



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate
and School Improvement Process — Formal
Intervention Process Consultation:
DE Briefing

5 February 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Dr David Hughes	Department of Education
Mrs Karen McCullough	Department of Education

The Chairperson: I welcome to the Committee Mr David Hughes, the director of the curriculum, qualifications and standards directorate in the Department; and Karen McCullough from the planning and performance management team at the Department. Apologies for keeping you waiting. Thank you for coming and for the information that has been provided. David and Karen, I ask you to speak to the issue, and members will then have questions for you.

Dr David Hughes (Department of Education): Thank you very much. I am very grateful for the opportunity to brief the Committee. I will set a little bit of context, and Karen will speak about the specific proposals and the consultation responses received.

The Committee will be aware that the Department's school improvement policy, Every School a Good School (ESaGS), was introduced in April 2009. That was intended to set out an overarching approach to raising standards and tackling underachievement in all schools. The purpose behind it was to support school leaders, boards of governors and teachers in implementing good practice in their school to address any barriers to learning that pupils might face and to improve the outcomes for all pupils. The underlying principle is that schools are best placed, through open and honest self-evaluation, to identify and implement changes that will bring about improved outcomes for their pupils.

A critical element of the policy was the introduction of a set of formal procedures to ensure that there would be follow-up on all published school inspection reports. So, if a school inspection report demonstrated outstanding or very good practice, that would be shared and made more widely

available, and action plans would be developed by the school, with support from the managing authorities, for any areas that needed further development or improvement. Additionally, more intensive support would be provided where provision was less than satisfactory.

The Every School a Good School policy included the introduction of a formal intervention process (FIP), which provides robust intervention support arrangements when a school is evaluated as less than satisfactory. The FIP is outlined in annex C to the 'ESaGS' document.

The formal intervention process is one of a number of processes aimed at school improvement. The focus throughout these is on ensuring that pupils receive the highest possible quality of teaching and learning so that they can fulfil their full potential. Schools receive tailored support from the relevant education and library board, or the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) for the Catholic maintained sector, and commit to working with the board or CCMS to deliver an agreed action plan to address the areas for improvement identified in the inspection report. Action plans are quality assured by the inspectorate, which monitors and reports on schools' progress in addressing the areas for improvement.

That process has achieved a much greater focus on school improvement following inspection. That focus is applied by schools, boards of governor of schools, the boards and CCMS. As a result, 80% of the schools that entered the formal intervention process have improved, resulting in a significant improvement in the life chances of the pupils in those schools. We calculate that about 3,500 pupils have been in schools that have exited the formal intervention process and are now getting a better standard of education.

We believe that the process is working well. However, there have been a number of proposals to improve it and clarify elements of it. We wanted to test those proposals with key stakeholders. The revisions put out to consultation were intended to improve the overall quality of education in an area through the refinement of the formal intervention process; to clarify some elements of the procedures; and, critically, to reduce the length of time that pupils are in schools in which the quality of education provision is satisfactory or less. They are also intended to ensure that, when schools are judged satisfactory and do not improve to good, they, too, receive the tailored support they need. Fundamentally, it is about ensuring that children spend time in education experiencing the highest quality of teaching and learning available and that schools get support in providing that.

I will now pass to Karen, who will go through the specific proposals.

Mrs Karen McCullough (Department of Education): Thank you. Questionnaires were issued to all schools, boards, the CCMS, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG), the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), the Governing Bodies Association (GBA), the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI), the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) and the teaching unions. By the closing date, we had received just 26 responses. Five responses were received after the closing date, meaning that we had a total of 31 responses to the consultation.

We have made proposals in four areas. The aim of the first proposal was to clarify the managing authority's plans for a school entering FIP so that support relevant to the circumstances of the school and its pupils could be developed. The proposal suggested that the formal intervention process would include an immediate assessment of a school's sustainability, taking account of local area plans. So, if a school entering FIP is identified in an area plan as part of the future education provision in an area, the managing authority would be asked to confirm that that remains the case. If it has been highlighted in the area plan that a school is to be closed or merged, we would ask the managing authority to submit, within six months, a plan including timescales and proposals for the future education provision of pupils at that school.

Stakeholders were asked whether any factors other than the area plan should be taken into account. Just 19 respondents suggested other factors. Five mentioned the stability of school leadership, and a number of respondents asked for consideration of schools' special circumstances, for example, their location, management type or pupil characteristics.

In the comments received about this proposal, questions were raised about the reality of moving at the pace proposed. There was also a comment that inspection findings should not be linked to any process other than school improvement. The responses highlighted the need for us to be very explicit that the proposal was about clarifying plans and ensuring that we can quickly move to improve the standards of education for pupils.

The second proposal looked at revised timings of follow-up inspections of schools in FIP. Currently, if a school has an inspection finding that is less than satisfactory, it will receive its first follow-up inspection 12 to 18 months later, and a second follow-up inspection 12 months after that. The proposal was that when a school entered formal intervention, it would have only one follow-up inspection within 18 to 24 months of the original inspection, the timing being informed by two interim follow-up visits. If, after two years, a school continued to have a less than satisfactory evaluation, we suggested that further action should be considered. Almost all respondents — 27 of the 28 who expressed a view — agreed that, rather than having two follow-up inspections, schools in FIP should have one follow-up inspection. Comments suggested that 18 to 24 months provided a more appropriate time frame, allowing schools time to address the issues raised. Another respondent suggested that there should not be any interim visits from ETI because they would be classed as inspections when they are really visits.

A similarly high proportion of respondents — 23 of the 27 who expressed a view — agreed that, if a school is in FIP and has not improved to at least a satisfactory evaluation after 24 months, further action should be considered. A minority commented that schools that had not made sufficient progress should be given an opportunity for a second inspection. Most agreed that further action should be considered because the education and life chances of pupils in any such school could be seriously hindered in the absence of such action.

Under this proposal, we also asked stakeholders to consider the case of schools that had gone into FIP because they were less than satisfactory at the first inspection and, at the follow-up inspection, having received two years of support, were found to be satisfactory. It was proposed that such schools have a further follow-up inspection within 12 months, at which point we would expect them to have improved their provision to at least good or have further action taken. So the issue is continued improvement. Respondents' opinion on that was more mixed, with 12 agreeing and nine disagreeing. The concerns expressed were about the length of time that we proposed to give schools and the nature of any further action that might be taken. A particular concern was that the impact of this proposal would be to assign a time limit to a satisfactory judgement, the threat being that, if measurable improvement was not visible within a specified period, a school would be treated in the same way as one in which provision was less than satisfactory, even if it had managed to sustain its initial improvement.

Although agreeing with the concept of a move towards Every School a Good School and the proposed time frame, some respondents cautioned that some schools may need longer to secure a good rating in all areas, particularly those facing a range of complex issues, which can often take a bit longer to sort out. A number of comments related to the interpretation of the term "satisfactory". Some felt that satisfactory was acceptable, and others said that it was not good enough, adding that a school should not exit FIP until it has received a good inspection.

The third proposal looked at clarifying arrangements for schools that are in FIP and are then evaluated as satisfactory at the follow-up inspection. We wanted to make it more explicit that a school will not automatically exit FIP on an ETI evaluation of satisfactory. Instead, as has sometimes happened in practice, the decision about exiting FIP would be based on all of the available evidence, including a recommendation from the managing authority. Again, opinion was mixed, with 14 agreeing and 12 disagreeing. Those in agreement believed that the different circumstances should be taken into consideration, particularly the information from the managing authority. Again, it was suggested that no school should exit from an intervention unless its outcome is at least good.

The proposal, like the previous one, generated comments on the use of the term "satisfactory". It was suggested that agreeing to the proposal would indicate that the current use of the term "satisfactory" to describe the quality of provision of a school was a misnomer and that it would be better described as "improvement required".

The final proposal looked at revising arrangements to support satisfactory schools, where improvement is proving difficult or unsustainable. The expectation in Every School a Good School is that all schools should be striving to be at least good. However, we are aware that, in a small number of cases, schools have not improved their provision from satisfactory over quite a number of inspection cycles. Since the implementation of Every School a Good School back in April 2009, 13 schools have fallen into that category.

Respondents were asked whether they agreed that a school evaluated as satisfactory should have a maximum of up to two follow-up inspections — the first after 12 to 18 months and the second after a further 12 months — to improve provision to at least good before further action was considered.

Again, opinion was divided, with 12 respondents saying yes, 10 saying no, and five saying that they were not sure. Very few respondents offered further comment, although the point about the use of the term "satisfactory" was reiterated.

There was stronger agreement with the suggestion that further action should be considered when a satisfactory school is evaluated as satisfactory in two follow-up inspections, with 16 respondents agreeing. The key message in the comments was that the quality of education provision should be at least good. However, it was also noted that sustained improvement should be recognised and further consideration given to why the school had not been able to improve within the given timescale. The point was made that, depending on where they are in their improvement journey, some schools may require more time and that consideration should, therefore, be made on an individual school basis, with high quality external targeted support provided to facilitate improvement.

The final question that respondents were asked was whether, in addition to the further actions outlined in annex C to Every School a Good School, there were any actions that we should consider taking when schools had not secured the necessary improvements in provision. Ten respondents said yes. They made a range of suggestions including extra funding, educating the community, lowering the quota for grammar schools in an area where there is demographic downturn, and employing, seconding and incentivising effective principals with a proven track record to work with the schools and take up leadership roles.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Karen and David. Basically, 70% of schools did not respond. Indeed, the responses were not all from schools — some were from organisations. Given the small number of respondents, is there not now a serious issue of how you ascertain the real views of the system that will ultimately be subjected to any proposed changes? Earlier, we were struggling with the issue of how we, as a Committee, make information available to people beyond the confines of this room. The Department is in a more difficult place in that it has a responsibility, albeit one that is partly devolved to managing authorities, for the everyday running of schools. David, is there not a concern that the consultation process is so fundamentally flawed or damaged that such a fundamental proposal to change the intervention process could not be implemented as currently proposed?

Dr Hughes: The proposed changes are to the formal intervention process as it exists and has been working for a number of years. It is an adjustment of a process with which schools are familiar, either because they have experienced it or because they are aware of the existing arrangements, even if they have not been affected by them.

This is extending, quite logically, the position that the Every School a Good School policy has taken. It is not taking a radically different approach. It is adjusting and clarifying it and making the point that the Department's strategy is called Every School a Good School, so that is what we are all aiming for. In many ways, I am not so very concerned about the small number of respondents, because it was not introducing a radically new policy. It was adjusting and developing an existing one. I am fairly confident that, if there were a very strong view — I know that some views were quite strongly expressed — consultees would have made that response.

The Chairperson: Karen raised a point about a change of terminology. There is a debate about what we mean by satisfactory. Does using the words "formal intervention", not give rise to an issue that needs to be further expanded on? It goes to the heart of what this is all about: why do we need to have this process when we have Every School a Good School, a policy that everybody buys into? This goes back to an earlier comment by the Committee: generally, the Department's policy takes the right direction of travel, but the wheels seem to fall off the cart when it comes to implementing it, and it gets into all sorts of problems. Placing a "formal intervention" label on a school is like sending a pupil to the headmaster's office. The pupil has to wait outside the door for whatever is going to come. Does that not give rise to a serious issue? I agree that the terminology and categories need to be amended, but do we not need to go back a wee bit further and say that we have to call it something different? Maybe that is where the consultation went badly wrong, in that the Department did not seek feedback on whether FIP should include an assessment of a school's sustainability. Yet many schools believe that this, in conjunction and association with area planning, is all about whether, ultimately, a school will stay in existence.

Dr Hughes: Your point about the name of the process is very well made. We have been considering this internally because some responses made it very clear that the perspective of the formal intervention process is that it is punitive. In particular, I would say that the perspective for those who have not been through the process is that it is punitive. A formal intervention process does sound

slightly threatening. If the process had a different title, and if we were able effectively to make the point that its value is that it is supportive, we may be in a different place. The process needs to be supportive: it needs to both challenge and support the schools in improvement. You make a very valid point about the perception of the process, and that is an element of what we need to work on.

The Chairperson: I have one final query. David, was it you who said that the exit element of the process was quality assured by the inspectorate?

Dr Hughes: The action plans, yes.

The Chairperson: Is that not the police investigating themselves?

Dr Hughes: The action plan is the school's action plan.

The Chairperson: Yes, but surely it should be in conjunction with the inspectorate and the district inspector in the first place. There is a growing concern. We now know that the inspectorate is asked for comment on development proposals. If a development proposal is published, the inspectorate is asked for its opinion. How can the inspectorate be an independent arbiter of whether an action plan is fit for purpose to address the needs of a particular school if it has some other view of what should be the long-term sustainability and future of that school?

Dr Hughes: It is important to completely distinguish between the two evaluations.

The Chairperson: Can you? They are so inextricably linked — forgive us for using that phrase in Northern Ireland. How do you draw that distinction?

Dr Hughes: The development of the schools action plan will be against what the inspectorate has identified as the areas in the school's educational provision that need improvement. If there were not the reference to the inspectorate, as a professional body of educationalists outside the school, one would not necessarily have the assurance of the adequacy of the action plan to address the issues that the inspectorate had raised. That is about the quality of the educational provision. I am not sure how one makes the connection between that and issues of development plans. I confess that I am not familiar with every detail of the area planning process in the production of development plans. I am looking at the school improvement process.

The Chairperson: It is reasonably straightforward. A school, a board or whoever decided — well, it is only a board, or CCMS, that can bring forward a development proposal to close school A. We now know that the inspectorate is asked for its opinion on that development proposal. How is the information from the inspectorate validated in such a way that it is not biased against a particular school? We are dealing with the inspectorate. It is part and parcel of the senior management team of the Department, and its view, in conjunction with the board, may be that school A has to close.

Dr Hughes: I cannot comment on the professional advice given by inspectors. That may be a question to raise with the inspectorate rather than with officials.

The Chairperson: Yes, I accept that.

Mrs McCullough: From personal experience, the action plans that go from the schools to the inspectorate are about the school asking the inspectorate, which has been in the school, whether this is the right set of actions to address the issues that they found with the provision of education in that school. That is then reflected in the school development plan. It is all about the quality of the education and whether this will do the right things for the children in that school. My personal experience has been that that is what it is concentrated on. It is very professional in its response.

Mr Craig: David, good to see you again. I am sure that you are glad to be in education at the minute. David, there is an issue with the name and the titles given in the final inspectors' report. Is there not also a real issue around how help or assistance is given and even the means by which the inspection is carried out? I was listening, and you said that high-quality targeted support should be given to the school. I applaud you for that. Yes, it should be. However, in reality, nothing is given. I am speaking from experience, and I can tell you now that nothing is given. You are given a small level of assistance from your particular board.

The inspectorate itself is very much a stick in this regard. The inspectors come in, and they condemn. They tell you exactly what is wrong here, there and everywhere, and then they disappear. The process is incredibly damaging for any school. It is not supportive or helpful. I have noted that, in practically every school that goes into intervention, the inspectors highlight serious managerial issues. That is the other thing, David. Once a serious managerial issue is highlighted, even if it was being addressed at the time or was about to be addressed — we all know about senior management positions in education. We are talking about approximately two years before you can sort that issue out. That is the reality of education. It is a long-term process. I am just interested to know this: what is the high-quality targeted support that we are talking about? At the minute, I do not see it.

Dr Hughes: I make the point that the support that goes to schools is coming from the boards and CCMS. In the boards, the work of CASS is focused on schools that are in the process. Therefore, support is coming from the boards to the schools to help them. It is very important to note that it is about supporting self-evaluation and self-improvement. It is not that CASS is doing it for the school or to the school, but rather it is supporting the school so that the school itself is able to identify an action plan that will address the issues that have been brought to its attention by the inspection process and able to put that action plan in place. In so doing, the school is developing the capacity for continued self-evaluation and self-improvement — responding positively to what is being brought to their attention, and then being able to take that forward.

Mr Craig: To be honest with you, David, all schools react to any report. An interesting thing the Chair talked about earlier, and it is factual, is that the first thing the inspectors actually do is an audit on the viability of the school. Why would that be?

Dr Hughes: I am not in a position to speak for the way in which the inspectorate conducts its inspections. Specific questions like that need to be raised with the inspectorate.

Mr Craig: Surely the whole thing about inspection is that you go in to look at the quality of teaching in a school. As you said, it is either satisfactory, unsatisfactory, good or excellent — all of those criteria.

Dr Hughes: It is important to make the point that they are evaluating the quality of the educational provision; teaching is a large part of that, but it is not the entirety of it.

Mr Craig: But it is interesting that they do a complete audit of the school, its viability and its future viability. Why would that be part of the inspection report? What does that have to do with the quality of teaching in a school?

Dr Hughes: Again, you are asking a question that I am not in a position to answer. That is a question for the inspectorate about the way that it conducts its inspections.

Mr Craig: The other issue is the lack of people who have contributed to your consultation process. Have you even looked at the rationale behind that? Is there a lack of interest — I doubt it — or is there still a fear factor out there? A lot of schools have gone through the process over the past five to 10 years. I just wonder how many of them have actually made a return to you on this, or are they, as I suspect, just like every other school, afraid to?

Dr Hughes: I do not know whether we have the detail of whether any of the schools who have responded reflect the views of a school that has been through the process. I do not know whether we have that information. I am not sure what you are implying about the fear factor of responding to a consultation by the Department.

Mr Craig: Work it out, David. If you have got yourself out of the process, you will not want to upset the apple cart in any way, shape or form because you will find yourself back in the process. That is the real fear out there.

Mrs McCullough: Sorry, I do not know the circumstances of your particular school, but I want to go back to the evidence that we have about whether the FIP works and people's reaction to being in it. One thing we do is meet the board of governors of schools that are in FIP. A message that comes across from them is that it is not pleasant when they hear the findings and are put into the formal intervention process, which is actually a support package. Generally, the comments that come back to us acknowledge the support that they have been given by the boards, CCMS and the ETI. In the long run, it does help focus on school improvement. It drives that. That is qualitative evidence. The

quantitative evidence includes the NISRA survey, which schools that have been inspected complete. The findings there are very positive. You have probably seen all of the information that there is about the contribution that they are making, but when you talk to leaders in the school, 93% say that they have been treated fairly and that the inspection process has helped the school and organisation to plan for and promote improvement in the outcomes of learners. So, there is quantitative evidence there as well to show that, in the long run, it does help improvement.

Mr Craig: They are very small numbers.

Mr Kinahan: It is 93% of 3%.

Mr Craig: Yes.

Mrs McCullough: But it is 93% of those who have been inspected and gone through the process, which is a very valid point.

Mr Craig: That is an interesting issue, David. I would be grateful if you would do a bit of research into how many schools that have been through the process actually responded. For those that did not respond, would there be any way of finding out the rationale for not doing so, because they are the ones with the real experience as to how this happened?

Mrs McCullough: That is a good thing in the process that we have: we talk to the people who are going through the process while they are going through it, so we can pick up on things like that.

Mr Craig: I hate to say it, but those who have been through the pain are the ones who will know exactly what issues are real and what issues are not.

Mr Rogers: You are welcome. I suppose I just want to take on a point from Jonathan. David, you have mentioned quite often this morning the idea of support: support from managing authorities and so on. Does the Department feel that the education and library boards have sufficient resources to address the issues when a school falls into formal intervention?

Dr Hughes: We are aware that the boards will prioritise the support to schools in FIP when it comes to the resources of their CASS service. It has not been brought specifically to my attention that the boards feel that they are unable to provide the support to schools in FIP. However, it is recognised that the current position of the CASS service is that there is still room for more support to be given to schools. But the boards are prioritising schools in FIP.

Mr Rogers: They are prioritising, but when they were in here it was clear that they were struggling. Say your school falls into formal intervention in, for example, history. I do not know how many, if any, history CASS officers are left in the North. In my board area, in maths, for example, all they can do is firefight. Do you think that is a reasonable place to be, if you want to raise standards, where all you can do is firefight? There are teachers who may not be at the formal intervention stage but are not far behind it who need help, but there is none there.

As you sit in the Department and discuss things with your accounting friends, do you bring it home to them that the severe cuts that they are making, for example, in staff development budgets are having a terrible effect on raising standards?

Dr Hughes: There is certainly a recognition that the reduction in the strengths of the CASS service in the boards has been very dramatic. With the proposals to establish ESA was the proposal to have, as part of that, a school development service. That not being progressed leaves the CASS service generally in a weakened position, because it is neither what it was nor what it should be.

I recognise that there is a real challenge there. I am not sure whether the answer will ever be to revert to the levels of resourcing that existed in the past, partially because of the levels of resourcing in the public sector generally and partially also as a recognition that there is a future position where the available support which already exists in the education system is not being tapped to the degree that it might be, in that support is not necessarily always to come from a board or an equivalent external authority. There is a huge amount of expertise in other schools as well. That is not an answer in itself, but there is a clear need to establish a model of school-to-board — or ESA, or whatever authority it is — support but also school-to-school support because of the expertise that already exists.

Mr Rogers: Yes, but school-to-school support has implications for the school that is providing the support as well. You said that you do not know whether the potential has been tapped. Has the potential within the Department and ETI to take the lead on school improvement been tapped?

Dr Hughes: There have been some developments in the way in which ETI will be able to provide support following that pattern of an inspectorate. At the moment, I know that the inspectors are working with a number of schools on the teaching of English and maths. That is a departure from the previous pattern, and it is taking things in a particular direction. You get a fuller and more sensible answer from inspectors who know the detail of how they are taking that forward. There are other forms of support as well, which will all need to be developed. CCEA, for example, also has a function in the support and delivery of the curriculum, and it also has resources that can be used in a supportive fashion. At the moment, we are in a position of moving from one model, with CASS in the boards, to a school development service in ESA.

Mr Rogers: The inspectorate witnesses some fantastic teaching out there and has a wealth of information on doing this. How is it going to develop that role if, on the other hand, there has been a 20% cut in the ETI's budget? When you listen to inspectors, how are they going to be able to give more for less?

Dr Hughes: You would need to put questions about the business model of ETI to ETI and inspectors. I am not in a position to give any detail on that.

Mr Rogers: OK. One other point, then. A point was raised about the formal intervention and the terms and the language. In future, will you be looking at language such as "unsatisfactory" and "inadequate"? If somebody tells me that I am unsatisfactory, and particularly if they tell me that I am inadequate, it certainly does not do anything to boost my confidence. Morale can be low. Someone made the point earlier that although viability audits have already been carried out, you come back again to look at sustainability etc, which is linked to a very high stake of whether a school stays open or is closed. I am just thinking of the language — the "unsatisfactory" and "inadequate". If somebody tells me that I have development needs and they can itemise them, that is OK.

Dr Hughes: You make a good point about the perception of the labels — what the evaluation categories actually feel as though they mean, as well as the definition that the inspectorate uses. It is for the inspectorate to look at that use of language, rather than me and my team. However, it has been raised here and it has been raised elsewhere. Does "satisfactory" actually mean "satisfactory" according to its dictionary definition? These are things that we are taking on board, and I know that the inspectorate is aware of them.

Mrs McCullough: When the chief inspector came to the Committee she mentioned that the inspectorate would be undertaking a review of performance levels and engaging with the sector in 2014. We can feed this into that process.

Mr Craig: As a point of information — because I find this intriguing, David — has there been a policy change that no school will get out of intervention until it is deemed "good"?

Mrs McCullough: No. That was one of the proposals that was here.

Mr Craig: I have a good reason for asking that.

Mrs McCullough: No, that is not the case. When a school has been in formal intervention and is deemed satisfactory, we go through that process. The ETI evidence is just one of the elements that is looked at. There is a wider consultation about whether the school should exit formal intervention.

Mr Craig: It is quite right that it drives the school towards being good and not just satisfactory. I agree with that, but there is an underlying issue there. Have they moved the goalposts?

The Chairperson: Is the answer to that not: what is the evidence of any school that has come out of FIP that was deemed satisfactory?

Mrs McCullough: We do have schools like that. Schools that are deemed satisfactory do come out of FIP. It is a minority that do not.

Mr Craig: It is satisfactory in all areas, not just in a number of areas.

Mrs McCullough: It is satisfactory overall.

Mr Hazzard: Thanks, folks, for the update. Just on the back of it, I maybe come to it slightly differently, and I am not sure how other members feel, but I do not think we should accept "satisfactory" at all. I agree with what they did in England in getting rid of the term altogether. A school is either at least good, or it is not good enough. I think we waste a bit of time on the notion of "satisfactory". We should just bin it. We need to be moving out of it. I was alarmed when the chief inspector implied on the radio that every satisfactory school would receive an improvement inspection within two years of its original inspection. Is it more than two years presently? Can a school that is deemed to be satisfactory go for more than two years without a sustainable inspection?

Mrs McCullough: I think it is meant to be 12 to 18 months. It is laid out in the —

Mr Hazzard: I know that it is meant to be, but —

Mrs McCullough: I do not know what it is in practice, but, as far as I am aware, that is what it is meant to be.

Mr Hazzard: Again, I am very alarmed about that. We want to move away from "satisfactory" as soon as possible.

Mrs McCullough: Sorry, it is 18 to 24 months.

Mr Hazzard: That is what it is supposed to be. I have no doubt that it is probably not. That is alarming for me. You mentioned, David, that discussions are going on around the term "satisfactory" and various terms. Is there an idea of losing that term?

Dr Hughes: It could come into the discussion that is taking place within the inspectorate, which will actually be taking the decision on how that it is done. I know that that will be a matter of engagement, but the inspectorate will be in the lead in taking that forward.

Mr Hazzard: Has the Department had any discussions with colleagues in England around their decision to remove the term "satisfactory", what fed that and what the effect has been? Is there any sort of dialogue at all there?

Dr Hughes: Again, I am not aware of whether the inspectorate is speaking to its inspector colleagues, but it has not been a matter of discussion between the policy division and any policy officials in England. I am not sure whether the policy was made by the Department or by the inspectorate in England, I must admit.

Mr Hazzard: That is OK. Most of the other things have been more or less covered. I have just one final question on the 20% cut. What has been the effect of that, and what is likely to be the effect going forward?

Dr Hughes: The 20% cut in —

Mr Hazzard: In the inspectorate's budget.

Dr Hughes: Again, you may be asking questions that are for the inspectorate to answer. It maintains an inspection programme. There are still schools that are evaluated as unsatisfactory or inadequate, and so on. There are still schools going into formal intervention. Those schools are still getting the support from the boards and CCMS. Schools that are going into formal intervention are seeing improvement and coming out. When we are looking at whether the process works, I come back to the point about the benefits to the children who happen to be in that school at that time. They are seeing an improvement in the education provision that they receive. That still goes on, which I think is probably the most critical point.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you, David and Karen. I am afraid I am not really concentrating on the excellent detail that you have prepared from what you have learned, but more on why you did not get a good

number of responses. Do you chase it up to get people to respond, or do you just send it out and let the world respond?

Mrs McCullough: It was sent out and then a reminder was sent out, because we extended the time period. We were told that it was too short a time period for people to come back to us, so we extended it and then let everybody know that we had extended it.

Mr Kinahan: Karen, you mentioned that you talk to people. I do not mean that glibly. Therefore, you must get a feeling. David, I was slightly concerned about your comment that you felt that, if people had something that they really wanted to say, they would respond. I think that there is a danger that hiding behind it all is a fear of the system or that no one is listening, and, at the same time, the questions do not have an opening at the end that really encourages the respondent to say that there is something else that is really important. We are getting stuck in our silos. From your comment that you are speaking to people, do you feel that you have a good response here that you can use and work with?

Dr Hughes: I think that the responses come from a sufficient breadth of different respondents. If we had faced responses only from one type of respondent — particularly if it were only one type of respondent and the answers were all the same — then I would have anxiety that the consultation would be quite limited. However, in fact, we got responses from quite a range of respondents, and, in some places, there were very clear differences of opinion. Very tellingly, in others, there was a considerable consensus of opinion on the issue. So, in that way, there is still very definitely value in the consultation responses as a whole because of that difference.

Mrs McCullough: That is a quantitative look at it. I do not think that there was anything there in the responses that surprised us. It is things that you hear people saying, like how long it is, the names of the things, and what "satisfactory" means. A lot of it was about needing to clarify the position, because people thought that a satisfactory rating meant that you were automatically out of formal intervention. It just provided clarity around that. There was nothing there that was unexpected.

Mr Lunn: You have probably answered any question that I might have. I am glad that we are having a discussion about the use of words and perception, because I think that it is far more important than people realise. Frankly, only the Department of Education, perhaps aided and abetted by the inspectorate, could produce a situation where "satisfactory" and "unsatisfactory" mean the same thing, effectively. They produce the same result: formal intervention. Try explaining that to a parent who is looking at a school with a view to sending their child there, and try to explain to them why this school that has a satisfactory rating from the inspectorate, is the nearest good school to where they live and is where they would like to send their children, is in formal intervention. It just does not make sense.

You mentioned that improvement is required. You could toss words about all day, but "intervention" is a loaded word. If the school is unsatisfactory, intervention is fair enough, but not if it is satisfactory or good. Even a good school can require improvement. I know that the strapline is Every School a Good School, but, in fact, we are aiming for every school to be an excellent school.

As usual, I cannot quite form a question here.

Mr Newton: Find one there somewhere.

Mr Lunn: The word "assistance" comes to mind, rather than "intervention". If a school is satisfactory but requires a bit of work, it requires assistance but not, perhaps, formal assistance. "Formal" is a loaded word too. "Formal" means inescapable or compulsory. There are all sorts of connotations to all of these words. David, I think that you said that it is the inspectorate that is charged with producing these descriptions, but perhaps the Department could lean on it a bit to come up with something that would mean something to prospective parents.

Dr Hughes: The inspectorate will look at the categories. It is very interesting that the question of what "satisfactory" means is a considerable distraction from the impact of what we are aiming for. What "satisfactory" is not, in the inspectorate's current categorisations, is "good".

Mr Lunn: It is not good enough.

Dr Hughes: It is not "good". There is a "good" category, and, therefore, "satisfactory" is not good enough. Exactly. We probably need to remind ourselves that we are aiming for every school to be a good school, because that is possible. I think that you are right that the formal intervention process has a slightly threatening connotation. There is a point about this idea of intervention that is worth picking up on. It may not be the right word, but it has an important idea behind it, which is that schools have a great deal of autonomy and the ideal is that schools are fundamentally relying on self-evaluation and self-improvement. So, if there is to be intervention, meaning another authority or organisation coming to the school to provide support, that is significant. That is not necessarily a defence of the word "intervention", but it explains why it is there.

Mr Lunn: You could use the word "support". Indeed, you just used it. "Assistance", "support", "advice" — there are a load of words out there that are far better than "intervention". However, if the school is in a bad enough state, "intervention" is the right word.

Mrs McCullough: There are a couple of points in that. A good school has to have an action plan, because there are areas for improvement, as you said. The other thing is that, depending on the circumstances, formal intervention, as it is called, looks different for different schools. I think that the point was very well made when the CASS people from the board were here. I think that it was Mr Gilbert from the North Eastern Education and Library Board who made the point very well that how the package of support looks for that school depends on where you are and on the issues that are being addressed. So, the intervention differs, depending on the situation, and it is bespoke to the school's circumstances.

Mr Lunn: I do not disagree with that at all, but I still wonder how you explain this to parents, who mostly, like me, would take a fairly simplistic view of things. If a school is in formal intervention, that is a red light flashing for any parent, whether they already have a pupil at the school or are about to enrol them. However, it may be that the school also got a "satisfactory" rating. It needs to be tidied up.

The Chairperson: To conclude, David, on the numbers that you gave us, it has been intimated to us that 10 schools had two consecutive "satisfactory" evaluations.

Mrs McCullough: Over the time that we have had this, 13 schools have fallen into the category of going from "satisfactory" to "satisfactory". Ten primary went from "satisfactory" to "satisfactory", and one went from "inadequate" to "satisfactory" to "satisfactory". Eight post-primaries have gone from "satisfactory" to "satisfactory", and two have had three "satisfactory" ratings in a row. At the moment, there are two primaries and five post-primaries in that position. So, it is quite a small number.

The Chairperson: What is your assessment of the implication if these proposals were adopted? Would it lead to a further 11 schools entering the formal intervention process?

Mrs McCullough: They would be targeted for some additional support, whatever it is called.

The Chairperson: Do we have a number of those?

Mrs McCullough: Yes; there are seven at the moment.

The Chairperson: Seven?

Mrs McCullough: Yes.

The Chairperson: Are they all in the controlled sector?

Mrs McCullough: Sorry, I do not know that. I could check it for you.

The Chairperson: That would be useful.

Mrs McCullough: As David said, with CASS, the first group of schools that it targets support for is the ones in formal intervention. It then has a group of schools — I think that it is a second tier of schools — that it will support. One of the criteria that it would look at is whether schools are sitting on a "satisfactory" rating, and, if so, they may need some additional support. However, I do not know the level; that is down to the boards and CCMS.

The Chairperson: Finally, who ultimately makes the final decision about a school coming out of intervention?

Dr Hughes: The decision is taken in the Department.

The Chairperson: So, it is the Department that ultimately makes the decision? Is it not ETI?

Dr Hughes: No.

Mrs McCullough: The inspection report is just one piece of information that feeds into it.

The Chairperson: So, it is almost like a development proposal process. Information is gathered, and, ultimately, a recommendation comes from the Department.

Dr Hughes: It would be done at official level.

The Chairperson: It would be done at official level. I am aware of one school in my constituency that waited six months for a reply from the Department about taking it out of formal intervention, yet the board said that it saw no reason why it could not be progressed. For those six months, that school was in the very position that Trevor referred to. People were saying, "What is going on here?", and it just so happened that area planning was going on and that there was a proposal to change significantly the nature of that school. I saw the comment in one of the responses, and that said that what feeds the fear is that this is not what it is intended to be. I trust, David, that you will take that on board as a serious issue that people have. The policy direction and those things may be well intended, but it seems as though, when it comes to being practically implemented, it causes undue concern that may or may not be necessary.

Trevor, you wanted to make a final point.

Mr Lunn: I want to make a positive comment, Chairman. We should not lose sight of the fact that there are 1,200 schools. How many of them are in the process? Is it about 13?

Mrs McCullough: It is seven at the moment. When you look at first inspections — I looked at that over that time — you see that, of 559 inspections, 74% were "good" or better.

Mr Lunn: I did not know that figure, but that is the point that I was trying to make. Despite all the pressures that we have been talking about on the boards, schools, principals, teachers and pupils, the overall requirement to put schools into some form of assistance programme is very low. The rate is less than 1%. So, fair dos.

The Chairperson: David and Karen, thank you very much for your time and your papers.