



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE
FOR EDUCATION

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**Ministerial Briefing on Education
Priorities**

8 June 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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FOR EDUCATION**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)

Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)

Ms Michaela Boyle

Mr Jonathan Craig

Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson

Mr Phil Flanagan

Mrs Brenda Hale

Mr Trevor Lunn

Mr Conall McDevitt

Miss Michelle McIlveen

Mr Daithí McKay

Witnesses:

Mr John O'Dowd) The Minister of Education

Mr John McGrath) Department of Education

Mr Paul Sweeney)

The Chairperson:

Minister, I welcome you to the Education Committee. It is a surreal experience for you. Previously, you have asked the questions, and now you will have a taste of what it is like at the other end of the table. I congratulate you on your appointment as Minister and wish you well in your term of office. As I said previously, the Education Committee has provided the new Executive with two Ministers, so if anyone aspires to high office, this seems to be the Committee to be on. It has a pretty good track record.

I also welcome the permanent secretary Paul Sweeney and the deputy permanent secretary John McGrath. I will hand over to you, and ask you to set out the priorities, as you see them, for education.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education):

Thank you, Chair, and I thank the Committee for the kind invitation to speak to it this morning. I have to say that you look more formidable from this end of the table. I welcome the fact that I am here so early in the mandate of the new Assembly. I look forward to working with the Committee. We have two distinct roles, which I think complement each other. There is no doubt that, at times, we will be on a collision course with each other over a number of issues. The way in which we manage that and work our way through it will prove the worth of the role of the Committee and of Education Minister.

I recognise that there is no consensus on a number of issues and that we have to work towards achieving that. We have to work through many of the complex issues that education brings. However, I think we can agree that the Education Committee and the Minister of Education want to tackle educational underachievement wherever it exists, and we want to ensure that all our young people have the best advantages as they start their journey of life.

There is no doubt that many of our young people do well at school and achieve good results. We all recognise that this is the passport to further study and to the workforce. Too many do not, however. Over 40% fail to achieve five good GCSEs including English and maths, and disadvantaged young people are half as likely to achieve that. There is a particular deep-seated problem in the disadvantaged Protestant areas, and I note the recent debate in the Assembly and the work done by Dawn Purvis, as well as the work done in the previous mandate by this Committee when working with schools in disadvantaged areas.

We have made real progress in recent years with the school improvement policy Every School a Good School, but we need to go further and, I believe, faster. We will be considering that further in the weeks ahead. We have a suite of complementary policies in place, all of which contribute to raising standards and closing the gap. Two early priorities we will be moving forward are the early years strategy and the special educational needs (SEN) review. Beyond that, I want to emphasise that, during my tenure as Education Minister, the priorities will be the

delivery of policy outcomes and the delivery of improved prospects for our young people.

The creation of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) will be a key component. We need ESA to help, support and challenge schools to drive up standards in a consistent and uniform way from Belfast to Derry and from Enniskillen to Ballycastle. I believe that, in this new mandate, an opportunity exists to move forward on that. My party is committed to working creatively and energetically with all others to achieve an outcome that everyone can sign up to.

At this stage, I do not propose to say much about transfer. I am on record as saying that I do not see it as an issue on which party political consensus cannot be reached. I reiterate my contention that selection at 11 is wrong and is a contributory factor to the legacy of underachievement that I highlighted earlier.

The question-and-answer session will be much more productive than me simply making a statement. Therefore, I will conclude my remarks by saying that the Budget remains a severe challenge for the Department of Education, as, indeed, it does for the Executive. I am well aware of the budgetary constraints that are being placed on the Department and the education and library boards, which then filter down to our schools. Already, and understandably, schools have been raising concerns with me, as have their elected representatives. The boards are going through their budgetary process. They have forwarded the first parts to the Department and my officials are studying those. I hope to return to the boards with commentary on those within a week or so to ensure that they are allowed to continue with that process, fully informed of the Department's budget objectives. That is an issue that, I have no doubt, we will return to many times.

The budget will force a rethink about how we deliver education services and new capital builds, and about how we share services across the education sector. It will be the driving force behind many issues. However, we have to remain steadfastly committed that the driving force behind any decision will be the educational benefits to the young people whom we are all here to serve. That will be at the heart of all our decisions.

Thank you, Chair. I am happy to take questions.

The Chairperson:

Thank you, Minister. As you would expect, I have a full list of members who want to ask questions. Any member who is not on that list should identify themselves to me or the Committee Clerk.

In your opening comments, you talked about there being no consensus across a number of areas. That is obviously the case when it comes to departmental policy and the position on education. When you spoke to a meeting of the Department's strategic forum in south Belfast recently, you said that you were:

“keen to engage early with educational partners across the spectrum ... I firmly believe that by fostering a more collaborative approach with our stakeholders we can become a driving force for improvement.”

Without going over old ground and opening up what some would see as old wounds, is it the case that you will engage with the entire education spectrum? It is the view of some that, because of the approach and attitude of the previous Minister, they felt somehow inhibited or reluctant to engage in the debate that every sector has to be engaged in if we are going to reform and reshape education in the weeks, months and years ahead. Can we take it that, as you as Minister and I have endeavoured to do over the past few days and weeks since your appointment, you will create a different environment for education and that that will extend towards those stakeholders, particularly elements of the controlled and grammar sectors?

Mr O'Dowd:

Yes. I intend to engage with all sectors in education. We should not shy away from talking about transfer or different views on academic selection. It is the way in which we hold the debate that is important. There is clearly the likes of the Governing Bodies Association (GBA) and other bodies that have a view on academic selection or continue to wish to promote and use it. I have invited those people to meet me in the coming weeks. If the letters are not yet sent, they are in the process of being drawn up and sent. I will not shy away from anyone on this debate. Those meetings will be held in a courteous fashion, which is in the same manner that I meet everyone. There will be challenges for us all in those meetings. I will put across my point of view and I have no doubt that the individuals who have a different point of view on a number of issues will put across theirs. Everyone's view on this matter will be listened to. I will engage with them.

I am on a pathway of trying to persuade people that academic selection is not the way forward. I do not underestimate that challenge or the difficulties ahead, but that is the pathway that we are now on: to try to persuade as many people as possible away from academic selection and discuss

how we give confidence to parents that the education sector will provide academic excellence for young people and that they can have confidence in the education service that young people receive.

My door is open to everyone. After the meeting, I will double-check with my officials to ensure that all interested parties have been invited to meet me. As I said, if we, as politicians, can create an atmosphere where people are able to express their views and discuss these matters, it can only be beneficial to the debate.

The Chairperson:

I do not want to get into the debate on transfer, because it may be raised by others.

One particular difficulty among many has been about capital spend and works. As a former member of the Committee, you know how often we had the officials come and it was always frustrating for members that we were never able to discover what criteria were used. An outline was given of a suite of policies that were being used, such as Every School a Good School and all that. However, the difficulty has been further compounded because, in the case of Loreto Grammar School in Omagh, a judgement was made that was a very worrying and damning indictment of the Department. The judgement said that it:

“gives rise to conspicuous unfairness, amounting to an abuse of power.”

That judgement is being appealed by the Department, so you may be unable to give any more detail on it. However, can you assure the Committee that the severe criticism contained in the judgement will be seriously considered by the Department and that we will, at some stage, see clearly defined criteria for capital builds? Right across the sectors there is absolute confusion about how you get on to the ladder, and even whether there is a ladder. It always seems to be a moving feast.

Mr O’Dowd:

As you mentioned, I am restricted as to what I can say about the Loreto judgement because it is under appeal. However, as a board principle, the site for redevelopment in Omagh is an excellent example of shared services and allowing schools to hold on to their identity in that campus. It is a project that I am still keen to drive forward.

You asked whether sectors and schools will know how to get on to the capital build list. The capital budget has been cut by 40%. I understand that the previous Minister received an injection

of capital towards the end of the last mandate of around £13 million. That allowed a number of projects to move forward. Some were compliant and others partially compliant. I am well aware of the debate as to how schools move forward, etc. I plan to have further discussions with my officials in the coming weeks about how we look at the capital budget, both in the context of the financial constraints and with regard to moving to a scenario where we have new schools built to a plan, not just for the individual school, but for the entire area, which fit into long-term policy decisions taken by the Department of Education. Those will deal with their connections with the community and their sustainability. When that work is complete, I will report back to the Committee and the Assembly and clearly set out the criteria that I will use to select schools for newbuilds.

One issue of concern is that we spend a significant amount of money investigating potential builds that may never happen. We spend millions of pounds on economic assessments, drawing up plans, etc, for schools that may never be built. We have to look at the process from the beginning when a school applies to have a newbuild through to the end the project.

We have to manage the expectations of schools, because, in many instances, once a school applies for newbuilds, the story comes from them that it is due a newbuild, despite the fact that the project may never happen or it may take decades. Therefore, we have to manage the expectations of the schools, keep them fully informed of where their plans are in the system and match that against the open criteria I referred to. I am happy to share those criteria with the Committee and the Assembly once we reach the point of establishing how we can use the limited resources that we have and drive forward an education system that will be long-lasting and to the benefit of the people we serve.

The Chairperson:

One of the problems has been that the process was a moveable feast. Some schools were being built under PPP projects, others were built under conventional building projects and a great variety of methods were employed in delivering schools. I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Ballymoney High School. The Department decided to change the way in which it would deliver the projects to rebuild that school and Rainey Endowed School. As a result, each of those schools, which were previously at a particular level in one process, was moved to a different process and became one of 50. There is a serious issue of equity and about whether we are transparent and fair in recognising the needs of particular schools and identifying

and reflecting those needs in the way we move forward. That would be very helpful.

You will know that issues were raised in the previous Committee about the fact that at least seven of the 13 projects that were announced by the previous Minister were partially compliant. Committee members asked officials how schools that were partially compliant could end up becoming compliant, which was the result of conversations that took place with the schools and their ability to move on site. Will you provide the Committee with an update on those 13 projects and what stage they are at of their delivery?

Mr O'Dowd:

I see no difficulty in that. A cash injection from the Executive is always welcome, no matter what time of the year it arrives. However, if capital is injected into the system and it must be spent quickly, the governance around spend and the use of capital funds will come down to what projects can move the quickest. That always throws up a scenario in which people, quite rightly, question why one school was chosen over another.

We will produce a format for our long-term planning, which will allow us to address how we spend our budgets over the four-year period and how schools will match that. However, I am keen to begin at the start of the process to look at when schools apply to and get into the system and move right through to the completion of projects.

The Chairperson:

There is an issue about minor works, which in many cases can be substantial capital works, although they are not deemed as such. There seems to be a misunderstanding about what happens with minor works, and, in some schools, such minor works would make a vast difference to the environment in which that school operates.

There is also an issue about spending by boards, and I am aware of one that was put under pressure to spend money at the end of the year and it decided to re-tarmac part of the school estate; work which absolutely did not need to be done. That type of spend is totally unacceptable. The planning must be done in conjunction with the boards and other service deliverers, so that they know that there is a scheme that they could pull off the shelf if money was available for them to do so.

Mr O'Dowd:

I know of the several scenarios that you refer to. I think that there are over 1,000 applications for minor works, and you are right: a minor work is up to £500,000, which, in some instances, will allow a new science block to be built onto a school. So, it is a significant investment in a school estate. However, we have to ensure that it is planned properly as well and that we do not reach a scenario where we are spending money at the end of the year just to get rid of it.

Mr Craig:

Minister, you will be surprised that I am going to raise the issue of transport. In the budgets that are set out for the next four years, there is a saving of approximately £5 million a year in that area. I recognise the need to save money. I wrote to the office a number of weeks ago — we had no idea who was taking the office — about an issue in Dromore, where the Southern Board has found that, if it uses two buses of its own as opposed to Translink buses, it can save approximately £100,000 a year. That raises a very serious question about the money that the Education Department is paying Translink for bus passes. It is in the region of £630 a year. Will the Department look at and possibly renegotiate that contract with Translink? Given that 90% of the transport costs are paid to Translink, the obvious thing to do is to renegotiate that contract, especially as they are being asked to make a saving of £5 million a year. Clearly, there is room to do that given that, when the board provides its own transport, it can make those sorts of savings.

Mr O'Dowd:

The simple answer to your question is yes. We are in negotiations with Translink about school transport. We make a significant contribution to Translink from our budgets. So, we are in a position to go back to Translink to negotiate that.

School transport was identified for savings because something in the region of £75 million is being spent, and we cannot get past that in the financial scenario that we are in. No matter what way we looked at it, we just cannot get round that £75 million. So, it has to be challenged and looked at. However, we are administering it across the five boards, and there is also a wee unit in the Department that is looking at how we administer transport. We are doing it efficiently that way. I am seeking to establish the exact costing per mile for school transport, such as buses, etc. That information appears to be difficult to ascertain, but I will continue to look at that. So, I certainly want the boards to run a more efficient and effective school transport system across the sector, but we are talking to Translink about how we can get a better deal from that company.

The Chairperson:

Translink has made some progress through a card scheme that it now uses. As a parent, I have had to pay for a bus pass for my eldest girl, and I know that she does not get the full value from the bus pass because there are days when her mum collects her and days when somebody else collects her or takes her to school. So, in a sense, that is money lost. Granted, it was not lost to the Department on this occasion; it is out of my coffers, but it was a loss nonetheless. However, that is probably being replicated across the system and is a serious issue that could lead to huge savings in the transport budget.

Miss M McIlveen:

You made comments about transport. Will you also look at a cross-departmental approach? Obviously, a lot of transport vehicles for health and education are not being used to the maximum. I know from my experience on the Committee for Regional Development that there were discussions with Translink to look at the issue much more holistically across government to get a better transport service.

Mr O'Dowd:

Yes. That issue was raised with me quite recently, and it is a case of thinking outside the box, because we have rural transport and transport in the Health Service and across a range of Departments. In some instances, school transport vehicles sit unused from 9.00 am until 3.00 pm. So, the Executive should explore how we share services and save funds for the public purse. I am keen to explore that area.

Miss M McIlveen:

Thank you. I welcome the fact that you said that you will move quickly on the SEN review. I know that the consultation closed in 2009. As a former member of the Committee, you are more than aware of the broad issues and concerns that were raised by the sector. Have you taken those concerns on board? Is there a timescale in which Committee will see an outline of that strategy?

Mr O'Dowd:

I am acutely aware of the emotions around the SEN review. It is understandable that those emotions were raised, because we are dealing with some of the most vulnerable young people in society. Parents are rightly very protective of their children and of the hard-won rights they have

gained for those children through statementing, etc. One of the areas of concern was around statementing and whether parents were going to lose legal rights. Other areas of concern were around the future of special educational needs schools and whether some of those were going to be closed. I am taking those concerns on board. My Department will provide me with a response document in the coming weeks. I intend to study that document to see how we can deal with the legitimate concerns that were raised by parents and other people in the sector and move forward.

I think that there is common agreement that we need change within our special educational needs services, commonality across the five boards and to ensure that young people are identified as soon as possible in the school system so that they can receive the support that they require. Statementing protects around 4% of those young people with special educational needs. The other 96% of pupils with special educational needs are in a more vulnerable place and have less access to the services required. That is an area in which I am keen to ensure we improve. I will be studying the report. The Committee will be involved in that matter throughout.

I want to allay fears. It is worth noting that any changes to statementing, for instance, would require legislative change, so the Committee and the Assembly would have a role in that. It is not a case of being able to railroad something through that faces opposition. We are going to have to work together on this to ensure that the concerns of parents are alleviated and that children's rights are protected.

The key thing in all of this is that we deliver the services to the young people as soon as possible and as effectively and efficiently as possible. There are certainly no hidden agendas around closing special schools. Special schools have a key role in our society and they provide a first-rate, excellent service to the young people in them. That is not on the agenda. Any changes to statementing, if any, will have to be legislated for. They will have to go through the Committee and the Assembly so that all of those things can be dealt with at length.

We have started a process of change, which has raised concerns. At the next stage, we will address some of those concerns and show how we wish to move forward.

Miss M McIlveen:

The issue of the Middletown Centre for Autism was raised at yesterday's Question Time. You spoke of the 7,000 professionals and parents who have been trained since December 2007 and the

small number of children in Northern Ireland to whom the available service is delivered. Can you quantify that number?

Mr O'Dowd:

I do not have the figures in front of me, Michelle, but I will ask the Department to provide those for you so that you have the accurate figures.

Miss M McIlveen:

When do you anticipate full service to be delivered through that centre?

Mr O'Dowd:

The centre is funded jointly between ourselves and the Department of Education and Skills in Dublin. There has been a review on how we move the centre forward. That review is complete, and I hope to be able to report back on that as soon as possible. I had some discussions on the matter with my colleague Ruairí Quinn, but those discussions have certainly not been substantive. It is at an early stage. I would like to move forward as soon as possible with a plan that provides the services required for autism in the twenty-first century.

Those are steps on which progress is required. I understand that there is frustration among some of the autism charities that have carried out excellent work on the ground and lobbying around the rights of young people with autism. They have raised the profile and the understanding of autism to a level that has never seen before. I understand all that frustration. However, I have to wait for further discussions with the Department of Education and Skills as to how we move forward to provide services required for young people.

Miss M McIlveen:

On the basis of that review, will you be able to make an assessment of value for money?

Mr O'Dowd:

Yes. I understand why you ask. It seems cruel sometimes when we talk about money, but we have to; it is part of our task. Any decision that I make will have to be based on value for money.

The Chairperson:

On that point, Minister, there is an irony in one sense. In the special educational needs review,

you are well aware of all of the concerns that were raised at the event that the previous Committee held in the Great Hall. Equally, there is huge concern by many of the parents about the lack of provision at Middletown. That is expressed through a lot of charities and organisations. That has to be taken into consideration, because there is a view that, despite the amount of money that has been spent, there has been little benefit to the children and families who really need help with autism. It is about getting a balance between listening and putting actions in place.

Mr McNarry:

Welcome, Minister. The Ulster Unionists are starting this new mandate with a very clean sheet of paper on education. Our intention is to be positive and to work constructively with you. We hope that we can work through any negativity that arises after today and make progress for the children.

Can we spend a bit of time talking about money? You will have a very busy summer, so good luck to you. The Department has identified, and has been told anyhow, that it needs £3.7 million. We will vote on that next week by means of a Budget Excess Vote. The Department has already identified that there is a £300 million shortfall in the Budget, so life will be very difficult. I am very interested to hear about all the reports, reviews, etc, that you are going to get. I am not too sure that any of them are going to be very functional in addressing the deficit.

You said in your opening remarks that the budget was forcing a rethink on delivering survival build and shared services. I am glad that something is forcing it, but it seems to be highly inappropriate and unfortunate that money is forcing it. Therefore, it appears very clearly that previous thinking was not bringing forward an ability to deliver rethinking on the very important categories that you have announced and quite rightly highlighted. Perhaps, in a strange way, the money will make us all think where previously we were not thinking. I hope that some good comes out of that.

What consequences do you anticipate inflation having on your budget?

Mr O'Dowd:

You talked about the budget driving forward policy etc. Inevitably, when financial constraints come forward, they have an effect on plans. However, it is not fair to say that planning and area

planning had been ignored for years because we were living in high —

Mr McNarry:

I did not say that.

Mr O'Dowd:

OK. I am paraphrasing. Plans were afoot to move forward around all those matters. It was part of the reform of public administration, but we could not reach political agreement on that. We will try again in this mandate to reach political agreement on that and move forward. The budget will play a role in how we shape that. I emphasise that the key decision that we will reach on each occasion will be about the educational benefit to the young people we serve as we drive that forward.

As inflation rises, it has a detrimental effect on the budget because we buy services that are affected by inflation.

Mr McNarry:

What percentage is factored into your budget to deal with inflation?

Mr Paul Sweeney (Department of Education):

Inflation has been built in. I cannot give you the exact figure, but, whatever the going rate was when the budget was set —

Mr McNarry:

Permanent secretary, I need exact figures. I expect you to have exact figures, particularly on inflation.

Mr Sweeney:

I do not have the exact figures.

Mr McNarry:

It is the most important thing in a budget.

Mr Sweeney:

The pertaining inflation rate when the budget was set, whatever that was, has been factored into our planning assumptions. If it —

Mr McNarry:

Would you be able to write to me with the information?

Mr Sweeney:

Of course.

Mr McNarry:

Unless I know that figure, how will we factor in what a rise in inflation will do to the budget? That needs a rethink.

Mr O'Dowd:

Do you accept that the Education budget was set along with all the other departmental budgets in March and April this year? All the Departments had to factor in a percentage of inflationary rise, which would have been acceptable to the Department of Finance and Personnel, so there would be a standard increase across the board. If I were to ask the Committee what inflation will be this time next year, we may have 11 different views on that, because all the monetary experts out there have different views on what inflation will be. However, we do know that increasing inflation has a detrimental effect on the budget, especially if it spirals out of control. Some would argue that it is out of control. Inflation has a detrimental effect on the budget and will place greater pressures on delivering services to schools and the communities that we serve.

Mr McNarry:

I know the figure that is in your budget. I am surprised that you do not know. I also —

Mr O'Dowd:

Enlighten us then.

Mr McNarry:

I can also anticipate that, by the summer, inflation will perhaps be nearly two points greater than what you have factored in. That tells me that there may need to be a change in priorities. I would

not want to hear this time next year that inflation has made a difference to the priorities and, although we said today that we are going to do something, we just cannot do it. Minister, I am sure you have observed that inflation is going to be a key area. I think it is going to rise over the next 12 months in a more than detrimental manner. That is why I am pointing that out in a constructive way.

There will be other increases in costs. I think school principals are already working out in their school estate that they are going to suffer because of increases in energy costs. We are hearing from ScottishPower about a 19% hike in gas prices, and perhaps an 11% or 12% hike in electricity prices. As we are going to have increases in prices for fuel, heat, electricity, etc, do you have any estimates configured as to what the increased costs might be that school principals will have to manage over the next 12 months?

Mr O'Dowd:

I will go back one question. I accept your estimation of a 2% increase in inflation but, as I said, a number of experts would give different indications that it will increase much more than that. I am not questioning your expertise in the matter. Regardless of how much it increases, at the end of the day, I have a set budget to deal with, and the Executive will tell me that I have a set budget, regardless of how high the inflationary rate rises. It is the same with fuel and heating costs.

Mr McNarry:

I think we are agreeing on the point that your set budget will be a minus budget. What I am trying to get at is how we can cope with the minus factor and what effect that might have on priorities.

Mr O'Dowd:

We will have to deal with each scenario as it is thrown at us. As I said, the budget is a driving factor for policy and priorities. If we reach a stage where the budget is detrimentally affected by inflation, to whatever degree, we will have to reassess. It is the same with rising fuel and heating costs for schools. I have heard your estimates about ScottishPower, etc, in the media. I am not sure that they will be as dramatic as that in our society, but we will also be looking at increases as world gas prices rise. In previous years, the relevant Minister would have made an application during the monitoring rounds to help ease some of the pressure on schools. I do not think we will have the same flexibility in monitoring rounds during this budgetary term to ease the pressure on

schools, so it adds only to the difficulties faced by education.

Mr McNarry:

I am grateful for your frankness, because I think we all want to be open and transparent. As a society, we are in for a hell of a time. I do not think that the austerity measures have really kicked in to Northern Ireland to any high degree yet. We are going to find that people will have to work to budgets. They will then find those budgets being severely knocked back just because of day-to-day running costs. We need to be thinking ahead so that we have some answers to help those people.

We are talking about pressures, which leads me to ask: what pressures you have seen so far? I know that it is unfair to ask and that you might have a different view in September, but, so far, what are the most significant pressures that you face? Within those pressures, do you see any room for reprofiling or, as I said, reprioritising the budget that you have?

Mr O'Dowd:

In the longer term, I am keen to look at years 2, 3 and 4. This year is difficult for education, but years 2, 3 and 4 will be particularly difficult. That allows us a bit of space to look at that. It allows the Executive subgroup on the Budget to carry out some of its work. I indicated at an early stage that, if extra funds do become available, I will make bids for those. In fairness to my Executive colleagues, I do believe that there is an understanding in the Executive that education is facing particular pressures and is a vital component of our society and of rebuilding the economy.

We are facing pressures at this early stage. The Department took the initiative to write to schools asking them to start their budgetary processes much earlier this year. That will allow us to have an early, clear picture of the effect on schools. I had an initial report from the five education boards on their revenue proposals, which I am studying. I want to go back to the boards as early as possible to outline the areas in which I think that changes need to be made or further discussions with the boards are required.

I am not avoiding the question, Mr McNarry. I am in the process of assembling all the relevant information that is in front of me to see exactly where the pressures are bearing down on the system that I am charged with managing.

Mr McNarry:

I accept and appreciate that. I have a couple of final comments. On your last point, I hope that costs are not going to be a reason for closing down more schools. I am sure that you would not want that, and I hope that that will not happen.

I have two questions to finalise my piece. In the June 2011 monitoring round, the Department bid for an additional resource of £16 million for school maintenance. Is there a backlog in school maintenance? If so, can you tell me what size it is and what period it covers? Also in that June monitoring round, the Department bid for £10 million for minor capital works. You discussed that briefly with the Chairman, but what pressures are on that budget line?

Mr O'Dowd:

The school maintenance backlog is £306 million, so there is a significant pressure on that. As you are aware, once a building falls into disrepair, it deteriorates further, which actually costs more in the long term to fix. We are keen to inject further cash into that on regular occasions to allow us —

Mr McNarry:

What period does that £300-odd million cover?

Mr O'Dowd:

It dates back over many, many years. We have never been able to catch up in school maintenance. This includes everything from a faulty light switch to rain coming through the roof. It goes across all that maintenance. In itself, the minor works are more major — that is a contradiction in terms — and we have a backlog of 1,000 applications with costings of £100 million.

Mr McNarry:

You have a bid in for £10 million.

Mr O'Dowd:

We are realistic also. We understand the constraints on the Executive Budget and we understand that Departments have become more efficient in spending their money so there is less money

floating around during the monitoring rounds. We are realistic in our bids.

Mr McNarry:

Thank you.

Mr Lunn:

Minister, in your opening remarks you mentioned ESA. You, along with the rest of us, spent a very frustrating year trying to prepare the way for the ESA Bill to come forward in November a year past. That did not happen. Is your intention to bring that forward in the same form? Given that the Bill was never actually presented to the Assembly, do you intend to bring it back as ESA 1 and ESA 2? It seemed to some of us, particularly during discussions after the election, that the obstacles to the ESA had largely been resolved. There is still an element of suspicion, but the firm obstacles that we could identify, particularly the transferors' situation, have been dealt with. What are your thoughts about the way forward for ESA?

Mr O'Dowd:

I want to bring it forward in a form that I can get agreement on, which will require political discussions with all the political parties. I think that there is general agreement on the principles of ESA, and, when we get down to the nitty-gritty of putting together clauses in a Bill, it will be possible to raise concerns and questions about the intentions and so on of each clause. However, we can get political agreement on the broad principles of ESA and on how we move the Bill forward, whether it comes in one or two parts.

I understand why the two-Bill process was followed at the time, but it did cause the suspicion that signing up to part 1 would be giving a free pass to the second Bill, and then you could almost drive forward anything you want. Therefore, we want to bring ESA forward in a format that creates the greatest confidence among the political parties, so that they are able to support it, and, equally important, so that it gives confidence to the education sector, which will have to work the new ESA format. People in the education sector need to feel that they are an equal part of the process and that their voice will not only be heard but listened to and acted upon. Those are the broad remits, Trevor, that I want in order, hopefully, to bring forward a new piece of ESA legislation.

Mr Lunn:

You have the old ESA template, which I would have thought is 99% usable.

Mr O'Dowd:

By no means am I saying that we should throw everything in the bin. There is broad agreement about many parts of ESA. A number of issues remain to be resolved, and I hope to have them resolved before bringing forward new legislation. However, it is not the case that we need to throw the entirety of it in the bin.

Mr Lunn:

In the House yesterday, there was a discussion about newly qualified teachers and the question of substitute teachers. When you replied to me, I queried why the Department does not have the teeth to enforce the situation concerning retired teachers. I was on the Public Accounts Committee that highlighted this issue. I wish to make it clear that I was talking about teachers who have retired early voluntarily, not those who have been made redundant or have had to go off because they were unwell but may be in a position to come back. I am talking about people who did it voluntarily. It is quite beyond me why the Minister and the Department cannot frame a set of rules or a change to the existing Orders to prevent teachers, who made a career decision to stop teaching, coming back after 29 days have elapsed. That is in an Order, so why can it not be changed? It is such an obvious way to free things up to give newly qualified teachers a chance to earn their spurs. You said that the Department has introduced constraints, and I know that it has the form of a flat-rate salary. However, that will not stop it happening, because headmasters have a natural instinct to work with people they know. That has always been a problem. I believe that the Public Accounts Committee first looked at the matter in 1986, when it recommended a change, but, 27 years on, nothing has changed, except that, if a teacher comes back, he has to accept a flat rate of pay. Given that in this scenario we have slightly more time, do you have any further thoughts on how that could be dealt with?

Mr O'Dowd:

In my response to you yesterday, I said that, as far as I was aware, we cannot take any further action because of employment legislation and employment rights. I will check again with my officials to see whether I am right to state that, but I think that I am. If we can take further action or if suggestions are put forward, I would be keen to explore them, because it is important that we give newly qualified teachers a chance to show their enthusiasm in a classroom and bring new

skills to the young people whom they teach. However, I do not wish to disregard teachers who have been in service for many years, whose experience is vital as well. Part of getting newly qualified teachers into classrooms and schools is not only to allow their enthusiasm to go through the classes but to work alongside experienced teachers. In reality, we work within legislative constraints around employment rights and so on, around which my predecessor took initiatives. There was a report on what actions we could take under the local management of schools (LMS), which came back to the Department on 11 May, and we are going through the equality impact assessment. If any further proposals flow from that, we will take them forward. I also emphasise that I encourage boards of governors to take a stand on this matter and give newly qualified teachers a chance to become a new driving force for education in their schools.

Mr Lunn:

I presume that a teacher who takes voluntary severance signs an agreement that includes the clause that they are entitled to seek a position on the substitutes register after 29 days of unforced leave. To my mind, that is ludicrous. If that was set up by agreement between the Department and the unions — I am not sure of its basis — why can it not be changed or at least discussed with a view to change?

Mr O'Dowd:

I am not arguing against discussing changing it. Investigations thus far show that the legal framework under which that agreement was reached does not allow you to go beyond that point, at least significantly beyond it because you cannot discriminate against someone who is seeking employment. I am willing to explore it, as I am any proposal that would assist us in that issue. I understand that the situation now is that we cannot go beyond the 29 days.

Mr Lunn:

I reckon I have done enough by now to lose the teachers' votes, so I will let it go at that.

Mr O'Dowd:

OK.

The Chairperson:

Surely there is an issue about boards of governors, Minister. The paramount role that boards of governors play is something that, at some stage, the Committee may look at. However, we

increasingly hear of incidents in schools where, if a more appropriate or searching question had been asked, a crisis might have been averted. We may need to look at having some guidance for boards of governors with probing and pertinent questions. I am not in any way casting aspersions on the chair or the secretary to the board of governors of any school, but there have been occasions when things were allowed to happen because of the close proximity of that relationship. By the time they have happened, it is too late, and the board and the Department have to intervene and pick up some of the pieces. That is something that we may leave with you, Minister, as a thought, which we may need to return to at some stage.

On the point regarding teachers, are we producing too many of them and have we too many providers?

Mr O'Dowd:

Do you mean in terms of training?

The Chairperson:

Yes.

Mr O'Dowd:

The different providers that we have produce teachers for different scenarios. That is why we have that number of providers. Over the past seven years, teacher trainee numbers have reduced by 25%. Therefore, there has been a significant drop in the number of young people going through teacher training college. Intake for next year is a matter that we will have to return to. It is something that will no doubt be raised on several occasions. I will study the information and documentation given to me. At that stage, we will make a decision on the number of student teachers that we require.

The Chairperson:

Is it possible to provide the Committee with an overview of that process? May we have a paper on that? It might be of particular interest to new members because it is not solely a Department of Education issue; it is a Department of Education and a Department for Employment and Learning issue. It may be that such a paper will give us an overview and some historical perspective on how we have reached our present position.

Mr O'Dowd:

Yes.

The Chairperson:

Thank you.

Mr McDevitt:

You are very welcome, gentlemen and Minister. I want to explore three areas. First, I welcome the Minister's identification of a basic measurement such as transport cost per school mile as being central to knowing what to do. To be brutally honest, as I read my way into the portfolio, I saw that education seems to be dogged by poor management. Transport is a good example. Another is inequality. It strikes me that we all talk a lot about tackling inequality in education, but I am not sure that we are able to measure how we are closing the inequality gap in education. Have you any thoughts on that?

Mr O'Dowd:

In relation to your initial thoughts: we have an outdated business structure in how we manage education. As I said in response to a question from Trevor, we need political agreement on how we move forward on that.

How do we measure whether we are challenging inequality in education? The statistical measure of educational underachievement, which is a major inequality, is whether a young person has five good GCSEs. When I was a Committee member, we had a significant debate about whether that is appropriate as it measures only to a C grade. We wondered whether we should measure a D grade because that is also added value to a child.

I am keen to explore how we measure added value to the individual pupil. I am not dismissing the five-GCSE model. However, I want to look at how we measure value added to the child, the pupil and the young adult so that we can look at our schooling system and say, when a young person leaves a school after a 12-year educational journey, value was added to that child's life and that that person became valuable to themselves and society and became a good citizen. I am not sure exactly how we can measure that. If we do not have a statistical format, there could be the criticism that politicians can say whatever they want.

I am of the view that academic selection is an inequality that is unfair to many sections of our society. I think that we can make progress on that. The provisions and facilities that we provide for our young people is an equality matter. The environment in which young people are educated, inside and outside the school, assists their education. Cross-departmental work is needed on how we improve educational outcomes for our young people in disadvantaged communities.

The figures vary, but between 70% and 80% of educational attainment happens outside the school grounds. Therefore, it is about your parent or guardianship background, your family, the community, the atmosphere in which you are developing and the environment in which you are brought up. All that needs to be challenged and improved so that we can say that we have improved equality, or are reaching equality, in education.

Mr McDevitt:

I am sure that we will want to return to this, Chair. It brings us to ESA, and there is a cultural issue. No matter what equality measures you put into the system, an exam-based system will always default to trying to get the best exam results. Therefore, it becomes a contradiction in itself.

ESA highlights the broader managerial problem within the sector. I heard what you said in answer to previous questions, Minister, but when will we sit down and try to sort out ESA? Will it be this year? When will we see legislation? By when do you want us to have had those political discussions so that a draft Bill can be brought before the Committee for discussion of its policy merits and then onto the Floor?

Mr O'Dowd:

Do I want it to happen this year? Yes. I want to see the legislative process start after the summer recess to give us a chance to get it in place as early in 2012 as possible for a variety of reasons, including financial management. My door is open to all political parties for political discussions. I want to engage with all political parties on the matter.

I do not think that I am breaking any Executive confidence when I say that, in discussions before the establishment of the Executive, one of the key areas in which it was identified that we could make progress was an ESA Bill. There is political goodwill behind the aim of moving

forward with a reform of administration in education. We have to ensure that that goodwill keeps the process moving and that we do not stall.

As Minister in charge of the Department, I have a responsibility on this matter. However — and I am not dodging my responsibility here — we have a collective political responsibility to reach agreement on it. I am willing to discuss the matter with the Committee in further detail. If the Committee has any collective views on this, I am more than happy to discuss those. My door is open to all political parties that want to speak to me about their views on how we move ESA forward. Key to this is that we start to have a discussion around how we arrive at an ESA Bill and get the legislation moving forward, because we have an outdated management structure in our education system.

Mr McDevitt:

If our management structure is outdated, Minister, do you believe that the system is outdated? It is a system that, except for work done in the past couple of years, pays no attention to early years; requires compulsory education to start at age four; transfers at age 11; is exam based; and invests disproportionately in kids who have already achieved. Do you think that it is fit for purpose?

Mr O'Dowd:

I have to be careful, because we have a highly dedicated workforce out there, not only in the classroom but across our education boards. They are out there every day, trying to achieve the best for the communities that they serve. I do not want to send out a message that we have —

Mr McDevitt:

They are not the system; they are just working in the system —

Mr O'Dowd:

I know, but —

Mr McDevitt:

— that people like you create.

Mr O'Dowd:

In fairness, I have been in post for only three weeks. What I am trying to say is that they are part

of the system and I do not want to damage their morale in any way. However, we cannot ignore the fact that we need to modernise our systems to deliver a twenty-first century education system. We have to modernise. We have done it in health, hopefully we will go through it in relation to how we run our councils, and we need to do it in education as well. We need to concentrate more on underachievement and celebrate achievement.

Mr McDevitt:

Do you think that the way in which we structure education here at a regional level, which we do for all sorts of historical reasons, will, in 20 years' time, be the best model to meet the needs of our children?

Mr O'Dowd:

No, certainly not. I would not advocate political agreement around moving towards the ESA Bill if I believed that the current structures are the way forward.

Mr McDevitt:

So, how do we square the big circle, Minister? Selection is just a symptom of the problem. It is not the actual problem; it is one of many. It just happens to have been one that came to a head. How do we solve the big problem about coming to an agreement on what education will look like in 20 years' time? Do we do something like they have done on several occasions in the Republic, which is to have a major commission to look fundamentally at the role of education from 0 to 18 and even beyond, to include lifelong learning? Is there something else that you have in mind?

Mr O'Dowd:

With respect to commissions, we could paper the Senate Chamber with reports on education. There are numerous reports. We have experts coming out of the woodwork in relation to education and reports, so we know what the problems are. I am not ruling out commissions on a number of issues, but we are politicians and we are elected to take responsibility and to take decisions. We are now the commission: the commission of the people, elected by the people to make decisions. We now have to make a decision on how we move forward with restructuring education. That is the challenge that faces us all. We have the evidence base because the investigative work has been done. It is now time for a political decision on how education will be reshaped. I expect, under this mandate, how we reshape education for the next 25 or 30 years to be addressed.

Mr McDevitt:

If we are doing the political model rather than the commission model, you are in the hot seat. Are you saying that you, as Minister, will bring forward proposals for an education system that will see us into the next 25 years?

Mr O'Dowd:

Yes, and for those proposals to become legislation, I will require the agreement of the Assembly.

Mr McDevitt:

What will be the main headlines in those proposals? Will we still have a primary system that ends at 11? Will we still have a secondary school system that starts at 11 and ends at 18? Will we still have an A level system rather than a more generalist-leaning sort of baccalaureate system? What is your thinking?

Mr O'Dowd:

When I talk about the structures of education in respect of the ESA Bill, I am talking about the management structures. We do not need five education and library boards; we can run that under one directorate that is inclusive of all the sectors that we manage. As regards what you were talking about and whether we should change from 11 and transferring to a post-primary school at a different age, etc, I am not proposing that at this early stage in my mandate. We have significant other challenges to deal with before we look at how and at what age children are transferred from one school to another, etc. I am not looking at that at this stage; it is too early in the mandate. There are other more important tasks to be challenged in education than primary school versus secondary school versus A level versus leaving certificate versus whatever. Let us get the structures right and how we manage education right first, and then we have an opportunity to re-examine our school age system, whether that be post-primary, primary school, preschool or all that. Let us look at that. The priority now is to get the management right and then look at other matters.

Mr McDevitt:

I will finish on this point. I hear what you are saying. Obviously, if you are the Minister who delivers ESA, it would be an achievement given the history of ESA. However, ESA will not transform children's lives. It will deliver better efficiency in the system, which, hopefully, will

lead to improvement in children's lives. However, it will not deal with the elephants in the room. It will also not allow us to coalesce around a model or philosophy of education that is capable of addressing the inequalities in the system.

Mr O'Dowd:

I disagree. The founding principles of ESA were not simply concerned with efficiencies. Instead, they were about challenging underachievement and making our system deliver better outcomes for our young people. Those founding principles were established under direct rule Ministers, and just because they were established under direct rule Ministers does not mean that I disagree with them.

Mr McDevitt:

I —

Mr O'Dowd:

It is almost like the 'Life of Brian':

"What have the Romans ever done for us?"

The fact of the matter is that ESA was a good idea, so why would we ignore a good idea? Let us bring it forward and shape it in our own image.

I am not looking to be the Minister who delivers ESA. However, I am happy to be part of an Executive and an Assembly that delivers ESA, and the only way that it will work is if we all work collectively. The outcome of, and the legislation for, ESA has to be about challenging underachievement and improving outcomes for our young people. It will not be worth it if we simply save a few pounds but do not ensure that the outcomes for our young people are improved.

The Chairperson:

It makes a change to see a row between the SDLP and the Minister of Education about the ESA, because in the past it was normally a row between the Minister of Education and my party. That is not to say that we have reached agreement on ESA, but I will not get into that debate today.

Conall, not everybody agrees what the elephants in the room are. Sometimes there is too much generalisation and almost an acceptance that everyone in the educational world is totally convinced that the problems are the ones that we highlight. They are not. Representatives from

all the parties, including Trevor and John, participated in the education debate on ‘The Stephen Nolan Show’ in the period before the election. During that debate, I said that I could fill the auditorium with educationalists, drawn a line down the middle and those on the right-hand side would be in favour of one thing and those on the left-hand side would be in favour of another. Therefore, we must be careful.

I welcome the fact that the Minister has clearly said today that there will be discussion, dialogue and engagement on a number of issues. That is a vast improvement from the previous position, and I welcome that if it is to be the case.

Mrs Dobson:

I want to ask a couple of quick questions. First, on the issue of early years provision and, specifically, the funding of nursery school places, does the Minister agree that the best way to tackle underachievement, promote equality and raise educational standards is to offer every child a place at nursery school? Does he also agree that a severe lack of funding is disadvantaging hundreds of children across Northern Ireland?

Mr O’Dowd:

I agree that a very important method of tackling underachievement in education is to ensure that our children receive preschool education, but that may not always be in a nursery school unit. I have to ensure that the services that we have are good services, and, whether they are provided in statutory nursery schools or in a preschool setting, the important element for me is that the Education and Training Inspectorate can go into those settings, assess what is provided there and report to the Department on each unit. I will be looking at each report to see whether the standard of care and provision for those young people is high, and, if it is not, I will be asking what interventions are being made. Therefore, my answer to your question is that it does not always have to be in a nursery school setting. I am a strong advocate of young children attending preschool, whether in a nursery or a community and voluntary setting. The quality of the service that our young children receive is the key thing for me.

Mrs Dobson:

Thank you for your extremely comprehensive briefing. The issues of pupil/teacher ratios (PTR) and full-time equivalent teachers are covered on page 30 of that briefing. Will you provide the Committee with historical data to give it a better understanding of the trends in those areas?

Mr O'Dowd:

We will certainly be able to provide you with that information. Off the top of my head, I cannot tell you, Jo-Anne, but it is an issue that will come into tighter focus as the Department's budget becomes more constrained. There is a variety of studies from various people about the benefits of smaller class sizes and teacher/pupil ratios. However, I will certainly provide you with the information that you requested.

Mr John McGrath (Department of Education):

Each school has its own budget; therefore, each school determines how much it spends on teachers. In a sense, 1,200-plus decisions are taken on PTR; there is no top-down definition of that because of the local management of schools system. Whether or not that is a good idea is another debate entirely.

Mrs Dobson:

Can that information still be provided?

Mr McGrath:

We will see what we can get, but there is no set figure.

The Chairperson:

A question about pupil-teacher ratios was asked. I am happy to provide information to Jo-Anne and other members. The Department provided a substantial document containing a breakdown of all pupil-teacher ratios for all schools. I have that.

Mrs Dobson:

That would be useful.

The Chairperson:

I will make that material available to the Committee. The Committee Clerk and the staff can make it available to members.

Mr O'Dowd:

If we have any general trend information to add to that, we will provide it.

Mr McKay:

I welcome the Minister to the meeting. I also welcome the worthwhile and constructive debate that we have had so far. I have a couple of questions, John. First, one of the Department's aims and objectives is to promote community relations in and between schools. A number of factors, such as the entitlement framework, have led to further co-operation between different schools. What do you plan to do to improve community relations between schools in different sectors? Secondly, you referred to the fact that about 70% to 80% of education takes place outside the school. What do you plan to do about that 70%? How are you going to liaise with other Departments, such as the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Health Department, to challenge the assumption that education does not happen only within the four walls of a school?

Mr O'Dowd:

I have always taken a sceptical view about glossy documents and reports to do with community relations and how we improve them. I want to see practical measures on the ground. I want to see schools working together, sharing services, and pupils moving between schools for a number of subjects. A couple of weeks ago, I visited Lisneal College in Derry, which is a controlled school. I walked into a classroom where I saw three kids sitting wearing GAA tops. I thought that was great. They came from a different school, and were sitting there comfortably, studying for their A levels. That was community relations in practice, I thought. All the glossy documents that you will ever read will never give you that. Those children were as comfortable as anything sitting there. The teacher was going through their A level studies with them, and children from that school travelled to other schools in Derry as well.

That is happening across the North; we are seeing schools exchanging pupils for various subjects and sharing services through area learning communities. The entitlement framework is also moving that forward. I will encourage that and move it forward in every practical way that I can, because I thought it was great that those young people were so comfortable and that the pupils around them were comfortable with them. That is community relations in practice.

We need to re-examine the promotion of the message of education outside the school. It is almost like the health debate — the Health Minister may give off to me for mentioning health, but, in a broader context, the health debate has often focused on acute hospitals. The creation of

good health is achieved in the community through awareness of diet, exercise, well-being, the environment, and so forth. We need to get that message out about education as well.

We have health promotion campaigns; I want to look at education promotion campaigns through which we talk to communities, parents and guardians and young people about how we improve their educational outcomes, and the role of family and community in education. Some good research work has already been done in that area, and I will come back to that. We need to engage with our colleagues in DSD about how to interact with people in disadvantaged areas on the issue of education. DSD has done a lot of good work through neighbourhood renewal schemes. I am familiar with a number of schemes in my constituency that have focused on education, and we can see a change in trends in those areas.

There has to be greater engagement between the Department of Education and other Departments on how we improve educational outcomes. My line of thought at the moment is that we can learn from how the Health Department has been involved in health promotion campaigns; we need to be involved in education promotion campaigns.

Mr McKay:

John, you said that you recently met Ruairí Quinn, your counterpart in the South. Savings have been a theme of much of the discussion. What savings are you looking at, and has that issue been raised with your counterpart in the South? Transport was mentioned earlier; that is an obvious area for savings on an all-island basis.

Mr O'Dowd:

Minister Quinn faces the same difficulties as us. He is dealing with a very constrained budget and is looking at ways to maximise the use of it. We have a report that, as I mentioned in the House yesterday, is an historical examination of the sharing of services that have been progressed between the two Departments. The next phase is a costings report on the potential to share services. We do not have actual costings in front of us, and, regardless of the piece of work that we are carrying out, it is important to know — I was asked earlier about this earlier — the value for money of initiatives that we might take. So, that is next phase of work that my Department and Minister Quinn's Department will take forward. We will look towards the future at how we can share services and what the costings will be.

Mr Flanagan:

I welcome the Minister to the meeting and echo Daithí's sentiments about the constructive debate that we have had. We have started a very important discussion on the future of transport in the education system. Will the Minister propose to the Finance Minister that that discussion is brought to the Executive's subgroup on the Budget? It needs to be looked at holistically, and it will not work if various Ministers live in their own silos.

I have three quick questions; I will ask them all together. The Committee received a letter from final-year law students at the University of Ulster, which was forwarded to you, and you responded to it. It was to do with young people's concerns about communication and consultation with the Department. In your response, you said that the Department is receptive to the idea of using more unconventional forms of engagement that are sensitive to the ways in which young people prefer to communicate. I know that you and a number of Committee members are keen users of social media sites. How do you envisage that the Department will use those unconventional forms of engagement that you speak about?

The Chairperson:

I do not want to cut in, but are you suggesting that the Department should use Twitter instead of circulars? *[Laughter.]* If that were the case, teachers would be in absolute despair.

Mr Flanagan:

Just to clarify: those were comments from year 8 students. They might be a bit young for Twitter. It is to do with communicating with the young people, and the Department appears to be the only Executive Department that has a YouTube site. I would encourage more things like that.

I have a quick question on underachievement in working-class Protestant areas. You have spoken about children in Derry wearing Gaelic tops. They obviously were not Tyrone jerseys or they would not be sitting there too comfortably.

The Chairperson:

There are no community relations in that community? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Flanagan:

Definitely not.

The Chairperson:

OK; so there is work to be done there.

Mr Flanagan:

We will leave it to people from that area to deal with that. The GAA and other extra-curricular organisations have played a great role in motivating young people to become involved in schools and in society at large. One key aspect that needs to be taken on board to improve the attitudes of young people is to get them involved in sport and leisure activities outside school.

Mr O'Dowd:

Yes, certainly. The Department has funded programmes for both GAA and soccer. Those have been very successful across our schools, and I hope to be able to continue with them. We have to modernise how we communicate with young people, and I have had discussions with the media team about that. I am not sure of its exact title. What is the title?

Mr McGrath:

The information office.

The Chairperson:

It is somewhere in Rathgael.

Mr O'Dowd:

In the dark recesses of Rathgael. We have been discussing how we present the Department, especially to young people. The Department's website is not young-person-friendly. I am nowhere near being a young person, but the website is certainly full of official documentation and all the things that should be there. However, we are supposed to be serving young people, and I am not sure that they will find the website to be of any value to their educational outcomes.

I have discussed that with the Department and we hope to bring forward proposals to change it. I am a keen user of Twitter. It is a great way to communicate with people. I look on it as a conventional, rather than an unconventional, form of communication. Facebook — and all those social websites, in case I am accused of not advertising them all — should be used in a responsible way. We have to ensure that; and the Department will look at all those things.

Perhaps this is a way to hold consultations that are relevant to education and that can enable young people to interact, pick up on them and look at them. I am also interested in YouTube; I spoke to the Department about it. We should not use our YouTube channel just for the Minister, but put young people on it to talk about their education experiences. We should have teachers on it to talk about their experiences. We are looking at all those ways to improve the message and help the Department to interface with young people much more easily and in a friendlier way.

The Chairperson:

Some of us are reluctant to go down the Twitter route because some people are maybe tweets enough without showing it in a formal sense.

Mr McDevitt:

I want to ask about community relations. I am sorry, Minister. I should have put my hand up earlier.

I was taken by your remark about your experience in the school in Derry. I agree with you that sixth form is a fantastic opportunity. The shared education programme has done a huge amount of work in trying to build those relationships between schools. However, I understand that it is struggling to find a home for itself in the Department and to become mainstream. What are your thoughts on the future of the shared education programme and the work it does?

Mr O'Dowd:

There is a new policy on how the Department deals with community relations and how it builds on the programmes of work we have done. I am aware of the concerns over shared education, and I will discuss further with my officials how we can move that forward. I am more than happy to engage and come back to the Department on how we do that.

I do not criticise the shared education programme in any way, but I want to see practical results. I do not want to see any more glossy documents about community relations or community relations events. I want to see practical examples in the schools of young people engaging with each other and feeling comfortable about the engagement, sharing services, and moving forward in that way. My view is that the best example of community relations work that we can produce is making the Lisanelly site a reality. There, schools can share one site, have their own identity, and share services. That would send out a clear message that there is a new

direction of travel in our society, and that education is playing its part.

The Chairperson:

Without every member giving examples from their own constituency, those who represent North Antrim will always be keen to mention that Ballycastle High School and Cross and Passion College have been doing this for years — before it was policy or even, in many cases, practical. They were challenging, and they have made an invaluable contribution to community relations in Ballycastle and its wider area. It is a direction of travel that we need to encourage. It is better coming from the ground up, rather than presented in some glossy document as though from on high.

Mrs Hale:

In relation to academic attainment in schools today, and empowering young people to change their lives, can you give the Committee an overview of how the literacy and numeracy strategy addresses the needs of the significant proportion of young people who leave school today without having met the required standard?

Mr O'Dowd:

This goes back to some of the other questions that I was asked. The strategy is not only school based, it is in the family home. Reading to young people at an early age is an important part of their learning process. Encouraging young people to pick up books and go through them at an early age improves their standards of numeracy and literacy. I will give a more detailed and specific response to this question. However, the broad vision is to encourage the improvement of numeracy and literacy standards from an early age.

Mrs Hale:

Teenagers who are in years 11 and 12 need extra support in literacy and numeracy, because they have not had that support at the beginning. How can we help them now, as they get ready to leave school?

Mr O'Dowd:

We focus with schools, and with the education and library boards, on intervention and offering support at as early an age as possible. I would question why, when a child reaches 11 or 12 years of age, there has not been intervention earlier to meet their needs.

Each child brings their own story and complexity of their own lives with them. However, I will continue to question why interventions are not made earlier in young people, before they reach 11 or 12. However, those are the circumstances that we have. We are saying to education boards and schools that interventions are possible earlier and we want them to happen to allow a child's educational improvement to continue.

I spoke recently to a parent whose young son had transferred into a post-primary school and had the reading age of a five-year-old. Within two years, that child's reading age improved immensely through the work, interventions and the commitment of that school. So it can be done. Even at that age, improvements can be made. Through our numeracy and literacy strategy, we tell schools to never, ever give up on a child. Make the intervention as early as possible, but when you recognise that an intervention is required, make it. I will get back to you, Brenda, with a more detailed breakdown of the programme.

Mrs Hale:

I welcome your comments. I worked in a school for the past five years and I have seen that implemented. It is utopian to think that education always happens outside school — many parents just leave it to the school, and teachers are becoming social workers in the classroom. My concern is that children now aged 15 or 16 are going into the employment world unable to read to the basic standard for GCSE English or maths. I experienced that recently and my concern is how to make them more prepared for the world of work when they are not numerate or literate.

Mr O'Dowd:

You are 100% right. It is a tragedy of our society that all young people do not come from a perfect and stable nuclear family. Many young people face major challenges in their lives and at home without a stable family background and the influence of caring parents or guardians. That is where we talked about working with other agencies in DSD or the Health Department.

We also want to encourage parents whose educational attainment has not been what it should have been or whose educational experience was poor. They too can still have a positive influence on their young people's lives. That is why I talked about needing to look at how we create an educational promotion format in the same way as health has the Health Promotion Agency. I am not talking about setting up any other agencies or level of bureaucracy, but we have to have

educational promotion in our society. How we do that is something that I wish to return to.

The Chairperson:

You talked earlier, Minister, about considering working with DSD because there is an overlap there. It may be that some other Departments also overlap, but it is particularly worth looking at tying in with DSD to see how the two Departments can address that issue.

Mr O'Dowd:

Certainly, and, in fairness, DSD has been doing some very good work, particularly through neighbourhood renewal schemes. I know young people in my constituency who have turned their lives around in ways that could never have been imagined.

The Chairperson:

We know how DSD helped because the previous Committee visited the nurture group at Ballysally Primary in County Londonderry. If it had not been for DSD, they probably would not have had that provision. There is a lot of good work being done. John McGrath may take some of the credit because I think that he was in DSD before he moved. I saw the smile and thought that that was probably what was going through your mind, not that I am a mind reader.

Mr Lunn:

You talked a lot about shared education, and the most obvious manifestation of that is the integrated movement. I am sure that the Minister is not surprised that I raise that issue. The Department has a statutory duty to facilitate that movement and to facilitate the placing of children in an integrated school where there is parental demand. The Department does not always totally succeed with that. There is always a large number of parents who are disappointed. Also, when it comes to the provision of a new integrated school, there is a perception at least that, sometimes, the Department can be difficult about it.

It was in Private Members' Business, but the Assembly passed a motion before the end of last term, which I think brought in the word "encouraged". Do you think that the atmosphere around the integrated education movement and the Department's agreement to promote it — we use the word "promote" as well — has changed? Will it change on your watch? That is the most obvious way to bring children together. I am not advocating an integrated school on every street corner, or placing them where they might cause serious damage to existing schools, but parental

demand and parental choice are big issues. Have you any views about that?

Mr O'Dowd:

My predecessor was supportive of integrated education, and I will continue to be supportive of integrated education. Matching parental demand and parental choice with the resources or facilities we have is not always possible, as we saw in the debate yesterday. At this time of the year, we are always faced with cases where young people fail to get into their preferred or second-preference post-primary school. We are always facing difficulties across the sectors. I certainly will continue to support integrated education where parental demand calls for it. It comes down to parental demand.

Shared education facilities, integration of education and the eradication of the problems in our society require a multilayered approach. We as politicians play a role in that. I think that we have played a positive role in that over the past number of years, even though, sometimes, we are open to fair or unfair criticism from the media. The fact that we are sitting together in this room and having a debate proves how much politics has moved on. I think that that sends the signal to our communities that it is time to move on. We are leading from the front.

I assure you that I will keep an open door to the integrated education sector. I will be open to discussions with them. I will also be open to exploring other ways of assisting, if there are any. However, we always run into a difficulty, because parental choice runs into the facilities and finances that we have to provide the services that people demand.

The Chairperson:

Before we conclude, Minister, I have a couple of queries. I appreciate the time that you have given. You placed no restriction on your time or on that of your officials, and I thank you for that. Have you any proposals or plans for legislation in relation to any new authority to govern schools, apart from those that have been discussed and mentioned? The Assembly is, obviously, a legislative body. Has the Department any plans in relation to legislation?

Also, there is a need for an overarching paper in relation to the issues concerning the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) that have been in the media. There is still concern about all that has been reported in relation to what has happened.

Mr O'Dowd:

My officials are preparing a paper for you in relation to CCEA. I am on record as saying that the lavish spends mentioned and reported in the media should never have happened. Latterly, we have provided to the media the information available, and we have ensured that any access required under the Freedom of Information Act has been turned around very quickly and that the media have had access to those requests as quickly as possible. We do not want a perception to build that we are hiding information on this matter from anyone. We want to be open and transparent about it. My view is that the extravagant spend should not have happened. We now have measures in place, which, I hope, will ensure that such things will not happen in the future.

You also asked about legislative process. I am not hiding behind this defence, but I have been in post for three or four weeks. I have outlined a number of areas that will require legislation. If there are minor matters that require to be tidied up, I would like to see them being brought through a Bill in and around ESA. Yesterday, we discussed the July and August dates of birth. That issue needs to be tidied up in legislation. If there is a signal that an ESA Bill is going to move quickly, I would like to include that in it.

You are quite correct: this is a legislative Assembly, and I want to play my role as Minister of Education in bringing forward legislation when and if required. Education is dominated by significant pieces of legislation at the moment. If, during my initial reading into the brief, I come across areas in which I believe legislative change is required, I will go through the normal processes for those.

Mr McNarry:

Thank you for your attendance this morning. I concur with the Chairman's remarks. It has been very refreshing, and I am sure that we all hope that that approach will continue. Who was the accounting officer at the time of the CCEA lavish spend?

Mr O'Dowd:

During different periods, Gavin Boyd was the chief executive there. I believe that a request has been made to meet Gavin, who is currently acting —

Mr McNarry:

I mean the departmental accounting officer.

Mr O'Dowd:

Do you mean who was the permanent secretary at the time?

Mr McNarry:

Yes.

Mr O'Dowd:

I am not sure. It crossed over a number of time periods. There are different time frames.

Mr McNarry:

Can you supply that information?

Mr O'Dowd:

Yes, certainly we can.

Mr McNarry:

It is because of that crossover that it seems that more than one person did not pick it up.

Mr O'Dowd:

We will certainly go through the timeline and match the permanent secretary against that. There was also a changeover in management structures during that period. However, regardless of who was in charge at the time, it should not have happened. Measures are now in place to ensure that it does not happen again.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much, Minister. Thank you, John and Paul.

Mr O'Dowd:

I thank the Committee for its time and for the positive discussions that we have had thus far.

The Chairperson:

This will be the first of many.