



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Common Funding Scheme and Education Bill:
Mr John O'Dowd MLA (Minister of Education)

9 April 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:

Mr O'Dowd	Minister of Education
Ms Fiona Hepper	Department of Education
Mrs Roisin Lilley	Department of Education
Mrs Karen McCullough	Department of Education
Ms Kathryn Menary	Department of Education
Mr Paul Price	Department of Education

The Chairperson: Minister, you are very welcome, as are your officials. Thank you for agreeing to come and see us today. I am sure that you have many other issues to attend to, so, without further ado, I ask you to make a few opening comments, which will be followed by members' questions.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Thank you, Chair, and thank you for your invitation to come before the Committee today to answer questions across a range of issues. I believe that we are dealing with the common funding formula (CFF), the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) and vacancy control. I was not planning on making lengthy or, indeed, medium-length, opening remarks, but I will touch on a number of the headline issues around the common funding formula, and then I will get into the other issues.

As members will be aware, we had a significant consultation process in relation to the CFF, and I made my announcements on my final decisions in March. If it suits the Committee, I will read the headlines of that decision and then move into questions. The principles of the CFF are to be revised to include the importance of school sustainability. Two separate funding streams will be introduced within the CFF, one for nursery/primary schools and one for post-primary schools. That will take effect

from 2014-15. An additional £15.8 million is to be split across the streams, with £13 million for nursery/primary and £2.8 million for post-primary. That is being implemented, along with an increase in the primary age-weighted pupil unit (AWPU) from 1.06 to 1.08.

There will continue to be three bands for targeting social need (TSN). The additional £10 million for TSN is to be split across the streams, with £5.5 million for nursery/primary and £4.5 million for post-primary, and is to be allocated on a more graduated basis for nursery/primary schools of 10%/30%/60% split across bands 1, 2 and 3 and injected into post-primary schools in band 3.

Targeting social need was a significant part of responses to the consultation and, indeed, the debate. Two thirds of the Warnock element, which is £4.7million of that funding, will be allocated using free school meals entitlement. One third, £2.4 million, will be directed into primary schools' core funding. Future TSN-related changes will be subject to normal consultation requirements. A new factor of looked-after children at 0.5 of the basic AWPU cash value will be introduced for 2014, and the premises factor will remain.

The CFF will no longer contain a specific sports factor. The VAT factor for the common funding formula for grant-maintained, integrated and voluntary grammar schools will be reimbursed directly. The Irish-medium curricular support factor for post-primary schools and units will be increased from 0.014 to 0.2. The existing support for special units within mainstream schools will be retained and there will be a number of other more minor and less significant changes to the common funding formula that I am sure we will cover in the course of the meeting.

To allow more times for members' questions etc, I had not planned to make any introductory comments in relation to vacancy control or ESA, if that suits the Chair.

The Chairperson: Given an opportunity such as this, we can sometimes go from Dan to Beersheba on many of the issues. We should keep focused on the three issues that we conveyed to you and the Department, which are around the revised common funding formula, ESA and vacancy control. Hopefully, doing that, in the time we have, will keep all of us on track.

Thank you, again, Minister for coming. When originally announced, the common funding formula obviously caused considerable concern. In fact, as a result of public petition and thousands of responses, it caused serious concern, and the Committee responded, as did many others.

So, where do we stand? As confirmed by letter from the Department this morning, the Committee has still not seen the spreadsheet telling us the outcome or position of schools in 2014-15 when you do not have the £25 million that was, basically, injected into the system as a result of this year's budget. That leads me to wonder why the headline in one local paper was:

"Schools set to lose millions in cuts".

The report listed somewhere in the region of 20 primary schools, 13 in the controlled sector and seven in the maintained sector, which this year stand to lose from £117,000 down to £30,000. What comfort can you give to schools that today face redundancies on the basis of those figures and the fact that the £25 million to prop it up is no longer be in the system?

Mr O'Dowd: Part of me says that the political and media debate regarding the common funding formula and the consultation was a good thing. It showed that we were involved in bread-and-butter politics and that we were involved in a debate around education including educational attainment and how to move education forward. At times, various and contradictory ideas were debated in the media and across the Chamber, which has to be a good thing. I have to say that the media cannot criticise politicians for not getting involved in bread-and-butter issues and then go off on one and criticise us for taking radical decisions, whether or not they agree with those decisions. That is what politics has to be about and it is where we are moving to.

I certainly did not want to create undue concern or worry among our educationalists, and I did not take any pleasure from that. Throughout my contributions, I assured them that I was listening carefully to their consultation responses, and, if there was additional money, that could be factored into the system.

Moving to the £25.8 million that has been added to the aggregated schools budget. That is an integral part of the aggregate schools budget, so it is not possible for me to present you with a spreadsheet

showing, "This would happen if I removed the £25.8 million". It is like saying what would happen if I removed the small schools factor or the funding for Travellers' children. So, it is part of it.

Looking to next year's budget, none of our Departments has had its budget confirmed for next year. This is a matter for discussion and negotiation among the Executive bodies. I am confident that the Department of Education can approach the negotiations from a strong, robust point of view. I base that analysis on the fact that after the last budget settlement in 2010-11 the Department was able to engage with the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the then Finance Minister and point out that the Education budget was unsustainable going forward. The three men involved awarded the Department further funding. So, I am very confident that I can enter the negotiations with my Executive colleagues in the future and say that, at the very least, education has to start from where it is at the moment, if not increase. I will argue for an increase, obviously. Sitting here as Education Minister, I can say that that £25.8 million is an integral part of the aggregated schools budget moving forward. I have made that decision.

The Chairperson: If you take what you have outlined, Minister, as the premise and foundation upon which you will build, then where you start from next year is a completely different place. Set aside the issue of the £25 million. The formula has fundamentally changed because of the Warnock factor and because of band 3 getting the highest percentage of the money allocated. Clearly, there has been a progression, and if the foundation for next year's budget negotiations remains the same, the disparity will still continue to affect those schools that do not hit inside those bands in relation to targeting social need. If that is the case, I cannot understand why the recent Nolan report, which everybody commented on, including you, clearly indicated that almost 20% of working-class Protestant boys in receipt of free school meals are still underachieving against the target of five GCSEs from A* to C. What is the evidence that proves to us that, as a result of targeting in this way, you can secure an outcome? The most recent report, which came out last week shows that, with that additional help, pupils in that category are still not achieving what the Department says is the benchmark for success.

Mr O'Dowd: I did not answer the point in your previous question about media reports that a number of schools will lose significant amounts of money. The schools identified in that report are losing significant amounts of money as a result of a significant number of pupils leaving their schools. Regardless of the changes I made or did not make to the common funding formula, those schools would have lost money. Indeed, they would have lost significantly more money if I had not made changes to the common funding formula.

You made points about the recent Community Relations Council report, the Nolan report. Surely that points to the fact that we need to invest in areas of social deprivation and need to give increased funding to the schools that face the greatest challenges with social deprivation. With that increased funding has to come increased accountability for how those resources are used to support young people from socially deprived backgrounds to improve their educational outcomes. On its own, it will not improve educational outcomes. Over the past number of years, we have seen a steady increase in the educational outcomes of young people from socially deprived backgrounds. The percentage points have risen year-on-year, though I accept that they are not rising quickly enough. The social issues, the community background issues and all the things that are happening outside the school gates follow a child into the school, and we have to support the school inside and outside the school gates to overcome those.

I will give an example. There has been some debate recently about how we move forward and support the challenges in the Protestant working-class community in the Shankill. As a result of the changes that I have made to the common funding formula, and as a direct result of targeting social need, schools in the Shankill area will receive £572,000 extra. Indeed, as a result of the entire changes to the common funding formula, the schools in the Shankill area will receive almost £1 million — £916,451 — in increased funding. The average increase to schools across the North has been 2.4%, and, in the Shankill area, it is 6.5%. I think that it is only right and proper that we target areas of high social need and also put the challenge to schools and to communities and community leaders to ensure that those young people are given every opportunity and encouragement in education.

The Chairperson: On that very point, does the Department have information on the schools? To date, we have not seen it. Some time ago, you issued, via the boards, correspondence to schools that had a surplus. It was made very clear that, if you had a surplus, you were not going to be able to access certain moneys such as additional money for support teachers. There had been a scheme whereby, if you needed additional support, you would not have access to that particular fund but would have to use your surplus. How many of the schools that have received additional money have budget

surpluses? How do you square that with saying to one group, "You have to use your surplus, and we are not allowing to progress until you do"? In fairness to the Department, a letter went out saying that, "If you actually demonstrate that you have, in your three-year plan, set out reasons how you will spend this money, that will be considered". What about the issue of schools with surpluses?

Mr O'Dowd: I believe that that letter came from the boards. That is understandable, because the Department queries the boards regularly about how they are managing and dealing with school surpluses. As you point out in your question, schools can carry as surplus, as long as there is, as part of their three-year plan, a way to deal with that surplus and how it will be invested in their school. However, in some instances, boards were replicating services into schools that could have been funded from either the school's budget or the school's surpluses. The boards, quite rightly, are trying to maintain their budgets, and, in doing so, to regulate school budgets as well.

I am more than happy to provide the Committee with any information that we have on schools on that have surpluses and name the individual schools and the plans that may be in place to spend that surplus. I have not taken any measures against schools that are carrying surpluses relating to targeting social need other than to emphasise to the education and library boards that surpluses have to be invested in pupils and that they should be spent in a way that assists pupils in their learning. Boards should ensure that their statutory responsibility to manage school funds is in place. On the matter of additional funds going into targeting social need, my officials are working up a scheme to monitor those funds and identify educationally appropriate tools that could be used by the schools to use that funding as well.

The Chairperson: So, in a sense, Minister, we have put the cart before the horse. We have given them the money, and now we are going to work out a system for how they will be monitored on how they spend it. The figures show that 23% of post-primary schools and 27% of primary schools will lose money. My concern is on two points. First, what will we do with the 23% and 27% of schools that will lose money? If anyone, including you or the Department, believes that they are so rich with a huge amount of money that they can afford their coffers to be raided to give to others, I think that that is not the case. Secondly, how can I and this Committee be sure that, as a result of what the Department has done on this, we will see improved educational outcomes for those children, which is what we want to see? There is no dispute about that issue, but how will we be sure that we have secured it? Pat and I have had an issue in that he said that he and I would have a press conference with a photograph together if there were schools that have lost. Well, 23% of them have lost, so it looks as though he and I are going to the front steps of Stormont for the photograph today.

Mr O'Dowd: In relation to those schools that have lost, the losses average between £2 and £11,000. The loss of a pupil to a primary school is around £3,000. We have had the conversation about why one newspaper identified several schools as losing money. They lost pupils; therefore they lose money.

We are ignoring the fact that I have set aside a transition fund to ensure that no school loses money moving forward.

Regarding school surpluses, I am not sure whether you have booked the photographers and the media for the press conference. I know that Pat has had his hair done, so he may be looking forward to that. A significant number of schools with surpluses are also losing money, and I am compensating them. There are checks and balances on both sides.

In my firm opinion, schools need to be investing the money that is given to them in the education of the young people before them. Schools that are building up surpluses without a plan have to be dealt with robustly by education and library boards. Regardless of what sector they come from and regardless of the number of free school entitlement children they have, that money needs to be invested in the pupils. The boards have been tasked to carry out that work more robustly.

The Chairperson: I will go to members shortly. However, on the point about the robust challenge by the boards, who is the accounting officer for all of that? Is it the boards or the permanent secretary?

Mr O'Dowd: Ultimately, it is my permanent secretary. However, the chief executives of the boards are also the accounting officers for the boards.

Mrs Dobson: Minister, thank you for your answers thus far. You will be aware that the Department's consultation on the common funding scheme cost about £110,000. Given the high cost and the fact

that the proposals were later revised, what lessons have been learned by your Department from that consultation?

Mr O'Dowd: I hope that other Departments would learn lessons from my Department on how to run a consultation. We ran a consultation that received 15,000 responses, and I believe that your good self was one of those who called on me to ensure that the Department of Education did not carry out the analysis of the consultation responses. You may claim that I listened to you, and I brought in an outside body to bring the consultation response together, to analyse them and present them to my Department in a way that allowed my officials and I to make the final decisions.

I am quite proud of the fact that we received 15,000 consultation responses. I am also proud of the fact that we were able to turn it around in a reasonable time and come to decisions that showed that I listened to the consultation responses, reflected on them and made changes where I believed the evidence and the argument had been made to do so.

Mrs Dobson: Given that some of the respondents claimed that the consultation was advertised inadequately — I know that you had a giant response, which shows the interest in it — and that the questions were loaded and did not address the key issues in the revised scheme, do you plan to take those criticisms on board with future consultations?

Mr O'Dowd: I think that there is validity in the criticism in the public meetings and how we advertised them. They were advertised only in the three morning dailies. The lesson to be learned from that is that we could have broken that down further and went to local newspapers. We could also have brought the public meetings outside the main centres of population.

We received the formal consultation responses, written responses and letters. I was also particularly pleased with the number of young people who responded to the consultation; almost 3,000 of them did so. They showed an ability and a willingness to express their views and opinions. A lot of good work was carried out during the consultation, but there are lessons to be learned from the public meetings.

Mrs Dobson: Do you want to come in on that, Chair, or can I ask another wee question?

The Chairperson: Go ahead. I am very conscious that the Minister is only with us until 11.30 am. Is that what you indicated, Minister?

Mr O'Dowd: I did, yes.

The Chairperson: We will try to keep it moving.

Mrs Dobson: Chair, I should be finished by 11.30 am.

Mr Kinahan: *[Inaudible.]*

The Chairperson: I do not want to get involved in an intra-party matter.

Mrs Dobson: On a different point, Minister, will you outline how you propose to assess the effectiveness of TSN funding? In your introduction, you mentioned that more funding will be put into areas of social need. How will you take into account the impact of other funding, such as DSD neighbourhood renewal funding? Surely, that will be difficult to quantify as far as outcomes are concerned. How do you plan to do that?

Mr O'Dowd: I am not expecting an immediate overturn or a significant jump in percentage points of young people from educationally deprived backgrounds who achieve further degrees of educational results. It is a long-term plan that will require significant financial investment and an investment from our schools, the Department and everyone else who is involved in education.

It will be difficult at times for the statisticians to break down whose money is making the difference. However, we know that, without investment, our education system has faced many challenges in socially deprived communities to overcome the researched relationship between social deprivation and educational underachievement.

I have used the example of Toronto several times in this debate. Representatives there made similar decisions 10 years ago, and they are now beginning to see significant benefits in their education system. They faced the same challenges, criticisms and debate as we have faced in this society in relation to that investment, but they are now seeing the dividends from that. It will take several years for the benefits to be seen. Statisticians may want to argue about whether it was money from DE, DSD, or in fairness, from the Health Minister who is investing in early intervention programmes, that made the difference. I do not mind as long as it makes the difference.

Mrs Dobson: Finally, if the Minister is leaving at 11.30 am, could I follow him out to discuss preschool education. It is Groundhog Day again.

Mr O'Dowd: If you can get past my bodyguards, that is fair enough.

Mrs Dobson: I will try. I will give it a good attempt. Thank you.

Mr Lunn: Minister, I want to go back to the Chairman's opening gambit. When the first changes were announced to the common funding scheme there was outrage and so on, which you managed to stamp down pretty well by confirming that no school would lose in the current year. However, schools are insisting that they have not had reduced enrolment but are still losing money.

I do not want to name a particular school, because I know that its staff have written to you. Can I take it that you will be able to explain to that school in detail how the new factors have been worked out that have produced the situation in which they have lost money even though, according to your reassurance of a few months ago, they would not.

Mr O'Dowd: Several schools have already been in contact with my Department by telephone and through correspondence with officials. All of them have been brought through their budget allocations line by line, had it explained to them how their budget was arrived at and how we are of the view that they have not lost money as a result of the common funding formula changes. I am not aware of any school coming back to me saying that the Department has got it wrong, that my figures are wrong or that my formula has resulted in them losing significant amounts of money as a result of formula changes that have not been taken into account through the transition fund. I am happy to engage with any school that comes to me in that regard.

Mr Lunn: That is really all that I wanted to find out. I did not doubt it for one minute, but let us have it on the record. As of last Friday, one school that has been in touch with me is quite convinced that it has been a loser no matter what explanation they have received from you. Maybe you have not given them the line-by-line breakdown of the budget calculation. However, I will leave it at that.

My other question is just a short point about grant-maintained integrated primary schools. Are they not permitted to establish special units as things stand at the moment?

Mr O'Dowd: There is no barrier to them doing that that I am aware of. This has been raised previously. I have checked with officials and checked the legislation, and there does not appear to be any barrier in the legislation or policy, that would stop a grant-maintained integrated school establishing a special unit. If there is a specific school that you have in mind that wishes to contact the Department directly, we are more than happy to discuss that with them. If there are barriers in place, we will look at what those are. However, neither I nor my officials are aware of any barriers that would prevent a school from doing that.

Mr Lunn: You could perhaps go back to the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) to confirm that situation. There is an impression that there is a barrier. I do not know whether it is formal or informal. That is the question.

Mr O'Dowd: I am more than happy to do so. I am not aware of any development proposals, certainly during my time, from any school in that sector for a special needs unit to be approved or, for that matter, turned down, so I am more than happy to engage with them.

Mr Lunn: You might get one or two after today.

Mr O'Dowd: OK.

Mr Moutray: At what level would the Department intervene where there is a large deficit in a school? What height would the deficit have to reach? When that happens, what is the nature of a departmental intervention in relation to school management? Are alterations likely to be temporary or permanent?

Mr O'Dowd: The intervention will be by the relevant education and library board and would take place around concerns about a school's three-year development plan and its budget plans. Schools are allowed to carry a £75,000 surplus or 5%, whichever is greater, and the same applies to deficits. Some of our schools are significantly over that, and we have been challenging the education and library boards to bring those budgets into line and under control. The boards have been doing that. At this stage, it is a case of working and cooperating with the schools to assist them in managing those surpluses or deficits. Ultimately, if a school refuses, is unable or unwilling to do it, there can either be an intervention from the board or by the Department under article 101, but that would happen only in the most extreme circumstances.

Mr Moutray: I understand that, but I am aware of a school with a considerable deficit. At what point, how long is the time frame, or what must the amount involved be before it is red flagged and you say, "We have to get in here and do something radical to address it"?

Mr O'Dowd: It should be flagged up at the 5% or £75,000 mark, whichever is relevant in the circumstances. The board should be engaging with the school and/or its managing authority on the way forward. Some schools, particularly those with significant deficits, are being dealt with through area planning, whether through amalgamation or perhaps even closure. Although it would not be the only deciding factor, schools that are running into particularly large deficits are most likely to be those with significantly falling enrolments. Boards, through area planning, are being asked to investigate the way forward for those as well. However, the figures are set and boards are acutely aware of them. Schools are acutely aware of them. Each school, however, will tell its own story about its deficit or surplus, and boards will engage with them on the way forward.

The Chairperson: On that point, Minister, I am well aware of a particular school in the post-primary sector — I will not name it because doing so would be unfair of us, and I appreciate members not doing that — the figures for which are reasonably fine this year. However, it will take a considerable hit next year because of the intake. A look at the figures for the succeeding two or three years show that it will see an increase, but the interim period could leave that school with a deficit in the region of £500,000. What help can you assure us will come from the Department for that board area to ensure that a very good school, one that has addressed all the issues in all other areas of policy and so on, is maintained and its demise is not based solely on pounds, shillings and pence?

Mr O'Dowd: The board would have to look at the school through the prism of the sustainable schools policy, which allows flexibility in the sense that we do not look at any of the criteria over a one-year period. We would look at the school across the criteria and by looking down the road at future enrolments and the projected future need for that school. In my opinion, a school that runs into a deficit in those circumstances would be assisted rather than challenged by the board. In the longer term, the board could and should work with a school in such circumstances on how that deficit can be retrieved over a number of years.

Mr Rogers: Thank you, Minister. You are very welcome. Is the contingency fund operational for just this year, or is it for the whole mandate?

Mr O'Dowd: The comprehensive spending review (CSR) budgetary period comes to an end in 2014-15. The Executive will be entering into negotiations on a one-year budget for 2015-16 ahead of the next Assembly election. I wish to continue to operate a contingency fund for schools that are losing funds. However, that will depend on how successful I am in negotiations with my Executive colleagues. As I said in response to a number of the opening questions from the Chair, I am confident that the Education Department can enter those negotiations from a positive position, because our most recent budget was recognised by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and the then Finance Minister, as unsustainable moving forward, and we were awarded quite a significant amount of money mid-term to sustain the situation. That is the way in which I intend to enter negotiations with my Executive colleagues on the 2015-16 Budget.

Mr Rogers: Thank you. Equality screening was carried out on the common funding formula scheme. The Committee asked for that paper in January or February but has not received it.

Mr O'Dowd: We could not publish the equality impact assessment ahead of me making a decision in relation to the common funding formula, because I was using that as a reference document in making my final decisions on that. My officials are currently updating the equality impact assessment in light of how I have dealt with it, and they are looking at any factors that were raised through it in my final decisions relating to the common funding formula. That work will take a further several weeks. Once it is complete, it will be shared with the Education Committee.

Mr Rogers: I admire what you are trying to do in tackling social deprivation and so on, but is the education budget not being spread too thinly? We should be tackling educational disadvantage. For instance, a child with autism will get Son-Rise support in one board area but not in another, and it can take up to two years to get a diagnosis. Take nursery education, for example, where up to 30% of our children are coming in with language acquisition problems. How can we better tackle educational disadvantage?

Mr O'Dowd: I have never argued that more funding alone will tackle educational underachievement, particularly in socially deprived communities. However, it has to be part of the equation in tackling educational underachievement in those communities. I have never suggested that the education budget is sufficient. We are dealing with a depleted budget as a result of cuts to the block grant by the coalition Government, and all Departments are struggling under added pressures in that regard. Since taking office, I have said that I believe we have the right policies in place but that we have to implement them with more vigour. I have been doing that over the past number of years, and I believe that those policies will continue to pay educational dividends.

In fairness, through the Delivering Social Change agenda, as has been mentioned, other Departments are involved in projects that will benefit education. The Minister for Social Development, the Health Minister and the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure are involved in projects that will bring benefits to their Departments, society and education in the future.

You referred to early interventions. A number of Departments, including mine, are involved in early interventions in socially deprived communities. They are assisting families, communities and children to be better equipped for life and education. All those interventions are long-term investments that will pay dividends long after I have left post and long after many in this room have moved on to other things. That is the programme that the Executive are involved in, and I think that it is the right programme.

There are no quick-fix solutions in society, despite many understandable and justifiable demands from the public, the media or elsewhere. Long-term investment in social issues, based on evidence and best working practices are required, moving forward.

Mr Rogers: While we are talking about nursery provision and so on, why has nursery principal release such as that available for primary principals not been considered as part of the common funding formula?

Mr O'Dowd: It was not part of the consultation programme, but it has been an area of work in my Department. I have committed to the National Association of Head Teachers, which is representing nursery school principals in this matter, that, once I have the common funding formula and its implications out of the road — it has an indirect effect in many ways on principal release time — I will come back to the matter. My officials are working through proposals and costings on principal release time for nursery school principals and, once that work is complete, they will present me with a report and I will make a final decision on it.

The Chairperson: You made a point about the overall budget. A letter that DFP sent to the Audit Office was very clear:

"These savings are required due to the financial pressures faced by the NI Block, including the penalties that are being imposed by HMT due to the lack of progress on welfare reform, within Northern Ireland. It therefore is expected that Departments will have to find additional savings of 1.5% during 2014-15."

Is it not the case that you just cannot just blame the previous reduction in finances when decisions could be made that would help your budget? You will start with a deficit of 1.5%, which is a pretty tough mountain to climb.

Mr O'Dowd: No decisions have been made on what penalties any Department will face as a result of not implementing welfare reform. Those discussions will continue to take place with Executive colleagues and with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. However, I want to say that we are trying to tackle the consequences of social deprivation in education and the consequences of welfare reform will make the job harder for us all.

Mr Hazzard: You are very welcome to the Committee, Minister. I welcome the Department's direction of travel in targeting social need. You mentioned Toronto and the great effect there over the past 10 years. When you engage with certain schools now, they are looking at extra resources that they are able to spend. Is the Department also engaging with schools on how best to target their resources? There were various problems in England with the pupil premium, and some schools tarmacked their tennis courts instead of spending the money in the best interests of the pupils.

Mr O'Dowd: My officials are working on a number of programmes we will present to schools that have gained further funding as a result of targeting social need. We will advise them, in our opinion, on the way forward to spend the money on programmes related to them, and we will support those schools to use those extra resources. It will perhaps take schools a number of years to bed those resources in and identify and firm up the best way forward. We will work with those schools and assist them to do that. However, it will certainly not involve tarmacking tennis courts or any other court for that matter. In certain circumstances, it may be used for facilities in schools, speech and language therapists, additional classroom assistance, added materials or after-school activities. It is about what the school believes is best, moving forward, but it should be an educationally proven way forward and in line with the programmes that my Department will identify and has identified in conjunction with the school.

Mr Hazzard: Questions were asked about accountability and the issue that, in all likelihood, it could be a generation before we see the real effects of these changes. How does the Department assess or hold to account the changes in the long term?

Mr O'Dowd: There are the normal audit processes. Our Education and Training Inspectorate visits and inspects schools on programmes of work. When we finalise the way forward for accountability on these matters, I will share that with the Education Committee.

As I said in response to an earlier question, statisticians and accountants may have some difficulties at times in equating which resource assisted children in moving forward, but we need to satisfy ourselves that schools have adequate resources, wherever they receive them from, to ensure that they have the resources to assist the children. The Canadian example demonstrates that other nations have shown that investing and targeting social need is required because it is the single biggest barrier to a child from a socially deprived background achieving good educational results. As I said, accountants and statisticians may have some difficulties with this, but I believe that the educational outcomes will be shown in the years to come. I used the Toronto example, where they are now in their tenth year of this and are seeing the benefits. I do not expect to see a change next year or perhaps even the year after that, but, after that, I believe that we want to be seeing tangible results coming through.

The Chairperson: Maybe after the Assembly elections in 2016, we might see that. Minister, if it is the case that we are not going to waste money on tarmacking, when will the Department stop wasting money on computer-based assessments, at £3 million? Those are assessments that schools already do. You are talking about an in-house process to do computer-based assessments. Scrap all of that nonsense and that resource could be directed towards the best place, which is the classroom and the teachers. I think that you would then have the entire support of this Committee in relation to schemes, rather than failed, useless, worthless schemes such as computer-based assessment. The way that was rolled out was not the teachers' fault; it was the Department's blunder. It was a shambles, and Key Stage assessment is heading down the wrong road. The best thing that you could do, Minister, is announce to us today that it is coming to an end and let schools get on with doing what they do best, which is teaching our children.

Mr O'Dowd: No one can be proud of how computer-based assessment has been handled, and I, as Minister, am not proud of it. However, the principle of computer-based assessment is proven, and it was proven by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). It believes that it is a good way forward. I accept that the implementation of it was a mess and that it lost the confidence of teachers and families. I have asked and tasked CCEA to move forward and examine how we implement the policy of computer-based assessment, or whether we should implement a policy of computer-based assessment. By providing a centrally procured computer-based

assessment, the proposal is that we would save schools money in the long run because they would not have to buy commercially available assessments. We will also have a measure of how our children are progressing, which will assist us to see whether targeting social need and other funds are working. Levels of progression are also at the core of assessing how our children are progressing to assist our teachers and others to ensure that we can monitor all the interventions that we have in place to assist children's educational well-being. I am working with the unions and teacher representatives on levels of progression, because I think that we are in danger of throwing the baby out with the bath water. In my opinion, we can reach agreement on that.

Mr Lunn: I notice that you have found common cause with the Minister in your dismissal of the necessity for a properly tarmacked tennis court. We have an obligation on sport, recreation and exercise, which is linked to obesity and all the rest of it. Frankly, I do not regard a slap of tarmac on a tennis court as a waste of money.

The Chairperson: Game, set and match.

Mr Lunn: It is 40-love. You have a chance to come back.

Mr O'Dowd: That is a fair point. If a school can prove the educational benefits of tennis courts or other sports facilities — I suspect they could — so be it. I think that the point that was being made has been made elsewhere. As you rush towards 5 April and are trying to spend your surplus, things are tarmacked more than once.

Mr Rogers: I have a very quick point. I admire what you are saying on computer-based assessment about levels of progression. You want to measure how children are progressing, and that is absolutely right. However, in practice, in communication level 4, for example, a child could have a score of 95, which deems the child nearly illiterate, as opposed to a score of 120. In reality, those two children are at the same level. That is not a measure of how the child is progressing. That is one of the concerns that principals are expressing to us all. Principals are there to assess learning. They can see exactly where a child is with literacy, numeracy and whatever else, and then move on, but computer-based assessment has not been helpful.

Mr O'Dowd: I accept that, going back to the implementation, communication and engagement with principals and educators was not what it should have been. That has now been corrected, and we are now in regular engagement with the unions, teacher representatives and, indeed, focus groups about how we move this forward. Very many changes have been made to levels of progression, and I will continue to make changes where we reach agreement with those bodies to do so. However, the principle of measuring levels of progression is a good idea. We have yet to reach agreement on how we do that, and that is why I said that we are in danger of throwing the baby out with the bath water. Let us keep the engagement going. I am prepared to be flexible in my approach to this matter and to work with teacher representatives on it.

Mr Sheehan: I agree with Trevor on the issue of the tennis courts. I have been to a few schools in my day; I have never been to one that has a tennis court. However, the principle certainly holds up, in that sport and physical education is a very important part of school life, particularly given the obesity epidemic that is coming down the tracks.

I welcome the changes to the common funding formula. I particularly welcome the fact — is Hansard here? — that no school will lose as a result of the changes to the common funding formula.

The Chairperson: You can stop buying 'The Irish News' then.

Mr Sheehan: However, I am sure you will agree that changes to the common funding formula are not a silver bullet that will resolve all the problems of educational underachievement in our schools. There are other factors involved, be they parental involvement in a child's education, good leadership in schools by principals or boards of governors, good teaching or good monitoring of the teaching staff. I would like to hear your views on those other issues and how you hope they will combine in the future with the changes to the funding formula.

Mr O'Dowd: I agree with you, and, as I have said during the session, the changes to the common funding formula on their own will not achieve the goal we all wish to achieve, but they are an important part of it. All our public services always target the areas in most need with the most resources,

whether that is in health, road safety campaigns, agriculture etc. You target most of your resources where there is the most demand and pressure on the system, or you should if you are looking to develop an equitable and level playing field for everyone involved. On its own, it will not make the difference, but it plays a significant part.

Parental and community involvement are vital. Research shows that the educational outcomes of a child are determined largely by the mother and her educational background. We have involved ourselves in engagements with communities through schools, funding that I have provided through the education and library boards and, in fairness, school-based initiatives. The Education Works advertisement campaign is a new dimension for the Department of Education. We are out in the public domain, on television screens and on buses. For the education of your child to succeed, you have to play a part in it, but, to achieve that, we have to break down barriers, particularly for families who have had bad educational experiences or who have a poor educational background. That is why I have invested moneys in the education and library boards to allow communities to become involved in education and educational projects. Over the past number of years, there has been a greater raising of awareness among community groups and sporting organisations of their responsibilities for the educational well-being of the young people they serve.

For very many years, the Department of Education was focused solely on what happened inside the school gates. That has been broken down, and our attention is not only inside the school gates, but outside, and we are working with communities, families and others. We are taking only small steps in that regard. That is largely driven by budgets, but it is also a cultural change that we are involved in.

Mr Craig: Minister, I am fascinated with the additional £15.8 million that you have put into the school budgets. Can you confirm that that is not part of the common funding formula?

Mr O'Dowd: It is. The £15.8 million was awarded to the Department of Education as part of discussions with the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the then Finance Minister, as I mentioned previously. I was given money to give to schools, and that £15.8 million was added to the aggregated schools budget, as it would have been regardless of what happened with the common funding formula.

Mr Craig: Will you then confirm that that is going to be there next year?

Mr O'Dowd: No budget for next year exists in any Department. We are all starting off at ground zero, but there will be a Department of Education budget. There will have to be funding for schools, and I am going to argue, discuss and debate with my Executive colleagues that, at the very minimum, the Department of Education needs to start off where it is today. I will argue that the £15.8 million, and the £1.98 billion Department of Education budget, is the very minimum that we must start with, which is where we are today. But, to make progress in education, we need further investment.

Mr Craig: Is that not a very hard argument to make, considering where we are with welfare reform?

Mr O'Dowd: All Executive colleagues have difficult arguments to make, moving into the next Budget. However, through the Programme for Government, the Executive are committed to tackling deprivation, inequality and educational underachievement. We need resources to do that. Welfare reform and decisions around what will or will not happen to budgets have to be thrashed out and concluded. Welfare reform is not without pain; it will have a significant impact on the communities that are less likely to succeed in education. It will put further and greater challenges in front of those communities in regard to education. We are then into the cycle of poor educational outcomes, unemployment, entry into the justice system, poor health outcomes — all those things start again.

Mr Craig: I am not disagreeing with you, Minister, but not implementing welfare reform has implications as well. No matter what we do here, we are damned if we do and damned if we don't. The deprivation issue fascinates me. Are you convinced that you are actually targeting underachievement through the deprivation factors? I had this discussion with Karen yesterday when we talked about a specific school where two thirds of pupils are middle class or upper class and do not meet any deprivation factors; a third do, but less than half of that third, for whatever reason, do not claim free school meals. Therefore, that school falls into the highest bracket of non free school meals. Therefore, the underachievement in that school does not really come onto the radar.

Mr O'Dowd: When you correlate the figures for high free school meals entitlement and for middle-ranking free school meals entitlement, they match all other deprivation statistics in geographical areas; there is no separation in that regard. Therefore, I am convinced that free school meals entitlement is the best way to do this. The point that you raised is slightly different. We have to ensure that everyone who is entitled to a free school meal claims it and that no stigma is attached to that. There is no longer an issue about those on free school meals having a differently coloured ticket and being labelled in some way. In the vast majority of our schools, if not all, no one can tell who is or is not on free meals, and that is the way it should be.

Mr Craig: I agree with that, but despite being very proactive, the issue remains and it has an impact on the way that the school is treated.

Mr O'Dowd: Yes. I do not know the specifics of that school, but I have asked my officials about this. If someone can provide me with the research, I will be happy to interrogate it further, but there is no research to suggest that one section of our community is more likely than another to claim free school meals. No research to confirm that exists. I have heard anecdotal evidence and suggestions have been made to me, but no one can pinpoint research that suggests there is a barrier in one section of our community compared with another in claiming free school meals.

Mr Craig: Minister, given the ongoing public debate about the educational disparity in Protestant working-class children, particularly males, does the Department have any plans to proactively go after that underachievement?

Mr O'Dowd: I believe that the policies I have in place allow us to tackle educational underachievement, regardless of where it exists in the classroom and inside the school gates. I do not have direct control over other factors at play in Protestant working-class communities, although I am prepared to use my influence where I can and engage with others who have influence. I have had several discussions with various bodies about how the Department of Education can be more proactive in promoting education in communities that feel alienated from education or other aspects of life. There is a bigger challenge for us all in that. However, no one can be complacent about those figures, because 853 young Protestant males did not achieve five good GCSEs, including English and maths, in the last year of figures available, which is 2011-12. There were 1,552 Catholic young boys who did not achieve five good GCSEs as well. In the different cohorts, 74.1% of Protestant working-class boys did not achieve that; in the Catholic community, it was 61.5%. The proportion is higher numbers-wise. Nobody can be complacent about this.

There are a couple of dangers. I accept that there may be a misplaced suspicion that, as a Sinn Féin Minister, I care less about Protestant working-class boys than perhaps I do about Catholic working-class boys. I accept that that perception exists in some communities, and I may have to work twice as hard to overcome that. However, if we concentrate only on one set of figures, we will leave behind a significant section of Catholic working-class boys and perhaps allow those responsible for Catholic education to become complacent about their responsibilities. I am committed to tackling each and every one of those statistics and doing whatever I can, perhaps through a specific programme of work in one community and not another community.

Mr Newton: Minister, I want to continue on the point that Jonathan Craig made. A fair part of my constituency is made up of either inner-city or large-estate schools. Indeed, there is a strong perception that young Protestant males are the only ones who are underachieving, and that is being fed, to a large extent, by the media just looking at parts of reports. I would welcome an overall look at all young people who are underachieving.

The expression has been used that we are "targeting social need", but this Committee is interested in educational underachievement. You said earlier that you do not care where money comes from, whether it is from the Minister for Social Development or Edwin Poots as Health Minister. Other Ministers are targeting other aspects that may have an effect on educational underachievement. However, we are not seeing a joined-up approach to tackle the underachievement. So, although money is going in to tackle social issues that may impact on underachievement, we are not seeing — at least I am not seeing — a joined-up approach in the inner-city areas or the large estates. Where is the plan to do that?

Leading on from that, I want to try to understand the measurement of that, particularly in the context of the Committee's concern about the underachievement in educational standards. What are the

criteria? In many cases, it cannot just be academic achievement. Other factors must be taken into consideration when we see where we are with many schools at this moment.

Mr O'Dowd: I repeat the point about tackling social deprivation at length because it is the single biggest determining factor in a young person's educational outcomes and similarly their health outcomes. What happens outside the school gates does not stop at the school gates when a child or young adult comes into school. All those barriers and challenges are brought into the school. We can look at it in a different way when we see the advantages that a person who is not from a socially deprived background has in the social capital and the knowledge that they accumulate throughout their life outside school. I am referring to things such as after-school activities and sporting clubs, whether swimming clubs, football clubs or whatever. There is an additional cost to parents for that. The children may be involved in youth groups, uniformed groups or whatever it might be, and there is an additional cost to those. Simple things like family holidays and breaks, the knowledge and attainment of the child's parents — I referred earlier to the educational attainment of a child's mother — and their educational backgrounds also factor on the child. All of those things bring social capital to someone who is not from a socially deprived background, and all that social capital, learning skills and benefits are fed into their educational well-being and outcomes. That is absent when there is social deprivation, so we have to counteract that inside and outside of schools.

There is a joined-up approach to that, but it is not good enough. That is a criticism of everybody, and it is as much to do with our political system coming to grips with itself and maturing in its political delivery and grappling with issues that have been in play for generations. I am not aware of any utopian society in which the politicians have managed to solve every problem. It would appear, and sometimes it could be suggested by the media, that we are expected to solve every problem like that. It does not work that way anywhere. However, we have a responsibility to have a plan to resolve it.

I think that the best interventions in working together are through partnerships, both formal and informal. I look at the West Belfast Partnership and its work in conjunction with the Greater Shankill Partnership. I also look at neighbourhood renewal schemes. In my opinion and experience as a local MLA, they have had a significant impact in tackling social deprivation and social barriers, but they are also very good schemes and involve cooperative working between health and education. I have seen that experience and have seen the investments that neighbourhood renewal projects have made in schools, communities and with young people. That is all helping to pay benefits.

We have to get better at partnership working. I think that the Delivering Social Change programme that the Executive are involved in will pay significant benefits to our entire society and to education. There are programmes of work in play. We are getting better at them. We are by no means perfect, but we have to learn from what we know and continue to improve.

Mr Newton: Let me come back to the crux of the question, Minister. The Health Minister puts money in, the Minister for Social Development puts money in and the councils put money in. How will we measure the outcomes in the schools in such things as tackling underachievement? It cannot be only through academic criteria. How will we measure that progress? How will we fill the parents and the children with the confidence that a school is a good school and that the children there have a future?

Mr O'Dowd: I agree with you that you cannot simply measure education on the basis of five GCSEs, grades A to C including English and Maths. However, it is a measure that we should all seek to achieve for our young people.

Many schools that operate in socially deprived communities, through their inspection reports etc, show that they are making a difference in those communities. They are not simply measured on those academic criteria. We measure our education system on the value that we add to our young people, their readiness to be good citizens and to enter the workplace and workforce, and the confidence that they can display in themselves. That will not always be achieved through a graph, a statistician's report, an Audit Office report or whatever it may be. However, we will measure that through the well-being of our communities.

There has always been a challenge for education in how it measures added value, and there have been many debates in many societies about how we measure that in education. That is the challenge for us all. In my view, educational success is the readiness of a young adult who leaves school to be a good citizen and to have confidence in their community and in themselves. That will be displayed in our society.

Mr Newton: I do not really disagree with that; I think that there are other ways of measuring that. However, at the end of the day, schools go into intervention as they do not meet the criteria. That is a big knock to schools and pupils, and it tumbles out into the entire community. That is based on academic measurements.

Mr O'Dowd: That is not necessarily because of simple academic measurements. Schools are measured across a broad width of issues, including academic attainment. They are measured across pastoral care, leadership and development plans — all those things that a school management team should be involved in. They are also measured on the basis of interviews with parents and pupils and observations in the school. They are measured across that whole range of things.

I accept that it is a challenge for a school if it goes into formal intervention; it is a significant wake-up call for that school. However, I have dealt with many schools that have gone into formal intervention and have come out at the other end as very good schools. They go through a number of phases in that journey. They go through denial, feeling that it is everybody else's fault but theirs, acceptance that they now have to take on that challenge and, then, cooperation with the inspectorate, the education and library boards and other support mechanisms that are put in place. They make changes and come out the other side as better and more confident schools, and the pupils who come out of those schools are much enriched by that process.

Every system must have its checks and balances. I accept that the Committee is currently involved in an inquiry into the inspection reports, and I await the outcome of that. However, I think that our inspection process adds value to our education system in that way.

The Chairperson: Is the key issue not access to services? When you identify a need, you should be able to address it, not three or four years later as is the case with psychology services. If anything is an abysmal failure in our system, it is the shameful situation in which schools are allocated three referrals per term to psychology services when they are coming down with issues. Health and education need to get a grip on that issue and address it and stop saying, "It is a health issue", or, "No, it is an education issue". It is a need for that child. While Rome burns and all that debate is going on, what is happening?

I am dealing with a parent at the moment, who ticks all the boxes for social need and all those things and who cannot get access to the service that is needed to address the needs of that child. That is the frustration and it comes through to Robin and all of us when we deal with practitioners. If you, along with your colleagues, are able to address that issue, you will have made an invaluable contribution to educational provision in Northern Ireland.

Mr O'Dowd: I totally agree with you. I hope to be in a position to bring special education needs (SEN) legislation to the Committee very soon. I want to discuss a number of possible amendments to previous discussions with the Education Committee even before I bring a formal proposal to the Executive —

The Chairperson: Even when you were a member of the Education Committee, maybe.

Mr O'Dowd: Yes. I want to discuss that further with the Committee. I accept that.

The Chairperson: I remind members that we are still only on the common funding formula.

Mr Kinahan: I was hoping to branch out with my questions. Minister, thank you very much for many of the answers today. I particularly welcome the joined-up approach that we have been discussing.

When you talk to school principals, they often have the better grip on what they need, whether it is a combination of provision for special needs, social needs or others. Will you look at a system that listens and maybe asks schools to bid for what they need? Sometimes they can see better what they need in the years to come. You can have the baseline that we have, but will you look at a system that allows them to say what they want, that relates to the community and to them and helps to pull it all together?

Mr O'Dowd: We have devolved significant powers and finances to our schools. Our schools enjoy great autonomy in a wide range of matters, and our boards of governors are responsible for drawing

up development plans for the schools and deciding how their budgets will be spent to provide the curriculum. I would argue that our schools are in that position.

Mr Kinahan: We always have the percentage thing. In England, something like 80% is spent down at the schools level, and here it is less. I know you have answered that by saying, "But actually, you're still spending it locally," but maybe we need more pressure on the boards for more flexibility.

Mr O'Dowd: I do not think you can compare our education funding to what is happening in England. It is comparing apples and oranges in many different ways. If you get into the different factors back and forth, some of the arguments will suit those principals who seek further funds, and some of them will actually work against them. Our schools have great delegated authority and spending to do as they feel fit to use those resources to deliver the curriculum. I am not convinced that it is the major barrier to making progress.

Mr Kinahan: OK. That gives us a different view. We have discussed, all the way through today, the correlation between educational need and social need and how accurate it is. Will you commission, or have you commissioned, someone to continually look at that so that we are continually learning to see if free school meals or special output areas are the right way forward, so that we are getting better at it all the time, rather than just using free school meals because it is the best of what we have?

Mr O'Dowd: I am finding it hard to pick you up, Danny; it is just the acoustics in the room, sorry. I got most of that.

The more I look at free school meals, the more convinced I am that it is the best measurement of deprivation in the education system, because it identifies the individual pupil, and their circumstances can change from year to year. You can then change measurements in that way, and reporting and research. However, I am on record as saying that if someone comes forward with a better proposal, I am more than happy to look at it, and to implement it if it is truly a better proposal on the way forward. I think the Committee is or will be involved in research around this matter, and I am more than happy to await the Committee report and examine it very carefully and discuss with the Committee the way forward in relation to how we identify individual educational or social deprivation in schools — and community deprivation in and around schools, as well.

Mr Kinahan: So you are waiting for the Committee rather than pushing it through the Department.

Mr O'Dowd: Well, I am the one who has to be convinced. I am the one who has stood up and said that free school meals entitlement is the way forward. I believe it is a good measurement. No one has yet produced evidence to suggest that it is not a good measurement. You may have a difference of views around it, but no one can turn round and say to me, through empirical research, "No, it's not. There are flaws in it." The Committee has undertaken a study of this. I think it's a responsible response to say that I am happy to await the Committee's investigations and to work with the Committee on it.

The Chairperson: Although you will accept, Minister, that Professor Tony Gallagher, who has a considerable degree of expertise, did say that a single proxy measure is a very blunt way of addressing a particular need. It is a single proxy measure, and it has flaws in it. It is not a perfect measure.

Mr O'Dowd: Well, I await the Committee bringing me forward the perfect measure.

Mr Kinahan: Can I switch subjects, then? At the Ulster Teachers' Union (UTU) conference the other day, you were talking about ESA being stuck, and you said you were going to look, therefore, at managing rebooting the boards in line with the councils and the changes that are coming there. But within that, we go back — Mervyn raises it all the time — to the sectoral bodies giving the other bodies a coherent and statutory right to be at all meetings with those boards. Will you look at giving them the funding so that they can take part in the reorganisation, whether it is called ESA or whether it is a rebooting of boards, so that they are there on an equal playing field?

Mr O'Dowd: It is worth noting that, if ESA had come into existence in the timescale that was envisaged, the controlled sector would have a sectoral support body. It would have, by right, membership of the ESA board, and it would be at the centre of all decision-making and discussion. In the absence of ESA, it is left without that. ESA is — I am thinking of a polite term — certainly not

moving forward in time to align us with the changes in the councils that were agreed by the Assembly last night. Therefore, I have a duty to bring forward changes to the board structures to ensure that they are legally compliant with the new council alignment. I will bring a paper to the Executive to do that. I have no plans, at this stage, to bring forward any further proposals on ESA or a sectoral support body. My proposal is that we move forward on the basis of the 1986 Order and slim down the boards to fewer boards or a board. We have to do that quite quickly so that it is in place for April 2015.

Mr Kinahan: ESA touched on shared education, and, particularly after the last debate in the Chamber, I am a bit thrown by the fact that what I thought was a fairly open motion to encourage all of us to go for sharing in every different form ended up with us getting boxed into just shared campuses. On the back of all that, we saw two CCMS schools in Armagh pull out. We seem to be closing the door on getting any shared education. If ESA is gone and you look at the new scheme that you have been talking about, will you push shared education so that every school is encouraged to share more and more but in a more dynamic way?

Mr O'Dowd: In the absence of ESA, the shared education agenda can continue. I am not sure if the Committee is aware, but I think that we have had 15 applications to the shared education campuses. That is a healthy response. Obviously, they will all have to go through the assessment against the criteria and economic appraisal, which is the usual process, but it is quite a healthy response. A recent survey tells us that 76% of schools are involved in some form of shared education, and that is also good. Schools have led that agenda ahead of the politicians at times. There is nothing to stop further proposals coming forward on either shared education campuses or substantial sharing among schools moving into the future, and a lot of that work has been taken forward through the area learning communities at post-primary level. There has been a significant amount of sharing through those. I am concluding discussions with Atlantic Philanthropies and OFMDFM about a significant investment in shared education moving forward, and OFMDFM is, I think, taking the lead on announcement on that and other matters related to that wider programme of work. So, shared education is still high on the agenda, is still moving forward and is largely being driven from the bottom up by our schools. They are carrying that agenda forward. ESA would be a preferable way of planning etc moving forward, but shared education will not be in any way impeded if it does not move forward.

The Chairperson: Minister, you have what is often described as a suite of policies, and I am sure that there are plans for more suites. I would not really want to sit on some of them. Up our part of the way, a suite is something you sit on. I will not get into the language of Ulster Scots.

One issue that we have repeatedly raised here is alignment of the policies. In a sense, it ties in with what Robin said about how you integrate services to ensure that you get the maximum outcome. We have shared education, area planning, the entitlement framework, shared campuses and the money that has been applied for in relation to shared education. How will the Department, in a sense, proof those applications? It is like any process in that it does not matter what you do, there will always be an intended or unintended consequence. How can you ensure, for example, if an application has gone in for the shared facility as a result of two schools coming together, that school number three or four in the same area is not included, for one or other reason, in that or impeded by a decision specifically on the issue of sixth form provision, which seems to be an area of concern in a number of places?

Mr O'Dowd: First, any proposals coming forward had to be endorsed by the managing authority, and we will go back to the managing authority to ask whether those have been proofed against area planning etc. The entitlement framework and all those issues feed into area planning as well because we are about the delivery of an extended range of courses, and I mentioned to Mr Kinahan that the entitlement framework, through the area learning communities, has encouraged sharing education simply beyond the stated aim at the time, which was about the broader range of courses. So, we will measure all those factors.

Not to prejudge any outcome around shared education, we often consider shared education in our system to be children-focused, but, at sixth form, we are talking about young adults. If we can get young adults, who missed out on shared education, sharing facilities, centres and classrooms, it is a good thing. That is not to prejudge any application either, but that is about bringing together young adults in the one format.

The Chairperson: That would ultimately include FE —

Mr O'Dowd: Yes.

The Chairperson: — and the 14 to 19 policy, which is currently on paper but not working in practice.

Mr O'Dowd: I had further discussions yesterday with Minister Farry on a range of issues including the 14 to 19 policy and how it is implemented on the ground. I agree with you, and I am not speaking for myself when I say that further work needs to be carried out on that with a greater understanding of each other's responsibility, resources and how each other's systems are working on the ground.

Mr Lunn: We seem to have moved from ESA to discussing shared education. Going back to ESA, Minister, there are three people here who have been involved with this since 2007 — you, the Chairman and me. Losing the will to live hardly describes the feeling sometimes, and I am not blaming you at all because it seems to me —

The Chairperson: Are you blaming me then?

Mr Lunn: No, well —

The Chairperson: Just clarify that.

Mr Lunn: I will get to it.

When I got the letter from the Governing Bodies Association (GBA) in January, I think it was, to confirm that it had decided to accept ESA as currently drafted, I had different emotions — one was complete surprise and the other was incredulity. That was because the association had held out for so long against ESA as currently drafted. However, it looks as if you were prepared to make further concessions, particularly around who employs staff and various other matters; you do not need the list. You now seem very pessimistic about it and prepared to go another way to slim down the education boards and all the rest of it. What are the current sticking points on ESA, or can you tell us what they are?

Mr O'Dowd: As you said, three of us here have been involved in this since 2007, and only two of us have gone grey, so that tells you something. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: I am in this for the long haul. *[Laughter.]*

Mr O'Dowd: The sticking points vary from occasion to occasion and depending on which sector you are speaking to at the time. I am content that I have made significant changes to the ESA legislation that allows all parties to come on board in good faith and be part of a board and a system that treats everyone on the basis of equality. We have not moved it forward, for whatever reason, but even if I was to get agreement or the nod from the Executive today that ESA will move forward to the next stages, I do not think that we would have the Bill through the Assembly and the structures in place to meet the 15 April deadline. We would have to go out and confirm board places or recruit boards again, and staff issues have arisen over the protracted time that we have been involved. So, because I do not think that we would be in a position to have ESA in place by 15 April, I have to look at reconfiguring the boards into boards or a board as we move forward to 15 April. Whatever the barriers to moving ESA forward are, whether real or perceived, they are there. They have stopped progress, and time has moved on. The reconfiguration of councils is now real, and we have to meet that deadline, regardless of whatever else happens.

Mr Lunn: Having sat through the discussions, certainly in the Committee, anybody around the table now would have a fair idea, frankly, what unionist opposition was about and the reason for it. It seems to me that you have addressed objections, certainly the major ones. You say that we are at the point now where it could not be brought in by 15 April, but I do not see that as a reason for not starting the process. One thing that we are pretty good at up here is plugging gaps and pushing things down the pipe. You could probably suffer on for a bit longer with the current board structure — you may have to make some adjustment to contracts and all the rest of it — but that would be worth doing if even what remains of ESA could be brought into place. Otherwise, we have wasted not just eight years, because it started before 2007. This is, frankly, ridiculous. We have been through ESA 1 and ESA 2: is it going to founder as well? I find this absolutely amazing.

Mr O'Dowd: I am not going to argue with your frustration around it. We should not underestimate the significant piece of work that is involved in reconfiguring the boards in preparation for April 2015. I simply do not have the resources, either financially or in terms of personnel, to carry out ESA work and

reconfiguration of the boards going into the future. I have directed the ESA implementation team (ESAIT), which is a body of the Department of Education, to focus its work on planning to reconfigure the boards moving towards 2015, because I do not have resources to do otherwise. I have stopped all departmental work in relation to ESA. I have reduced funding to ESA by 50%. It was £2.3 million but has now been reduced by over £1 million. Any work it is involved in, from here on in, will be implementing whatever the Executive agreement is on the boards' configuration. I hope to be in a position to present a paper to the Executive in the very near future on the way forward for the reconfiguration of the boards to meet the realignment of councils.

Mr Lunn: Thanks for that, Minister. I will stop there, but, frankly, I think that I am asking the wrong person. I mean no disrespect. I should be asking unionist politicians what their problem is, frankly, because that is the way it looks to me at present. A lot of time has been wasted.

The Chairperson: Maybe I missed something coming in here this morning, but I do not think that unionist politicians are responsible for schools. I do not know. Maybe I missed something, did I?

Mr Lunn: That is not what I was saying, as you well know, Chairman. I said that you are responsible for blocking this Bill.

The Chairperson: Just on your point, Minister, if ESAIT is asked to do a piece of work in relation to the configuration of the boards, who is the accounting officer? The boards are accountable to the boards, so to whom is ESAIT accountable? Does ESAIT have the legislative right to be involved in work in relation to a piece of legislation under the 1986 Order, which constitutes the boards?

Mr O'Dowd: ESAIT is a departmental body. It is made up of staff who have been seconded from various sectors in education, the education and library boards, other bodies and perhaps even my own Department. The accountability mechanisms remain in place. The boards in their day-to-day work are accountable to their chief executives and the chief executives are accountable to the accounting officer of the Department of Education.

Mr Rogers: When ESA was referred to as the European Space Agency last Friday, I do not think that the analogy was lost on us or on the audience there. Minister, we have many weaknesses in our education system, but our major strength is our teaching force. Whether it is raising standards, embedding self-evaluation in our schools or whatever it is, I plead that, whatever we do as we go forward, there should be a strong emphasis on continuing professional development for our teachers, because, I think, that is one of the key areas that we need to invest in.

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, I have no argument. Our greatest strength is our teaching workforce, and our workforce in general, I have to say, because our schools are made up of many different elements of staff. Our boards and all those bodies, even my own Department, are made up of people who are dedicated to the educational well-being of the young people we serve.

On the particular question about continuing professional development, I accept that. My officials are working on future plans for the implementation of professional development in the absence of ESA and other bodies, which, we hope, would have taken that work forward. There is continuing professional development taking place. The boards still have a role in that. I accept that it has been depleted over the years with a reduction in staff numbers and budgets. My officials have been tasked with and are carrying out intense work in relation to the continuing professional development of our teaching staff and how that will be outlaid and implemented.

The Chairperson: Minister, I appreciate the time that you have given us, but, finally, what is the current thinking in the Department on any new configuration of the education and library boards and the continuing existence of sectoral bodies such as CCMS?

Mr O'Dowd: As I said, I am hoping to bring a paper to the Executive in the near future. The numbers that are being circulated are five, three or one. It will be based on the 1986 Order. Given our lengthy experience of trying to negotiate the ESA Bill and all the different pieces to it, I strongly suggest, considering the timescale we are working in, that we bring forward the 1986 Order with minimum changes. It is really to do with the shape of the board or boards, and existing services and structures remain until the Executive return to the reform of public administration in education in the future.

The Chairperson: Minister, I thank you and your officials who, I have to say, have got off very easily today. I was worried; I thought that a bus had arrived from Rathgael. I hope that the Department is still in good hands when you all get back. I thank the officials. They know that, sometimes, I make humorous remarks, but it is not intended to be personal. Thank you to your staff, and thank you, Minister. We look forward to continuing to work with you on many of the issues that continue to be of concern. I advise you to go out through this door, so that you can avoid being hijacked by people who just want to make points. *[Laughter.]*

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you, Chair.