource for area planning to facilitate the development planning process etc, the actual process of carrying on planning for education is a total one. So, it is not possible to separate out from that. With the boards, it is a slightly different case from CCMS, which has a different delivery function than the boards. In the boards, area planning is part of our totality of services. As such, it restricts how we can progress those if less money is available. If we had more money available, we would be able to spend more time on wider consultation and developing new options.

When you look at shared education and other areas, such as those that Ray referred to, you will see that the schools that are undertaking them require an intense amount of support. It is not simply financial support, but people and time. It is not a part that you can separate off and say, "This is area planning". It is part of our core function, but, without money, we are not able to progress as quickly as we would like to.

The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen): Obviously, Ray has spoken for the group, but will each of you tell me what you have been trying to achieve in your areas and what lessons you have learned to date through the process?

Mrs Rosemary Watterson (Western Education and Library Board): Before area-based planning started, we in the Western Board were already looking at primary schools. We had the controlled schools working group, which we have since strengthened. That has always been looking at primary schools, and, as a result, a substantial amount of work was already done when area-based planning came along in the controlled sector. As a result of that work, we recently closed two schools and amalgamated them into one in the Tyrone area. That is the latest one. We do not have any plans in the present strategic plan to close or rationalise any more primary schools in the Western Board. However, as the plans are reviewed, year on year, it may come up that we need to rationalise further, but, at the moment, we are not planning to do so in the controlled sector.

One of the areas into which we are moving in the Western Board is shared education. Two schools in Brookeborough — the controlled school and the maintained school — are looking at becoming a shared school. We are presently working on that project. It did not get through on the first call for shared proposals, but, obviously, we are hoping that it will get through the next time, with a few minor adjustments. That is the thrust of the work of the Western Board.

Mr Donaghy: The Southern Education and Library Board is very much a rural board. We have 222 primary schools across all sectors, 87 of which are schools with fewer than 105 pupils, which is below the threshold. Our concern, therefore, is for the small rural primary schools and the education of children within those schools.

By and large, the primary schools in the controlled sector do not represent a concern financially, when contrasted with the post-primary sector. They are performing well educationally. Only one of those 222 schools is in formal intervention. The issue of enrolment is one that is heightened and highlighted by the area-planning process. As Ray said earlier, this process is one that puts education first and foremost, and our concern with the very small primary school is the educational experience that the child will receive in that school. We are also concerned about what effect the removal of a small rural primary school will have on a community. That came through very strongly in the public consultation on the board's draft area plan back in 2013. We are very conscious of that.

Rosemary mentioned shared education. In the Southern Board area, we have one of the three approved schemes: St John's Primary School in Moy and Moy Regional Primary School. We have worked closely with colleagues in CCMS on that proposal, and it, perhaps, serves to indicate the wishes of the community, because it has come from the community, not from the board and not from CCMS. The two schools wish to preserve their identity and ethos, but they wish to come together on a single campus. That offers opportunities for efficiency with school buildings and facilities. It could also offer a model for other schools in similar small communities where there is a maintained school and a controlled school, and it is in the interests of the community not to have one of those schools disappear. We are working with colleagues in CCMS and with the schools on that shared education project, and we will be interested to see how it develops. From our point of view, small rural primary schools are the focus in primary area-based planning in the Southern Board.

Mr Gilbert: In the North Eastern Board, in organisational terms, in addition to our liaison with other bodies, we have a strategic management unit, which I chair and which involves a range of disciplines. Traditionally, we have always had a very strong view that provision is an educational issue and not a property issue. Property is there to serve provision for education. As I stressed, the strategic management unit has had ongoing work over a number of years, in common with the other boards.

As for specific work in the primary sector at the moment, we are looking at some eight projects and exploring the opportunity for shared education. As Mike said, it is very much in rural communities, where two schools working together have said that they need to find a way to maintain education in their rural community because of the way in which it serves the community. We have some examples of that. I appeared before the Committee on a previous occasion discussing our project on primary

integrating/enriching education (PIEE). We have a number of very successful projects, where the focus was on the local nature. Rather than sharing with a school that is 25 miles away, and you do not have to meet people every day, it was in villages where people were meeting each other, and there was a focus on governors and parents. There have been tremendous strides, and we have had proposals from schools that want to build on that and take it forward more formally.

In our work programme for this year, one of the interesting features is that, while we have a fairly rural population, unfilled places are a big issue in urban areas. In some big towns in our area, a number of primary schools, technically, in the current calculation, have up to 150 unfilled places. As I stressed, we recognise that curricular demands on primary schools mean that their usage of space is very different. It has grown from the schools, so we are looking at four or five possible opportunities to look at things like federations and working together to maintain a presence, perhaps in a housing estate, even though a school may not be full and be close to other schools that have a similar challenge.

In our work programme for this year, we have only about two significant reviews of the potential future of provision. As I stressed, that is driven by educational issues. As we always say — we are very proud to be able to say it — it is not an issue about the quality of provision that is being made by teachers in the area. It is about the stress on those teachers to meet the whole curriculum. Some very significant work is being taken forward, and further bids to the shared education campus programme might emerge from that.

Mr Butler: When I moved from the Southern Board to the South Eastern Board, there was an interesting switch in the make-up of the schools. In the South Eastern Board, there are fewer rural schools than in the Southern Board area. Also, the South Eastern Board had been involved in area planning since about 2000 and had produced regional plans, so there had been a strong programme of rationalisation in areas like Lisburn. When we came to look at primary schools as opposed to post-primary schools, we had a small number of schools. It was largely about looking at areas and taking in area planning. We had an ongoing problem in Bangor, for example, where there was regular oversubscription in some schools and surplus places in other schools. We took an overview of the total plan in that area, looked at all the schools and decided on a working policy for large towns or cities. In an urban area, we looked at schools that were multiples of seven, so it was one-class entry, two-class entry or three-class entry. We then looked at the total provision and worked towards that, which meant reducing some schools in a parish: we reduced Kilcooley and Clandeboye, for example.

The other big trend in the South Eastern Board, given that it borders Belfast, is its close work with the Belfast Board. We meet bimonthly. The Belfast and South Eastern Boards look at all primary schools along the corridor. Another big issue concerns changes in population. Take Carryduff, for instance. The make-up of Carryduff has changed dramatically over the past number of years, so there has been a big switch and an increase in the integrated and maintained sectors. Millennium Integrated Primary School, for instance, has just been given approval to double its entry. We have different approaches for different areas.

To get back to what Mike said, we need to look at only a very few schools for which we have proposals. One was largely caused by a shift in army battalions and the knock-on effects of that. We are reducing numbers in some schools and increasing numbers in others. In Ards, some schools are looking to increase their numbers, and others are looking to reduce their numbers. It is a similar situation in Lisburn. It is a global package, and we take on board what the schools bring forward.

Mr Crudden: We are in a slightly different position than the boards in that we are responsible for planning the provision of Catholic maintained schools across the North of Ireland. However, it is fair to say that CCMS, since its inception, has always been involved in school rationalisation programmes. Historically, they were about amalgamations, which inevitably involved school closures. The purpose of those amalgamations was to address issues such as building deficiencies and hopefully getting a new school build as a result of the amalgamation and to try to reduce the single-sex provision in the Catholic maintained sector. We have been very successful in doing that.

When area planning came onto the table, we established an area-planning team that comprised five people: two professional officers, and the rest of the team are administrative staff. We took the approach that we would review all our two-teacher schools and revisit those areas in which there have been conversations about rationalisation. We have completed the review of all our two-teacher schools. In the past 18 months, we have been involved in over 50 consultation exercises and have brought forward a variety of proposals to the local communities. We need to dispel the misconception that consultation exercises are merely a rubber-stamping exercise, because there have been occasions on which we have brought a proposal to a local community, received its responses, and, as

a result of that, the proposal has been changed. It is important that communities understand that a consultation process is exactly that: a consultation process.

We are at a stage at which a significant number of proposals are under way. Consultations have taken place, development proposals have been published, and we are awaiting decisions from the Minister. We are at a stage at which we have identified our three-teacher schools and will begin a process of reviewing them. We believe that, once that is done, it will be a matter of looking at the area plan and continuing to implement its planning statements for each school. At this stage, we have no intention of looking at four-teacher schools, because we believe that such schools can deliver the Northern Ireland curriculum and provide a variety of activities that contribute to a child's broader educational experience. There are also certain policy conditions about the number of year groups within composite classes, which we think can be resolved with four teachers in a school.

We are in discussions with, and working alongside, all the boards, bar the South Eastern Board, on shared education projects. We have shared education projects up and running in the North Eastern, Western, Southern and Belfast Boards. Over the past period, we have had lengthy conversations with the South Eastern Board, but it so happens that no meaningful proposals have come from the bottom up in that area that we feel that we can take forward. It is very important that there is a bottom-up approach to shared education.

You asked what we have learned. We have learned that this work is hugely challenging, and that cannot be overstated. We cannot approach the exercise from a cold, bureaucratic point of view. We need to take on board and be aware of the position that these schools hold in local communities.

There is also a significant lack of understanding in communities about the area-planning process, and there is an onus on the Department of Education to address that.

The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen): Since you have just spoken, Malachy, I will ask you this: what support would you give to Catholic maintained schools that wish to transform to integrated status?

Mr Crudden: That is not a responsibility that we have. Our responsibility is to ensure the provision of Catholic maintained schools. There are processes that a school goes through. We are proposing to close Clintyclay Primary School, for example, and the local community has taken steps to publish its own proposal to transform to controlled integrated status. In that instance, the responsibility lies solely with that group taking advice from the integrated sector. We have no input whatsoever into that process.

The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen): So you will not comment on the proposal.

Mr Crudden: We may comment on the proposal if we are asked to.

The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen): However, you will not give support.

Mr Crudden: We would not give any direct support to the school, because the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) has a process that a school goes through.

Mr Gilbert: I will add to that, Chair, if I may. There is a specific process because of the mechanics of transforming from a controlled school to a controlled integrated school, and departmental guidelines lay out that process. In fact, I have one school that is going through that process at the moment. Mr Kinahan will know it very well. An external body, the Electoral Reform Society, ballots parents to find out whether there is a wish to move in that direction, and then it immediately moves to the publication of a development proposal for public consultation. I have one very live example of that.

Mr Craig: Malachy, I am interested in your response to the Chair's last question. You said that you take nothing to do with the process. As Committee members, we are all aware of property trustees. Ultimately, will the trustees or CCMS take a property away from a school if it goes down the integrated route?

Mr Crudden: Not necessarily. Let us say that we have a proposal to close a school. If the Minister approves that process, the responsibility for that building rests with the trustee, who takes a decision on what will happen to it. If the trustee spoke to us about the local community wanting to transform

from maintained to integrated status, we would certainly advise the trustee about the use of the building.

Mr Craig: It would be a big step for the bishops.

Mr Crudden: It certainly would.

Mr Craig: I want to move on to the controlled sector. I declare my hand: I sit on two boards of governors in the controlled sector. What is the definition of controlled sector?

Mr Gilbert: It is defined in legislation as a management type, which is a controlled school. That is the specific definition in the 1986 Order.

Mr Craig: Is it defined tightly as controlled schools?

Mrs Watterson: It is defined as non-denominational.

Mr Gilbert: There is sometimes a misconception that a controlled school has a particular constituency, but a controlled school is a non-denominational school.

Mr Craig: I am asking that because there is an interesting line in our papers. The Department has said that, on area planning, the controlled sector includes integrated controlled schools and integrated Irish-medium schools. Are you aware of that?

Mr Gilbert: May I comment on that? There are controlled schools, and, as I said, there is a process to transform and become a controlled integrated school. In the Irish-medium sector, there is one example of an Irish-medium school that has transformed to a controlled school. In my area, I am dealing with an Irish-medium school that wishes to transform and become a controlled school.

Mr Craig: What I am really interested to hear is how that translates into area planning. If they are all seen as controlled sector schools, are they all treated equally?

Mr Butler: All schools are treated in relation to their particular circumstances at the time. You asked about schools being treated equally, and we look at each school — controlled integrated, Irish medium, maintained integrated or whatever — and its issues from an area-planning point of view, and we will look at them all in a similar vein.

Mr Craig: I think that you know what I am coming to, Gregory. I have a good reason for asking this question. Ultimately, I have seen integrated schools appear out of nowhere that have had a major detrimental impact on other schools in the area. In fact, from an educational point of view, such a school would never have been approved because there was no rational need for it. If those schools are all called "controlled" in the context of area plans, are they all treated on an equal basis, or is there a bias towards the integrated sector?

Mr Butler: The process of area planning takes account of the needs and wishes of the community and the planning responsibilities of the board. If there is a proposal for an integrated school in a particular area, you have to look at that and consult on it and its impact. In the Good Friday Agreement, and in a range of other things, there is an onus on the Department to promote and support the integrated sector. That is built into legislation. The board must look at the totality. If there is a proposal from the integrated sector, we have to look at how it will impact on other schools and at what parents are looking for. Quite often, demand is demonstrated by enrolment. In the case to which you refer, there is an area in which enrolment has doubled, but, over the previous five or six years, there was ongoing growth in that school, which was demonstrated by parents making that preference and stating that they wanted their children to have that type of education. The board has to take account of that with planning, and it consults other schools about the impact.

An interesting fact about the South Eastern Board area is that there are more pupils in controlled integrated schools than in grant-aided schools, because the board took the line that, if there was demand that could be facilitated through transformation, that was done. We must look at all the local circumstances and make a decision. The situation is very much driven by demand and the interests of the parents being expressed through their preferences at admission stage.

Mr Craig: That is very interesting. I know that there is this thing in the Good Friday Agreement about the integrated sector. The biggest percentage of schools for which boards are responsible is the controlled sector. What is done to promote that sector?

Mr Butler: The board regularly promotes the controlled sector, but it has a dual function, as defined in legislation. We are the planning authority for all schools. Under the order, we are charged with ensuring that there is adequate provision for all children and young people, so the board has that role. That was recognised by the Minister in the formation, in the new dispensation, of a controlled schools working group. The board has to support its own schools — as it does — but it is also a planning authority. It has been recognised that that duality is a difficult delivery mechanism, and, in the new legislation, a facility has been provided as part of the Minister's announcement that he will have a controlled schools working group. We are very supportive of that, because, although it is difficult to perform those two functions, we have done so, to the best of our ability, over the years.

Mr Craig: I thank you for your honesty about that. I concur: I agree with a sectoral body being set up for the controlled sector. You have already touched on this issue. I hate coming back to you all the time, Gregory, but you are obviously close to my heart in Lisburn.

Mr Butler: I could worry about being close to an MLA's heart. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Craig: I just mean that I am continually on the phone to you and pestering you.

What will be done about increasing enrolments in the Lagan Valley area? This goes to the heart of area planning or, as I honestly think, lack of planning. For three years, we had an ongoing row over the preschool facilities in Lagan Valley bursting at the seams. That does not seem to have been reflected in any increase in enrolment in the primary school sector. We then had a major influx of army families, and the need to increase enrolment in a number of schools was obvious, but it never took place, which has led to a major displacement of children not only throughout Lisburn town but further afield. Is that being looked at, and will it be rectified for next year? It is causing mayhem.

Mr Butler: I referred to the situation in Bangor, which is a bit like Newtownards. From last Friday I was out and about in schools in Newtownards. Our next stop is Lisburn. I want to be careful and do not want to name schools. In Lisburn, a number of schools are oversubscribed and a number are traditionally undersubscribed. A Minister once said that Bangor is not a metropolis and neither is Lisburn. There is an issue —

The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen): Lisburn representatives might disagree with you.

Mr Craig: It is a city. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Butler: It is a city, but we will discuss that later. We have spare capacity in certain areas. Lisburn is a town very much divided in terms of social and economic issues, and there are certain school choices in certain areas that may be more attractive to parents. We have to look at Lisburn as a totality. I will not say any more than that.

Mr Craig: When the Committee looked at shared education, it was very much between the controlled and maintained sectors — everybody seems to have that impression — but that is not necessarily so. We talked about rural schools being smaller, but some of the educational outputs from smaller schools are better than those of larger schools. I have seen that in my own primary school. Shared education also means the sharing of management and other facilities between local primary schools to ensure that smaller primary schools can also be maintained in that community. Are all the boards looking at that aspect of shared education?

Mr Butler: May I come in to talk about my board, and then I will pass on to my colleagues?

As you are probably aware, we have a situation in which Glasswater and Killyleagh share a principal, and there is a soft federation. That is one model that we have developed. One of the biggest changes with schools goes back to 2004, when Barry Gardiner made a statement about the pressure on schools and budgets when there was a decline in population. Since the population has stabilised, however, schools have started to develop more cooperation, so informal federations of schools have formed through their principals and so on. There is a mix between informal arrangements of working together, when, for example, schools might share a music teacher, a PE teacher or a technician, and

more formalised arrangements, which we call "soft federations", whereby a principal is shared but schools maintain their own identity. In rural areas, identity becomes a very important part of the equation, but if you have a shared principal, it means that you have the ability to do certain things across those communities. We worked that example, and I know that there are a range of examples across the boards.

Mr Gilbert: I referred to a number of things that we are looking at, even in our work programme for this year, with schools of the same management type that are in relatively close proximity but where there is quite a significant unfilled capacity issue. We are looking to explore options on the way forward to maximise the opportunities for young people and, as Gregory said, recognise that, even in a town, one estate can be very distinctive and different to another. It is not simple. On a drawing board, logic would say that, if we have three schools with 100-odd spare places among them, we should put them all into one school. However, where do we locate that school? One estate may have a different or distinctive flavour to another. It is about looking at and exploring those models that are not simply across the religious divide and single-management-type issues, rather than single identity. As I said, we are exploring a number of projects with schools in the controlled sector in the North Eastern Board and looking at different models of working together. We will spend significant time and energy evaluating that as a precursor to moving forward.

Mr Craig: I am glad to hear that. As the purse strings get tighter, that aspect will become more and more important, especially among primary schools.

Finally, Mike, it was all over the newspapers yesterday that Dromore Central Primary School — a brand-new school that has been in the planning for almost 10 years — is finally moving ahead. I am glad to see that, and I welcome it, but ultimately, it will be too small: it will be two classrooms short. We cannot turn children away. We hear about parental choice. It is a successful school in an area where there are more kids than there are places in the school. That is not going to change. Therefore, are we going to build a brand-new primary school and have portable classrooms outside the front door before it ever opens? Is that not a waste of public resources?

Mr Donaghy: In responding, Jonathan, I do not want to start commenting on one school. I will set it within a context —

Mr Craig: I am talking about the principle.

Mr Donaghy: The principle is that we look at an area in terms of need, birth statistics in the wards around the school and pupil distribution historically and going forward. There are a number of wards in the Dromore area where the birth rate has fallen, and the average for the wards in the Dromore area is minus 20%. I have spoken about the rural context. Another main feature of the context for area planning in the Southern Board is pupil growth. We currently have six district council areas, and, on the Department's needs model, five of those show growth. The one that does not show growth is Banbridge District Council area in which Dromore is situated, and it shows a deficit over the next 11 years. Therefore, it is not a simple question of projecting growth in general terms. We need to look specifically at the areas. With Dromore, we also need to look at the needs of the schools immediately outside Dromore, two of which have had development proposals for growth and extension approved by the Minister within the past 12 months. Therefore, we are looking at pupil distribution as a whole. The school that is being built is being built according to the Department's policy and the board's analysis, which shows that what is being built is sufficient for the needs of the school at this time.

Mr Craig: Thank you, Chair. I did promise that that was the last question.

Mr Newton: I thank the witnesses for coming today and for the very able substitute who has attended.

The Chair asked a question about the cost of area planning, and I was surprised by the answer, which basically was that it has all been done within resources, although we do not know the cost of it. If we had gone to ESA, my understanding is that area planning would have moved onto a legislative basis. That is my first point. Secondly, you made a bid for additional funds. You do not know the cost, yet you are going to move to a legislative basis, and then you made a bid for more funding. That does not sound like a very professional approach.

Mr Gilbert: Thank you for the question. I will try to clarify that. In response to the Chair's question, we indicated that there is a cost but that it is within existing resources. There is a serious imperative

here, because, when you are looking at moving forward, particularly in the current circumstances in which there are incredible budget pressures and so on, you are trying to make sure that the best provision for children is there. It is about forward planning, and our bid for additional resources was recognition, as the Chair indicated, that we have other things to do. Therefore, the pace at which we can address area planning issues is very much dictated by the availability of the human resource. As Malachy said, it is incredibly intensive, even in terms of our duty, where there is a proposal to move forward, to consult parents, staff, governors etc. All of that is very time-intensive, but it is absolutely critical to be out there talking to people face to face. Sometimes those are difficult conversations, and sometimes we are not the most popular people in the world, but the bid for additional resources was about trying to move things forward at a faster pace than is possible with the current resource level in the context of all the other jobs that we have to do. I hope that there is no contradiction in that.

Mr Newton: I agree with everything that you have said, but there did not seem to be the grounds or the support mechanism in the way in which it has been done.

Mr Gilbert: Apologies if I did not make that clear.

Mr Newton: I do not think that anybody could argue against area planning and planning in general. The comment was made that it was planning for a purpose. You have listed five or six criteria, and there is no aspect of that that is about saving money, so I accept that it is not about saving money. It is about educational experience and educational outcomes. How are we measuring that at the moment, and what has been the success or otherwise of area planning to date in educational experience or outcomes?

Mr Gilbert: I do not want to answer all the questions.

Mr Crudden: To a certain extent, it is very early days to see what the impact of area planning will be. It is a very time-consuming process. You could be talking about a period of 18 months to two years from the initial meetings taking place at a local level to having a ministerial decision. It is too early in the process to say what the impact will be of, for example, the small number of closures of small schools and the amalgamation of schools. With some amalgamations that have taken place in the past few years, I know that the breadth of experience offered to children has certainly increased in the extra-curricular activities offered to children who are coming from a small school and may not have had the opportunity to engage in those types of activities. I think that it is too early in the process to comment on or to measure the impact that area planning will have on raising standards at this time.

Mrs Watterson: Whilst I agree that it is very early, my experience in the Western Board is that, when you rationalise the school, the Education and Training Inspectorate comes in quite quickly after the rationalisation. At that stage, you get a baseline. I would imagine that, over a period of three or four years, when they return, you start to be able to measure pupil outcome and then you are able to make decisions on the advantages of the rationalisation.

Mr Newton: It has been a very controversial area. At this stage, even though it may be successful, we have no idea whether it is or not.

Mr Crudden: Anecdotally, you very often find that the individuals who are the slowest to change are the parents, because they are obviously concerned about their children. When you do an amalgamation, very soon after the amalgamation has taken place, you begin to hear comments from parents that it has been the right thing to do, their children are happy, why did it not happen sooner and so on. Anecdotally, we have evidence that points to the process being successful. If you want to measure it, as I said, in terms of raising standards in schools, I honestly believe that it is too soon in the process to comment on that.

Mr Newton: A comment was made about consultation on the area plan and the amount of detail that has gone into that. I refer to the South Eastern Education and Library Board first. Gregory made the point about the consultation of the schools along the corridor in east Belfast, which really was not happening. It is only very recently that consultation started to take place between the South Eastern Board and Belfast about the Newtownbreda and Knockbreda situation. I know of examples, Gregory, where parents were being told one thing and yet the principals of schools were not aware of those comments being made. From where I am sitting, and from where many parents are sitting, that really was an absolute shambles of a situation.

Mr Butler: We are talking this morning about primary area plans. All I can say about the post-primary situation is that the issues that you have raised have already been discussed in fairly great detail by the Committee and us. As for where the chief executives of the South Eastern Board and the Belfast Board are at the minute, we have instigated a programme. I cannot necessarily speak about what happened before. All I can talk about is what is currently happening under the two current chief executives and what we are doing to move things forward in the primary and the post-primary. The other has had a fair airing already at previous Committee sessions and in the Assembly. We have talked to the groupings. We have put in place measures to address that in the primary, and we are looking very much at that. I still stand over the decision that we made. The judicial review very clearly made the point that the decision was right, but we will work with the communities to develop it.

As I said, even before the single board, we looked at the fact that there are areas. We are looking at the minute at the primary-school sector, where there are pressures for growth. The chief executive of the Belfast Board meets us and our officers on a bi-monthly basis to look at that. I can comment only on what is happening now as opposed to what happened in the past. We all learn lessons from area planning. We learnt from that particular one, and we are progressing very satisfactorily.

Mr Gilbert: More generally, I will pick up on something that Malachy said. One of the real challenges in the whole consultation process is unfortunately because of the myths and legends that grow up. If somebody in the community is having a conversation about a school and says, "Did you hear that school is closing?", you suddenly find that some parents move children to other schools because they have heard a rumour at the shops or somewhere else. That is a challenge. It is back to the point that Malachy made around the evidential base across all five boards: significant changes have been made as a consequence of feedback to consultation. One of the greatest challenges that we face is the perceptions that people have around consultation. We, as officials, and our colleagues who do the face-to-face work hear that it is all a sham and that the decision has already been made and so on and so forth. That is a challenge for us all.

The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen): Do you mind if I bring Mr McCausland in? He is moving to another Committee duty.

Mr McCausland: Thank you very much, Chair. It is just to pick up on the issue of perceptions in people's minds once something is even talked about. Some of the reports say that a certain school, subject to a development proposal, is to close. In other words, when people see that, they will assume that that is done and dusted; they will see it as a formality. I think that, in many cases, they do not feel at all that they have been consulted about or involved in that; they do not feel that their views have been represented through to the board. How do you deal with that? It occurs in a number of areas. A report names a school and says that it is to close, subject to a proposal, but it is already proposed. How do you deal with that? Once that happens, you get flight; people will go, and yet there has been no proper process of consultation.

Mr Donaghy: I will address that from a Southern Board perspective, although I know that it is common to the boards. Before anything is printed or released in public in an area plan, it will have been subject to consultation with the schools. There would be ongoing discussions with schools prior to any statement being made in the area plan. The area plan simply states what is being proposed, and the member is quite correct to say that. However, that is part way through a process with the school; it is not the end of the story. As several colleagues have already said, there is no pre-defined outcome to this; in fact, there are numerous examples where a proposal has not gone forward because of the response to consultation. There is a local consultation and a public consultation, both of which are formalised in the development proposal process. I want to reassure members that, prior to an area plan being published with intentions in that, those have been talked through with schools and boards of governors.

Mr Crudden: In compiling the area plan, CCMS worked very closely with the education and library boards. The use of language in the area plans was one of the most significant challenges. We and the boards tried hard to couch proposals in soft language, but, at the end of the day, the purpose of the area plans was to identify what course of action was being planned. In that case, it is very difficult to avoid the use of words such as "closure", "amalgamation" or whatever it happens to be. That was a difficult decision to make. From our perspective, from the start of 2012, when the area planning began to kick in fully, we were in constant contact with our schools about what was being discussed and what was going to appear in the area plans. We undertake no piece of work in relation to any school without the principal, the chair of the board of governors and the trustee knowing that we are going to do that.

Mr McCausland: I understand the circumstances and appreciate the difficulty, but it would be helpful if there was an opportunity to talk to the Belfast Board.

Mr Lunn: Thanks for your various presentations. You have a very difficult job, and I do not envy you the task you are embarked on. I was struck, given Ray's presentation in particular and followed by the rest of you, by the fact that the first person to mention the word "integrated" — it was at 10.35 am — was Gregory. There is a lot of talk about shared education, and that is OK, but I am glad that the Chair made up for it.

Malachy, I want to ask you a question, because the answer you gave to the Chair would have been a credit to any politician, frankly. *[Laughter.]* Let me ask you this straight: if the parents of children who attend a Catholic maintained primary school wanted overwhelmingly for the school to transform to integrated status, CCMS would obviously be a major consultee. I am not talking about Clintyclay Primary School and some survival mission; I am talking about a valid, viable school that has no enrolment problems but which decides that it wants to transform to integrated status. Are there any circumstances in which CCMS would endorse that decision and support it?

Mr Crudden: That is a very difficult question to answer.

Mr Lunn: No, it is a very easy question.

Mr Crudden: I would answer it by saying that CCMS's statutory responsibility is to ensure the provision of Catholic maintained schools. Other organisations have a responsibility to provide for integrated schools or controlled schools or whatever they happen to be. If a strong Catholic school came forward to CCMS with a proposal to transform to controlled integrated status, that would provide us with a significant challenge. It has never happened, and it is something that we would have to take a view on, but I could not say at this time, in all honesty, that CCMS would endorse or not endorse that particular course of action.

Mr Lunn: That is pretty much the same as the answer you gave the Chair, only longer. I will not pursue it. You say that your obvious mission is to maintain the maintained sector, to put it simply. I could lead on from that and ask what you are doing in an area-based planning process that might involve the amalgamation of a Catholic and a controlled school and lead to your maintaining a controlled school.

Mr Crudden: What are we doing in that area?

Mr Lunn: It is the same thing. Theoretically, it could mean removing a maintained school because of the necessity to amalgamate. Are you saying that you would support that?

Mr Crudden: I do not understand the question.

Mr Lunn: If there were a Catholic maintained school and a controlled school in a particular area, and we have been talking about smaller areas, and the best solution was amalgamation — I do not mean the Moy solution, although I will come to that in a minute; I mean a proper amalgamation — it seems to me that you would oppose that.

Mr Crudden: Do you mean pursuing the amalgamation of a Catholic school and a controlled school?

Mr Lunn: Yes.

Mr Crudden: I do not think that that is possible under legislation. It would probably involve the closure of one or other of the two schools.

Mr Lunn: Of course it would.

Mr Crudden: If we felt, in a particular area, that we could not argue for the retention of the Catholic school, we would bring forward a proposal to close that school. I do not see the point that you are trying to make.

Mr Lunn: If the salvation for primary-school education in a particular, probably rural, area was the amalgamation of two schools, what would your reaction be? I am talking about a proper amalgamation, not two schools on one site with different uniforms. Again, Moy is a strange example, but I will get there in a minute. If that amalgamation led effectively to the potential damaging of the Catholic ethos that you quite rightly treasure, what would your reaction be? It seems to me that the CCMS just would not agree to that.

Mr Crudden: No, we would not be involved in the amalgamation of a Catholic and a controlled school. In that instance, our process would be to propose the closure of the Catholic school. Parents would then have the choice to send their children to whichever school they chose. Our responsibility is primarily to provide Catholic maintained schools.

Mr Lunn: Gregory, I am glad that you set the record straight on the particular school in Lisburn that we were discussing without naming it, because if an integrated school can start from scratch and achieve about 180 pupils in the timescale that we are talking about, despite the fact that it is operating out of a farmyard in Portakabins, that is a considerable success, and it is a supreme example of parental choice at its best. The implacable opposition of some people to that school does not really do them any credit. That is not a question.

I want to ask you all about the needs model. What do you think would be the effect on your operation of the Drumragh judgement? I know that that is more a question for the Department, but it must filter down to you. You are the ones engaged in area planning, which is what Judge Treacy particularly commented on. Do you have any comment on that?

Mr Butler: The answer that I gave you on the previous school illustrates how we deal with the issue practically. At the end of the day, the demand, as illustrated by enrolments and available bodies, and the quality of education are the factors that drive our decisions rather than judicial decisions. We will have to live with the consequences of judicial decisions, but when we look at a school, we are not doing it because of a, b and c. Parents, in a particular case, were expressing a preference for that school. If that is illustrated, we can then look at it. That is the way that we would look at all schools, whether controlled, integrated, Irish-medium or whatever. We will look at it if there is a parental demand that demonstrates that the need is there, and it is viable in the longer term, within the context of looking at the total provision in an area, because you have to look at the best use of resources. So, there is that part. If you look at a particular case as opposed to the global part, it is not a question of looking at it and saying that every integrated school has to grow. Rather, in a particular situation, if there is a demand that can be illustrated and it can be illustrated that that can be met within an area planning context, you then take account of it.

Mr Lunn: Yes, but the current situation seems to be that the needs model as it stands assumes no growth in the integrated sector. Judge Treacy has challenged that, without being absolutely definitive, so it may be that we will all end up back in court at some stage. I certainly hope that we do, because I like definitive judgements. In the meantime, I wonder how all of that filters down through the Department to your operations. I will read you a comment from the Minister, from December 2013, on the back of a previous judgement in the case of McKee versus the Department:

"I want the Department's approach to our duties to integrated education and Irish-medium education, as outlined in the above judgment, to be re-focused. ... It is the positivity with which we do this that I want re-emphasised. I want to be sure that, as it balances its obligations, the Department continues to look for steps and measures that will encourage and facilitate Irish-medium and integrated education. I particularly want to be satisfied that this positive approach is embedded across the Department."

That clearly must filter through to you. Where is the evidence that the boards, or perhaps the new board, will take on the same responsibility as the Department?

Mr Gilbert: I will respond to support what Gregory said. We recognise that there are significant challenges around protecting populations no matter what model you use, and we are aware of the particular issues raised around the needs model, but, ultimately, we are charged with ensuring that there are sufficient places of a suitable type in an area. That is driven largely by the demands of the area and the parents in the area. One thing that is very clear, and often becomes a contentious issue locally, is that, when children move, they leave a space. Therefore, it is about the totality of the planning for the area. You look at enrolment trends, over-subscription in application and other things.

In bringing forward business cases and cases for change in provision, that kind of hard information has to be there, otherwise you are very much on a wing and a prayer.

I support what Gregory said. We plan on the basis of the reality on the ground and the picture that is there. Where there is a demand for any type of education, that has to be evidenced. We certainly try to meet our duties as they are passed down from the Department in that kind of way.

Mr Lunn: It is evidenced by polls, but particularly by parental choice in particular areas. It just seems to me — I am not getting at anybody here — that the Department has a long record of failing to facilitate and encourage, to the extent of actually being in opposition to the whole project. What we have at the moment is a situation where you guys might decide that a new integrated school, or even the transformation of an existing one, which might draw in new pupils as a result, could have the potential to damage controlled or maintained schools in the same area. Then Malachy will come along and say, "There is no way we are going to countenance this notion of a maintained school transforming to integrated status". It is opposition where it is supposed to be facilitation and encouragement. Somebody used the word "promotion". I just wonder where all of that fits with a sensible area-based planning approach.

Mr Crudden: From the perspective of CCMS — I am sure that it applies to the boards as well — there is certainly no inference that a particular view should be interpreted as opposition to the development of the integrated sector. CCMS does not oppose the development of any school where the demand has been identified for provision, whether it is Irish-medium, integrated, a new controlled school or whatever it happens to be. I think that it would be unfair to make the inference that the boards, CCMS or any other employing authority is opposed to the development of integrated schools.

Mr Lunn: But they are. The transformation of a maintained school to integrated status as a result of overwhelming parental demand is a development of the integrated sector, and you will not allow it.

Mr Crudden: That can happen.

Mr Donaghy: I want to make the point that, in the controlled sector, we have examples of controlled schools that have transformed, both in the primary and the post-primary sectors.

Mr Lunn: I know that.

Mr Donaghy: But what I am saying is that those were not opposed; they were facilitated. However, the desire —

Mr Lunn: *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Donaghy: — and the expressed will came from the school and the community of the school.

Mr Lunn: I am nearly finished, Chair. I want to take up with Mike the question of the Moy. It is for information only; I will not go over the top about it. Roughly how many pupils attend that school?

Mr Donaghy: There are two schools involved: St John's Primary School and Moy Regional Primary School. St John's has nearly 200 pupils and the figure for the Moy is in the 70s.

Mr Lunn: They are coming together on one site.

Mr Donaghy: The proposal, which has been approved by the Department, is for both schools to come together on a single site, maintaining their separate identities and ethos, as is the will of the two schools. The site will enable the board, as the planning authority, to make efficiencies around school buildings and facilities.

Mr Lunn: Are they going to maintain separate uniforms, assemblies and classes?

Mr Donaghy: The proposal is for the schools to maintain their separate identities and ethos. How that works out will be down to the boards of governors of the schools. One point that I will make, Trevor, is that the proposal has come from the community in the Moy. It has not come from the board, and it has not come from CCMS. We have engaged with both schools together over the last couple of years

to listen to what they want and to assist them to formulate that proposal. Members around the table who have memories of the situation in the Moy 20 or 25 years ago, during a very bad conflict situation, will recognise that the proposal represents for that community an immense step forward. We are happy to facilitate the proposal. However, it must be recognised that the proposal to maintain the separate ethos and identities is the will of the community.

Mr Lunn: It is a step forward; I will grant you that. However, the best hope for it, surely, is that it will develop into something more solid and really together. At the moment, it seems to me that it is actually emphasising division rather than cooperation. The fact is that they will still be kept in separate classes. You will still have a 70-pupil school, which is operating almost completely separately.

Mr Crudden: It will be a 70-pupil school that will have the number of classrooms required for a 70-pupil school, but it will have additional resources that can be shared with the neighbouring school. The proposal is going to benefit the overall education of all the children involved.

Mr Butler: The original proposal arose from the fact that, at that particular stage in the Southern Board, we were proposing to close the controlled school provision. The Catholic community wanted to retain controlled provision in the village of Moy. Support was given by the Catholic community to retain the controlled school, which, at that stage, had 42 pupils. There was a big drive around that, which enabled the board to move a voluntary playgroup from a GAA pitch into the controlled sector. That was because the community felt that the village would be better if the two communities were retained. That was where it was driven from. So, it started off with the two communities, and one community saying that the community would be better by having both communities co-existing. Those were the words they used back when they first started the proposal, about eight or nine years ago.

The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen): Obviously, we will return to this —

Mr Lunn: Only in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen): — during our inquiry.

Mr Lunn: It is very likely.

Mr Gilbert: May I make a brief comment, Chair? I am conscious of time. Forgive me for repeating it for those who were members of the Committee at the time, but we made a presentation to the Committee on the PIEE project. One point we emphasised, which, I think, picks up on Mr Lunn's point, was that it is about communities starting from where they are. Of course, our hope is that, down the road, things will gradually change and move forward. I have one example in my board area. It is a post-primary example, where there is a history of 25 years of sharing. They still feel most comfortable maintaining their own ethos but are happy to run, as they have been for 25 years, joint provision across the two schools. So, it is about that point of bottom-up. We recognise and Mike made reference to the fact that for all of us, we have areas in our board where the history of the area is very significant with communities. It is about communities coming on board, because that is how it will be successful as opposed to being imposed from the top down.

Mr Lunn: Can I make one final comment? I am sorry, but —

The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen): As long as it is short, Mr Lunn.

Mr Lunn: I said at the start that what you have to do is difficult, and I think it was Malachy who said that there was a challenge between bureaucratic decisions and the needs of the community. I accept that, but if you invariably take note and respect the needs and wishes of the community, you will not end up with any fewer schools than you have at present, because everybody values their school. You have got to make harder decisions than that. I hope that you can cooperate and do it. I do not see much evidence.

Mr Kinahan: I have masses of questions, but I will limit them to one or two. I wanted to explore sharing. Given the fact that there is less funding coming through to all the schools, does that mean that some of the decisions that have been made already will not be implemented for a while because the funding is not there?

Mr Gilbert: There are a couple of things that I could say. We recognise the pressures, but members will be aware of the OFMDFM initiative around shared education, which will provide significant amounts of funding. Colleagues may comment from their own boards' perspective, but I would imagine, and I am speculating here to some degree, that, given where we are in this process, some of the schools that have a history of sharing will seek to embed and develop that further using that additional funding. We very much welcome the additional funding, both from Atlantic Philanthropies and from the Department and government, through the OFMDFM initiative. We hope that we will be able to obviate some of the challenges that we are facing.

Mr Kinahan: Other schools are expecting things to change, but things will not change for two or three years because there is no funding coming through.

Mr Crudden: Approval has been given for a number of shared education projects and they have gone to planning stage. Just within the last 10 days or so, the call went out for the second round of bids for the shared education fund. We are reasonably confident that, if the Department approves bids, the money will be forthcoming. However, with all these things, the process of change is very slow. Even if there is an amalgamation of two schools, the process of bringing that about is painfully slow.

Mr Kinahan: The reason I ask is that it has been evident all the way through the area-planning process, not totally, but in most cases, that schools of the same type amalgamate with each other. Partly because of the process and partly because of the different powers that you all have, you are missing out on getting schools to share unless they go through area learning communities or the good initiatives that you just raised. Is there any way of reviewing some of the things that we have done to make sure that we get better sharing from schools, either maintained or controlled?

Mr Gilbert: In the projects that we have been involved in where there was a four-year funding process, it is absolutely the case that, when those relationships are built, they find ways to come together. They may not be able to do it in the way that they would like to, but our history shows, particularly with the PIEE project in the North Eastern Board area, that they will continue to work together in the manner that they can. As I said, although I cannot pre-empt this, it may be the case that additional external funding from the OFMDFM signature project could be a way to seek to develop what was there.

In the fourth year of our PIEE project, as previously reported to the Committee, one of the really interesting developments that we found was the appointment of the shared teacher. There was a teacher who worked across a Catholic maintained school and a controlled school.

Mr Butler: It is possible that we underestimate just how much sharing is going on. I have been in education long enough to be able to remember quite a few things, but if we look back to where we were 20 years ago with cooperation between schools, we see that there has been phenomenal growth. I am not just talking about cross-sector; I am talking about the totality. Over the past years, a number of projects have happened, for example, through community relations funding, which maybe initially concentrated on sporting and artistic issues. Those were very money driven. When the money disappeared, quite often, the schools carried on the relationships, because it was about teacher relationships. It is about having a shared, common understanding about how they could, together, enable young people and pupils to progress.

There is a lot going on across the Province that we do not necessarily see. I usually get out once a fortnight to do a tour of my schools. It is surprising just how often we see events at schools where schools from the other community are very strongly represented. I was at the opening of an extension in Newcastle last week, and 12 different schools, from across all the sectors, were at that. You could see from the discussion afterwards that there is genuine engagement in curricular delivery across those schools. People saw that they were dependent on each other. That dependency, which is very much part of the rural farming community, is now coming into schools, where they see the need to have that interaction. It is something that is coming because they feel that it is worthwhile, as opposed to something that is coming because it just happens to be the shade of opinion at that time.

Mr Kinahan: On the back of that, the stakeholders and principals who were up here asked for facilitators. I know that area planning is happening, but, until it hits, the question is this: are you putting facilitators in each board? I am aware, Malachy, that you now have someone coming in as a facilitator to help schools in some areas. We need those facilitators to help promote shared education at the same time. Are all the boards putting people in place to do that?

Mr Butler: We are in the process of appointing staff for that.

Mrs Watterson: We are looking at the inquiry into shared education. In the Western Board, a lot more sharing is going on than perhaps we realise. When we look at the schools in the Western Board, we see that we have a number of controlled schools that are multi-denominational in places like Ballykelly and Culmore. Those schools have been sharing for years but have remained controlled schools with, obviously, a mixed community inside them. That is really the natural way of doing it. Through the Fermanagh Trust, schools have been given the finances to promote sharing between teachers and, very importantly, pupils learning together. We have post-primary area-learning communities, where schools are very definitely sharing expertise, teachers and so forth. My understanding is that that is going to follow through into primary schools. A lot of the work going on now, through the Fermanagh Trust and others, will develop into something like a primary area-learning community. When the money comes along for the signature project, there will be facilitators in each board looking after that project. My understanding is that a process of recruitment is about to take place. Each board will have its own facilitator, which is very important.

As for the integrated sector, in our board, we have an example of a school that transformed to controlled integrated status. We also have the new controlled Irish-medium school in Dungiven. Although that is an Irish-medium school, it is a controlled school and obviously open to all communities. That is something that we would like to see developed. Already, the board of governors has representatives from both communities. When you move to post-primary level, you see very successful projects like those in Limavady, where the controlled and maintained have been in partnership for years, which is bearing fruit. You are obviously aware of the sixth-form project and STEM centre that has come about as a result of all that sharing. As somebody else here said, that is good not only for those two schools but will have a wider impact on other schools as well. In the Western Board, we are looking at something a little bit different again, and that is the Brollagh project. We are looking at whether there could be any North/South cooperation on Brollagh.

In our response to the inquiry, we will look at shared education as an umbrella term. Maybe before we get too pessimistic, I think that there is quite a bit going on. We certainly have the evidence that there is a lot going on in our board.

Mr Donaghy: I reassure the member that the Southern Board is actively engaged in recruitment using the additional resources provided by the Department.

Mr Kinahan: My only comment on everything else is this: would you please all put in place something that keeps schools fully up to date with what is going on? I say that particularly to the Belfast Board, which is not here. Once schools do not know what is happening, parents then start going into the room and it just carries on. It is to control the leakages and make sure that things are done properly. That is a plea, not a question.

The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen): Is there anything else that you want to ask?

Mr Kinahan: I will come in at the end if there is time.

Mr Rogers: To follow on from what you said, Rosemary, in the needs model, there is an assumption of some sort that the only growth in the Irish-medium sector will come through the maintained sector. There is a flaw in area planning already. I say that because you mentioned the school in Dungiven.

Mrs Watterson: I suppose that, initially, in Dungiven, the majority of pupils came from the maintained sector. However, in the Western Board, if that is a controlled school and, by definition, multi-denominational, it could well be that that would be an attractive school to the Protestant community. Obviously, it may take a long time, but it could well be. I am aware that, in the Protestant community, there are Irish-speaking people who may wish to avail themselves of an Irish-medium education. We could be talking about the very long term, but I think that it is quite an exciting project.

Mr Butler: When the needs model was first introduced, we looked at it with the Department. The area planning process is very much about looking at it in totality. So, the needs-based model is part of that process; it informs it. If you look at the plans, you will see that we have not religiously done a maths exercise to say that $x + y = z$. It provides a framework and there are difficulties within it. However, in the adaptation of the plans, we have looked at it as one piece of evidence. The other

piece of evidence is what we see on the ground. We have not stuck religiously to it. The Department would probably shoot me for saying that, but that is where we are at.

Mr Donaghy: One small point to note is that interest has been expressed by CnaG around controlled status for several Irish-medium schools. Those pupils would come out of the controlled column.

Mr Gilbert: Yes.

Mr Rogers: A considerable number of our primary schools are experiencing stress, be that around educational achievement, finance or enrolment of less than 105. However, from reading a lot of documents and seeing it on the ground, I know that, when a school has over 85 pupils and sufficient teachers, it is sustainable. Why do we have to increase the stress on schools? When the documentation comes out from the board, if you have 100 children in your school, you get a red box. Could it not be a yellow box?

Mr Gilbert: Mr Rogers is identifying the concerns that were there initially in what was called the viability audit, which is history. What comes out now is an annual profile statement, which is simply a statement of the factual enrolment of the school and the financial position of the school. The achievement of the school is no longer included, which is because of all the issues around the fact that there is not a common way of measuring that presently.

I stress the point that it is not about slavishly following any dogma. It is about looking at the situation on the ground. As I said earlier, across the five boards, the analysis of the current profile of primary schools shows that very, very few schools are exhibiting financial stress. As for the prescribed measuring of enrolment, there are schools that are against it, and we touched on the fact that we recognise that how primary schools use their available space is being reviewed. I assure you that, when I go into primary schools in my area that, on paper, appear to have 150 unfilled places, as I am sure my colleagues do, I cannot find the empty rooms, because the foundation stage and the nature of the experience has now spread itself out.

It is great to have a music room, an ICT suite and so on. It is a complex area. I can provide reassurance that there is nothing any longer in the business of labelling people in the red box, or whatever. It is a clear statement of fact, and it is annually reviewable, as are all these plans, because things move and change.

Mr Rogers: I think I have seen it somewhere that stress has been broken down. Something in the region of 46% of primary schools are experiencing stress. There are figures somewhere that breaks that down into financial or whatever.

Mr Gilbert: The annual profiles are publicly available on each board's website.

Mr Rogers: It would be useful to see the number of schools with under, say, 85 pupils.

Mr Butler: That is covered in area profiles. There is a summary of each district council area.

The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen): On that point, if you redefine Bain, is it no longer a measure?

Mr Crudden: No, I think that is the issue: 105 is still the accepted number. CCMS has argued that, in terms of sustainability, 85 or 86 is more realistic, and I think the boards would support us in that. We have tried to convince the Department of that argument. We have reviewed a number of schools that fall below 85, and we have concluded that they are sustainable. As my colleagues said, we are not sticking rigidly to that figure of 105, but it is still the figure that the Department quotes.

Mr Butler: This is where the misconception was when Bain was published: Bain did not actually say that schools under 105 should not exist. Bain said that schools of 105 should be reviewed. It is a very important subtlety. I say that because, when we refer to the figures and the rationale, we will, in fact, comment in relation to the P1 to P3 intake as opposed to the P5 to P7, because a school could be top-heavy or bottom-heavy, depending on progress. So, we look at them under 105, but it is not a cut-off point above which we say everything will be safe or below which everything will not be, because there will be schools above 105 with which we will have concerns, and they have been looked at in reports. If I am to leave one message with the Committee about area planning, it is this: it is not a finite process. It is an iterative process that is about looking at the total factors that influence a particular

area and taking account of such areas as Bain, the population and the local social and economic situation. It is a total approach, as opposed to somebody sitting in an office with a pen and ticking boxes.

Mr Gilbert: As I said earlier, most of us who are here this morning have very significant rural populations. I am sure that I am not uncommon in saying that I know what the reaction was from many of the smaller schools in my board when that began to be talked about. If you are sitting in a school that has the capacity to look after only 85 pupils, and you have 85 pupils and are making good provision for them, 105 is meaningless. It is about the points I made in the opening statement: making sure that children have provision, and it is about education. That is very different in different contexts. As colleagues said, you do not look at anything with a single rule. There is looking at context and looking at community. A school in my area has nine pupils. It happens to be on an island. If you were looking at that in a bureaucratic sense, you would say that it is totally unviable. However, the practicalities are that that needs to be sustained. There are examples all around of where you have to have that flexibility. As Gregory said, it is about planning in an ongoing way, taking account of what happens in the situation, trying to make sure that we are absolutely driven by making the best provision that we can for young people's education and making sure that young people have access to a range of areas and their entitlement in the curriculum. As I stressed earlier, other experiences that build them as people are also important. We all hear, in a commercial and employment sense, that it is not just exam results that matter when you go into a career; it is all of the other skills that you bring. Those are developed through the range of experiences you get through your education and, of course, through your home, family and everything else.

Mr Rogers: Following on from that point on sustainability, Rosemary, particularly when you look at the geographical isolation or community engagement in the Western Board, how is it measured? In the future when we have one education and library board, how could we have a consistent approach across the whole area?

Mrs Watterson: To follow up on what Ray said, there are 175 schools in the Western Board, and 100 of those are below the Bain threshold for rural schools of 105. We could not close 100 schools. We have to ensure that the schools that are there are fit for purpose. You are quite right: rurality is something that has to be dealt with very sensitively with area-based planning. We have a number of schools in the Western Board that are well below the Bain numbers, and they will never close simply because they are far too far away from bigger schools or centres of population, the travelling distances would be too great and so forth. We go out and talk to those schools and keep them under review. If they continue to provide fit-for-purpose experience for the youngsters, obviously they will survive.

As area-based planning embeds itself, the boards and the Department of Education are suggesting that the whole process of area-based planning becomes more structured and more formalised, in that schools and everybody will be aware that, probably on a yearly basis, somebody is going to be there talking to them about where they are at the moment. Obviously, that has an implication for resources, but, somehow, we always find the resources within resources to do that, or we have up until now.

When the annual profiles are produced in April or May of any year, the boards and people need to get into schools and start talking to those schools that are at risk with regard to whether any action needs to be taken. We believe that, come the end of October, the revised strategic plans should be issued. People should be aware at that stage of the terminology that we have been using — no action, probably review, and all that sort of thing — so that when we arrive in schools there is no surprise as they would have been expecting us. If you are going to do something, the development proposal process should kick in about November to February time. The Minister and the Department of Education are working on the ministerial decision on what to do. Generally, in June of any year, a school will know what is going to happen. Rather than rush the process — maybe through expediency in the past, there have been cases when it has been a bit rushed — we suggest that there should be a year between the publication of the development proposal and the rationalisation coming into place; namely, the September following.

When those plans are published, I envisage that, in the new authority, there would need to be close scrutiny with regard to those schools that are at risk, and then resources would need to be put into looking at the schools that are at risk. They would need to be prioritised. There will be no need to go near a lot of the schools. However, I take it that the new authority will be a leaner authority in terms of personnel, so —

Mr Gilbert: Chair, can I add a very brief comment to what Rosemary said?

The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen): I am really conscious of time, because we have run over our time.

Mr Gilbert: I will make a very brief comment. Members will be very aware of the encouragement for schools to become much more self-evaluating. One of the most encouraging features and one of the most significant developments that we have all seen in the last year or two has been governors who reflect upon themselves in respect of their sustainability, viability and provision. I could quote — I will not because of time, and members could equally — significant examples of where governors have come to us and said, "We have had a close look at ourselves, and we think that, if we worked with the school up the road, between us, we could be a viable unit and make sure that we secure the education of children".

I want to put on record our gratitude for the voluntary governors, who do so much work under increasing pressure. They are now coming forward much more, which is true from the ground up. It is a feature that has really developed.

Mr Rogers: Going on from that, Rosemary, we can see geographical isolation, whether it is Rathlin or wherever. How do we measure community engagement? Most of the schools in the Fermanagh area in particular seem to share. How do we measure those things? How can those factors be taken into consideration as well?

Mrs Watterson: You are quite right. In the primary schools in Fermanagh, there has been a lot of sharing going on, some of it at teacher level and some at pupil level. Obviously, that is down to the finances made available by the likes of the Fermanagh Trust. I have 14 schools sitting in the strategic plan that are interested in pursuing shared education, but they are not really at the stage of coming together as schools; they need to do a lot more work. I hope that, under the new signature project, those schools will get the resources to continue that work. I am not sure as to what the baselines are at the moment with regard to the sharing that has gone on, but there certainly needs to be some identification of where those schools are at. Through the signature project, I imagine that there will be a measurement of some sort with regard to their progress.

Mr Rogers: On a similar issue, take, for example, St Mary's High School in Brollagh. They have to travel to Enniskillen, an hour and a half or whatever. That is opposed to having a relationship with, say, Ballyshannon. Are you considering the cross-border dimension as well? For some of our small rural primary schools, in particular, there is a primary school across the border that is only two or three miles away as opposed to 15 miles.

Mrs Watterson: We have not looked at that. Obviously, at the moment, we are looking at the Brollagh situation. I am aware that the schooling system in the South is slightly different from ours here and so forth. Youngsters need to stay an extra year in the North. A lot of work would obviously need to go on before schools could come together in that way. I hope that, through looking at the Brollagh post-primary project — it is obviously a learning curve for us — we will find out more about the systems, North and South. Should the situation arise that we are looking at small schools on the border, we will be better informed with regard to how we could bring that about. At this point in time, however, I have to be honest: we have a lot of learning to do.

Mrs Overend: I will speak quickly to try to speed up the process. It has been really interesting to hear from you this morning. You mentioned that there is a review of the number of empty places, and you also said that that was ongoing all the time. Which is it? Tell me how that is being undertaken or what is happening, and how —

Mr Donaghy: It is an integral part of what is called the area-planning process. In other words, we are charged with looking at provision across all sectors within our areas of jurisdiction. That means looking at what is provided and the most efficient way of providing that education to all children in an area. If a school is half empty, that is automatically taken into account, as are the questions of whether that is the most efficient use of resources and whether there is a better way of doing it. It is built into the data that underpins the area plans.

Mr Butler: It would also be picked up in the reasons why there is such a split. It is possibly picked up at times, for example, when you are looking at the financial provision of the school. If a school, for example, is in deficit because its numbers have decreased, you would look at that particular period of time. You have a formal part that is looked at as part of the area planning process. You may also

have circumstances that arise, such as the year 8 intake or the primary 1 intake being lower than expected, which has a knock-on effect for the school. That creates the situation where you may know over two or three years that the population is decreasing. You have to look at it outside the planning sequence. There will be occasions arising from the formalised part, but there are other occasions. For example, there was one occasion when the army was coming in. The army changed where it was going, which had a big impact on one area's growth but had the reverse impact on another area, which lost 25% of its population overnight.

Mr Gilbert: I will answer that in a very specific way. From my perspective in the North Eastern Board, members of the board have made representations to the Department on the basis of the calculation because of the very strong view that what is going on in a primary school today may not be what was going on when that equation was worked out. I gave the example a couple of times of the foundation stage and a very different methodology of teaching.

To give you a straight answer, we have gone back, as have colleagues in other boards and CCMS, and raised the issue with departmental officials on behalf of our members that perhaps that is something that needs to be revisited. If you remember back to when this all kicked off, the headlines in the press were about 80,000 spare places. The issue is around the definition of a spare place; we tend to use the phrase — you have heard it this morning from all of us — "unfilled" places. I want to reassure you that we have gone back to the Department and raised the issue on behalf of our members who want to have that looked at in the modern context of the current Northern Ireland curriculum and the responsibilities on our primary schools.

Mrs Overend: So, in fact, it is a really false headline for them to come out with, saying that there are so many thousands of empty places and that that is the reason for looking at area plans. It is really not the reason why we are looking at area plans at all.

Mr Gilbert: You will understand my care at not commenting on that.

Mrs Overend: Is it inevitable that a school that has a capacity of 58, which seems to be quite a small number, is going to close?

Mr Crudden: No. It has been pointed out already that the position of that school would be looked at in the context in which it finds itself. Obviously, we need to take into account the impact that the pattern of enrolment is having on the school's financial position and the impact that that would have on the ability of the school to deliver the curriculum. It is not just a simple matter of saying that every school that falls below a particular enrolment is going to be closed. We try to look at each individual case on its merits.

Mrs Overend: Its full capacity is only 58, never mind that its enrolment is, maybe, slightly more than half of that.

Mr Crudden: That is the point that Ray made; there are some schools that do not have the capacity to take any more children.

Mrs Overend: You referred earlier to 85 being a reasonable amount, and 58 is 30 below that again.

Mr Crudden: Again, the school would be looked at in the context of where it finds itself. If that school was 10 miles away from the nearest school, and, as a result of that school closing, the children were going to have to travel excessive distances, there might be a case for the retention of that school. We cannot just adopt a hard and fast rule that x number of pupils equals a particular course of action.

Mrs Overend: I am glad to hear that. OK, thank you. I was interested to hear the approach that CCMS was taking, which is different from that of the other boards. You seem to be a bit slower in going through the process; you are just finished looking at schools with two teachers, and you are now looking at schools with three teachers. Is that right? Is that the case?

Mr Crudden: I would disagree totally that we are slower. *[Laughter.]* I would absolutely disagree with that. When you are recording that can you put a line underneath it? *[Laughter.]* In the past two years, CCMS has achieved a huge amount of success in the area planning process. The delay is not so much in what CCMS does; the delay is caused, perhaps, by the issue having to be revisited as a result of a consultation exercise or, if you get to a development proposal stage, the length of time that

it appears to take for a final decision to be made in relation to that particular proposal. CCMS can only take it to a certain point, and beyond that point, the responsibility then passes to the Department of Education and the Minister.

Mrs Overend: OK. Looking forward to the proposals for a single education authority, do you feel that, given the extent of the resources that have been used for this area planning process, a single education authority would have been able to carry out such a task?

Mr Gilbert: There are a couple of things to say on that. The first thing is that, as I hope has been illustrated by the presentation, we are using a joined-up process. Therefore, whether it is five plus CCMS or one plus CCMS is, in a sense, irrelevant because we have a common process. In taking it forward, I suppose that we are in the realms of the potential design for the new authority and so on. Certainly, I note that, when the Minister was with you last week, he said that he recognised that a single authority will have a regional perspective that needs to be locally delivered. From our experience of doing this type of work, the local delivery and relationships that we have with our areas and schools are critical.

Getting communities to open up to officials is based on trust, relationships and so on. It is impossible, obviously, to comment specifically around what capacity is needed to take this forward. It certainly needs a resource to deliver it, and I hope that we have illustrated that in the way that we interactively guide the process, but I do not want to make any speculative predictions as to what may be needed.

Mr Donaghy: To add to what Ray said. We have touched on this this morning, but it has not been drawn out: a regional structure is in place for area-based planning. There is an area planning steering group that is representative of the Department and chief executives of all the organisations. There is also an area planning group at an operational level that involves all of the boards, the CCMS and is also across some of the boards. We established, this month, area planning groups at a board level, which involve CnaG, NICIE, CCMS and all of the managing authorities and interested bodies. There is a formalised structure there and a high level of standardising a common approach to area-based planning that has evolved over the last three years, certainly.

Mrs Overend: That was to be my next question: will there be local knowledge with the single education authority? Do you feel that that will continue?

Mr Donaghy: It is a challenge.

Mrs Overend: Under the umbrella of a single education authority, with the CCMS coming in, would that bring a different focus to how you area plan?

Mr Crudden: I do not think that we are coming in under the umbrella of the single education authority.

Mrs Overend: Yes, but they are represented on the —

Mr Butler: That is the current position of the boards.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Thank you, folks. A number of the questions about the geographical isolation and small schools have been dealt with. You were also clear that the Fermanagh model was learning in progress. The important thing today is that we are hearing that this is fluid and flexible, not a finite process.

I go back to the issue of the perception or criticism around it being a top-down process and, in recognition of some of the commentary this morning, about levels of engagement and difficulty through processes, almost until it is in black and white and communities engage. Malachy, you referred to bringing a proposal to the community, which begs this obvious question: how many times did the community bring proposals? You alluded to no meaningful proposals coming forward, but you clearly put that responsibility back on the Department. So, I wonder —

Mr Crudden: In what sense?

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Well, you said that the responsibility for increasing or enhancing community engagement was the Department's. Correct me if I am wrong, but that is what I picked up.

Mr Crudden: I made the point that, at a community level, there is a lack of understanding about what area planning is about. The community, when you talk to it, tends to look at it simply as a process for closing schools.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: So what does the Department need to do?

Mr Crudden: The Department needs to engage in a programme of educating the community at large as to what area planning is about. The documentation would be put out for consultation, but you have to ask how many people are aware that documents are there and go and look at them to see what they say. The Department needs to engage in a programme of educating the community on what area planning is about.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: So you are suggesting an educational programme. What about CCMS? What, in addition, do CCMS and the other bodies need to do?

Mr Crudden: We in CCMS have always taken pride in our relationship with our schools. The strength of our organisation is built on that relationship. I said that, if we identify a school that requires a review, we will not undertake that review without speaking to the principal, the trustee and the chair of the board of governors so that they are aware that we are undertaking that review and why we are doing so. When the draft area plans were being drawn up, we corresponded with every one of our schools and told the principals, the chairs and the trustees what was going to appear in that draft area plan. Then, when they were published, we notified our schools that the draft area plans were out for consultation and that they needed to respond to them. So, we have always kept the communication open between our schools. At each stage of the process, they were fully aware of what was going on in relation to their school. That is why it can be very frustrating when you go out to talk to a community and people say, "We didn't know this was going to happen". We say to them, "We've kept you informed the whole way through the process, from the very start, of the nature of the discussion that was going on in relation to your school". I think that we do a considerable amount to ensure that our schools are aware of what is happening.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I accept the engagement and continued engagement and the very solid relationship with schools, and I accept that any such proposal is subject to consultation with the schools. Equally, if there is a criticism, and it seems to be a common thread that we pick up, it is about the process. Is there a better mechanism? Is there something additional that can be put in place, not only by you but by ELBs, to enhance that bottom-up approach or to support engagement at that level?

Mr Crudden: Part of the message that is delivered during the process is, "This is the proposal that we are bringing to you for consultation. If you as a community, in responding to that proposal, can bring forward an alternative that turns out to be viable, CCMS will look at that". We have done that on several occasions, and the outcome of that has been a change to the actual proposal that was put forward initially. So, that mechanism is there. That is why communities need to understand that the consultation is not a done deal; it is not a rubber-stamping exercise. Eighteen months or so ago, I attended a number of meetings that Ray's board held, at which the message was clearly put out to schools that if they had an alternative, they should let us know what it was.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Is there anything additional from —

Mr Gilbert: I can provide reassurance that there is significant engagement and consultation with communities. One has to take on board human nature. Very often in this process, we discover that, if a discussion or debate is moving in a direction that people do not like, people have a tendency to blame the process. I think that that goes wider than our educational world. As Malachy has said, there are numerous examples across all of the organisations of getting out — even at the very formative stages — and having those discussions and debates with governors, parents, and so on.

It is part of our day-to-day working life that we have to accept that even if something might be right, strategically and educationally, for children, parents will not always agree. If the school is at the end of their street, they might not care if it is slightly lower in numbers. They are happy with their school; why would you change it? You respect that, but, as Malachy and others said, you create the opportunity, but not just because you must at a certain stage of the process, under statute. Again, I am commenting from the North Eastern Board perspective, but I know that others did similar work. When area planning was first commented on, we immediately got out and tried to explain what was going on,

because, at that time, they were hearing all sorts of things. We encouraged them to engage. Most of the draft area plans that were put out for consultation around March 2012 were largely informed by local community, school and governor input in terms of shaping the process. I am sure that colleagues will agree that the same happened in other boards.

Mr Hazzard: Thank you for the presentation. Is there any scope for flexibility in the four-teacher criteria for primary schools, especially with regard to any potential proposal for shared hybrid models?

Mr Butler: We have emphasised all day today that there is no line. There is an area where we look at particular parts, and we have said that we feel that four makes a good provision. We have given examples of where there are less than four but the school is still viable. No part of area planning is about lines in the sand. You look at it in its totality. There may be an area where a four-teacher school or a three-teacher school is justifiable due to other factors that come into play. You look at it in totality, not just the line.

Mrs Watterson: The Brookeborough proposals illustrate that. If a single school was being built for any one of those schools, it would have to be a four-teacher school. That is the smallest school that the Department would build. In those proposals, there are not pupils for eight classrooms. That is part of the reason why that project fell on the first call. My understanding is that, on the second call, we will resubmit that for two schools of three classrooms each. Malachy, you can keep me right here. As folk here have been saying, there are no lines drawn in the sand. You try to accommodate the communities as best you can.

Mr Crudden: That point opens the door for the exploration of shared staff. If you have two three-teacher schools, there is potential for them to look at the possibility of jointly employing a fourth teacher. In fact, I think that happened in the North Eastern Board.

Mr Gilbert: Yes, we have examples of that.

Mr Crudden: There is already evidence of that.

Mr Butler: I do not know if you were here when we referred to the Moy model. That was one of the initial parts that we did, because the school was way less than the four-teacher part. By introducing the preschool provision, we facilitated development. It is a creative approach towards where those circumstances apply.

The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen): You will be glad to know that no one else has indicated that they wish to ask a question. Thank you for your time this morning. Members have found it very useful. We will come back to this as time progresses, and, of course, we will be in contact with you individually, I am sure. Mr Butler and I have a meeting tomorrow morning. I wish you well.